

September 23

Ezra 1-4

Today we start the book of Ezra, which records the beginning of the Jews' return from exile in Babylon to their homeland.

The book of Ezra is meant to follow 2 Chronicles which took us to the end of the kingdom of Judah and the Babylonian captivity. Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are the last three historical books in the Old Testament which cover the period from about 538 to about 433 BC.

Ezra and Nehemiah describe the three stages of return of the Jews from exile. First Zerubbabel, about whom we read today, brought his company of people (and animals), then 80 years later in 458 BC Ezra himself brought his party. Finally in 445 BC, Nehemiah bring is party back. Our story begins after the overthrow of Babylon in 539 BC.

There are five Medo-Persian rulers who span this period. Cyrus ruled from 559-530 BC. He is the king who issued the decree to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Isaiah the prophet had long beforehand predicted that the king who would return the Jews to Judah would be name "Cyrus." That remarkable prophecy was located in Isaiah 44 and 45. Cyrus reigned in Babylon at the end of Daniel's life.

Unlike other rulers before him, Cyrus gained favor with the conquered subjects of Babylon by reinstating the exiles and by encouraging them to return home and resurrect their national religions. From a human point of view then, what was going on would not have looked all that extraordinary—a change of government policy, that's all. But the Jews knew that this was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Cyrus was extremely generous when he allowed the Jews to return. He sent back as much of the temple furniture and equipment as he could and ordered the Jews who decided not to go back to provide goods to assist those who were leaving. It is important to note that many in the exilic community chose not to return. Their exile in Babylon had not been as hard as the one their forefathers had in Egypt, and some were established so well in their new land that they simply chose to stay and become full-fledged members of the Persian Empire.

Out of the list of names of returnees, the most important names to remember are: Zerubbabel, who was their leader; Jeshua (the son of the high priest Jehozadak), and Nehemiah (though he is not the Nehemiah who wrote the book after Ezra). Ezra's name is missing from the list of names given, because he came along with the second wave of returnees.

Rather than security, the people's first concern was to build an altar for worshipping the Lord. It was not that they were unconcerned about security, but in Chapter 3 vs. 3 says, "Despite their fear of the people around them, they built the altar on its foundations and sacrificed burnt offering on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices." Then they celebrated the feast of tabernacles—offered the burnt offering, new moon sacrifices, and the freewill offerings.

This shows the absolute priority of worship in the lives of the people of God. Worshipping God was more important than protecting themselves from their enemies. It was more important than planting crops before they had established herds.

In the second month of the second year, under Zerubbabel's leadership, they laid the foundations for rebuilding the temple. I am sure that you noticed that there was a great shout of praise that went up from the congregation as they sang one of King David's Psalms.

But many of the older priests, Levites and family heads, wept aloud. Shouts of joy and loud crying happened all at once. There could be a few different reasons why they wept. It could've been out of regret because of their grievous sin and all of the pain, death, and ultimately exile would not have happened. Or it could've very well been that they were tears of regret because even though only the foundation was being laid, they already knew that this rebuilt temple would in no way compare to the one Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed.

Today's reading ends at the beginning of Ezra Chapter 4 and we read about the rebuilding of the temple that was finally finished under the leadership of Zerubbabel. It mentions the opposition the Jews received to the building of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The original permission (and order) to rebuild the temple came under Cyrus. But when Zerubbabel and his companions began the task, opposition arose from the neighboring peoples in the area. We'll continue on with that situation further in September 25th's reading.