

Ezra

I am Ezra, priest by descent from Aaron of the tribe of Levi. I was sent by Darius, King of Persia, to teach the Law of Moses to the returning exiles in Jerusalem. I was not the first to return. Zerubbabel and nearly 50,000 people had returned 121 years before. That was by order of Cyrus, first Persian king, who together with Darius the Mede, ruled over the former Babylonian Empire. Darius invaded Babylon on the night Belshazzar saw the “handwriting on the wall.” Cyrus was named as the one to authorize the return of the exiles by Isaiah 200 years before it happened. And the length of the Babylonian captivity of Judah had been predicted to be 70 years by Jeremiah, writing while Assyria was still the dominant world power.

All this was known to Daniel, who served as advisor to a succession of Babylonian and Persian kings. Because miracles and amazing interpretation of dreams accompanied Daniel’s service, all kings for whom he worked were impressed with Daniel’s God. Daniel had been careful to emphasize that those wonders were not his own doing but the work of the LORD God of Israel. Daniel must have showed Cyrus that 200-year-old scroll of Isaiah, “(The LORD), who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, let it be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid.’” The 70 years of captivity had been assured by the abrupt fall of the Babylonian Empire.

Cyrus then decreed, “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you — may his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.” The result was the group led by Zerubbabel, the appointed governor (he would have been king if the kingdom of Judah still existed), with Jeshua, son of Jozadek and his fellow priests and Levites, arrived in Jerusalem, built an altar, and began sacrifices.

When the foundation of the Temple was laid, supervised by Levites over 20 years of age, the descendants of Asaph provided singing of praise with the music of cymbals and trumpets. A great shout went up from the people, praise for the beginning of the project mixed with weeping by those who remembered the Temple of Solomon.

Does it surprise you that there was opposition? Some of the inhabitants of the land who had been brought in by the Assyrians after the deportation of the northern tribes claimed to want to participate in building a Temple to the LORD. When Zerubbabel refused, they sent a letter to Artaxerxes, now king of Persia. They wrote, “To King Artaxerxes, from your servants, the men of Trans-Euphrates: The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and the royal revenues will suffer.” That caused the king to order cessation of the work.

After 15 years, despite the continued restraining order, the prophets Zechariah and Haggai got the construction restarted, “But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.” Counting on the diligence of the Medo-Persians’ record-keepers, they told the Trans-Euphrates governor, Tattena, to write the new king, Darius the Persian and ask, “Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter.”

The record was found and Darius wrote back, with a royal threat, "Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you, their fellow officials of that province, stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work on this Temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. Furthermore, I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. And for this crime his house is to be made a pile of rubble."

The Temple was completed with the sacrifice of many animals and the Passover was celebrated joyfully. This is the point in time when I arrived, commissioned by a letter from King Artaxerxes, who was the stepson of Esther. "Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven: Greetings. Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you may have occasion to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury."

It was starting to look like the perfect end to a perfect story until the leaders reported evidence of idolatry in the city. The people had married pagan neighbors and allowed them to continue their idol worship. I tore my clothing in expression of my grief. "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.' What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

The people repented with confession and weeping, established a covenant to send the pagan wives and children away. I fasted and prayed, then called an assembly to address them. 'You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.' The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: 'You are right! We must do as you say. Then let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us.'

There was a small group who objected. I could not blame them. It seemed cruel. Yet it was the penalty for disobedience and decreed by the LORD, whose work continued when Nehemiah arrived to complete the wall. Blessed be the name of the LORD, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob who allowed me to see this day.