



THE EXILES RETURNED HOME

Ezra 1; 3

Ezra began his book by enlightening the readers to God's fulfilled promise. Jeremiah previously prophesied that God's people would indeed one day return to Jerusalem. During the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, the people were allowed to return. In 538 BC, Cyrus decreed that he had been appointed by God to build a temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God. Cyrus appeared to be a true follower of God, but his prolific writings made similar decrees naming other gods of other people groups. Cyrus was making a significant political move. He seemed genuine in his decree, but it is likely that he did not understand fully that God indeed had appointed him to build a temple for God in Jerusalem. Captivity in Babylon was over.

Interestingly, Cyrus gave the people the choice to return to Jerusalem or stay in Babylon. Those who wanted to return were welcome to do so, but those who chose to stay were ordered to give offerings so the Jerusalem temple could be rebuilt. Much like Israel's first departure from slavery in Egypt, God compelled the inhabitants of Babylon to richly bless the efforts of those returning by donating significant amounts of gold, silver, and other precious items for the rebuilding.

Led by Zerubbabel, 42,360 people—the majority of whom were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin—chose to leave Babylon and return to their homes. Along with the exiles, Cyrus returned the items Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem when he destroyed it. Once the temple was rebuilt, the original items from Solomon's temple would be put back in place and used to worship God. A few months after arriving in Jerusalem, the priests began to officiate worship on the foundations of the temple that had been restored. The priests also led the people to celebrate the Festival of Booths, a festival that celebrated God's deliverance of the people from Egyptian slavery. This was a fitting reminder that God keeps His promises.