

# Ezra

## Chapter 1

### *The Proclamation of Cyrus*

**In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: 2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” 5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. 6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. 7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. 8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. 9 And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 10 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 11 all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.**

**1:1–3a** Virtually identical with the last two verses of 2 Chronicles. This fact has been used to argue that Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah were written and/or edited by the same person, the so-called Chronicler. However, the repetition may have been a device of the author of Chronicles (or less probably of Ezra) to dovetail the narratives chronologically. (CSB)

**1:1** *first year.* Of the reign of Cyrus over Babylon, beginning in March, 538 B.C., after he captured Babylon in October, 539. (CSB)

Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, reigned over the Persians from 559 until 530. Isa 44:28; 45:1 speak of him as the Lord’s “shepherd” and his “anointed.” (CSB)

Founder of the Persian Empire, located between the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, far east of the Holy Land. (Iran was formerly known as Persia.) Cyrus triumphed over the Babylonians at Opis on the Tigris River and captured the city of Babylon, Oct 539 BC. In 538 BC, he allowed exiled Judeans to return home. Before anyone knew the name of this conqueror, the Lord had anointed Cyrus to “fulfill all [His] purpose.” (TLSB)

*that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah.* Jeremiah prophesied a 70-year Babylonian captivity (Jer 25:11–12; 29:10). The first deportation began in 605, the third year of Jehoiakim (Da 1:1); in 538, approximately 70 years later, the people began to return. (CSB)

God had foretold the end of the 70-year exile. Luther: “Here the flesh is greatly offended. It cannot understand the counsel of God about miraculously fulfilling these promises. The Lord had promised an eternal kingdom, a glorious return from captivity. All the Jews, therefore, kept thinking that they would be saved and brought back, that they would be placed in that new and glorious kingdom.... Only very few of the devout were after some years brought back from Babylon, namely, those whose spirit God had touched, as the account in Ezra 1:5 says. Therefore He is separating the faithful from the wicked and says that the latter will remain in an eternal captivity, while the former will be brought back and glorified” (AE 18:241). (TLSB)

*stirred up the spirit.* Our heavenly King moved Cyrus to action (cf Is 41:2, 25). (TLSB)

*proclamation.* Put into writing; referred to again in 5:13; 6:3. (TLSB)

**1:2–4** This oral proclamation of Cyrus’s decree was written in Hebrew, the language of the Israelite captives, in contrast to the copy of the decree in 6:3–5, which was an Aramaic memorandum for the archives. (CSB)

**1:2** *LORD.* Cyrus was not likely a believer. He learned the name of Israel’s God from the Judean exiles. Cyrus was tolerant of all religions, letting conquered peoples retain their national gods. (TLSB)

*God of heaven.* Of the 22 OT occurrences of the phrase, 17 occur in Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. (CSB)

Used repeatedly in Ezr, this name is appropriate to the exiles, who formerly may have associated their God with a specific land (Israel) but now knew Him to be God over all. (TLSB)

The religious language of this decree does not mean that Cyrus was a true believer in the God of Israel. Historical documents report that Cyrus restored the temples of Babylon and many other temples. The fact that the language of Cyrus’s decree sounds very “biblical” may very well be due to the influence of Daniel or other Jews at the court of Cyrus. They may even have composed the decree for him and pointed out the prophecies of Isaiah which name him as the restorer of Judah. (PBC)

*charged me.* Perhaps the Lord stirred up Cyrus through a prophet, someone like Daniel, to order the rebuilding of the temple. Cf Dn 6:28. (TLSB)

*house... at Jerusalem.* Jerusalem and the house of God are prominent subjects in Ezra and Nehemiah. (CSB)

*Judah.* Name given the Persian province (2:1) in the area where the tribe of Judah had originally settled. (TLSB)

**1:3** Cyrus instituted the policy of placating the gods of his subject peoples instead of carrying off their cult images as the Assyrians and the Babylonians had done earlier. His generosity to the Jews was paralleled by his benevolence to the Babylonians. (CSB)

Cyrus was like a rich person of today who may make donations to all religions as part of his general charity. Although Cyrus had his own motives for releasing Israel, his action is nevertheless an example of how the Lord of nations can use even a heathen king to serve his

purposes. Centuries later, at the time of Jesus' birth, God would use Caesar Augustus and Herod to help carry out his divine plans. (PBC)

*God who is in Jerusalem.* "The God of heaven" (v 2) revealed His earthly presence in Jerusalem's temple (2Ch 7:1–3; Ps 84:1). (TLSB)

**1:4** *men of his place.* Probably designates the many Jews who did not wish to leave Mesopotamia. (CSB)

Neighbors were to assist the exiles as at the time of the exodus from Egypt (Ex 12:35–36). (TLSB)

*freewill offerings.* A key to the restoration of God's temple and its services (see 2:68; 3:5; 8:28). (CSB)

Items useful for the exiles. (TLSB)

**1:5** *heads of the fathers.* In ancient times families were extended families—more like clans than modern nuclear families. The authority figure was the patriarch, who was the "family head." See 10:16; see also 2:59; Ne 7:61; 10:34. (CSB)

The leading members of each family (usually the oldest, i.e., "elders") exercised civil leadership. (TLSB)

*Judah and Benjamin.* The two main tribes of the kingdom of Judah, which the Babylonians had exiled. (CSB)

*everyone whose spirit God had stirred* – One of the most important thoughts of this section is expressed by these words. Willing hearts are necessary if God's work is to prosper. Willing hearts are the gift of the Holy Spirit who works in God's people and makes them eager to work for the Lord. It seems that many of the exiles were unwilling to leave the prosperity of Babylon or the difficulties of the journey to Zion and the hard labor of rebuilding God's house. May the Holy Spirit give us willing hearts. (PBC)

As the Lord had stirred up Cyrus (v 1), so He moved the hearts of many laypeople of Judah, priests, and Levites to break away from their homes in Babylonia and return to Judah (cf Zec 2:7). Luther: "Such are the wondrous counsels of God. He orders the prophets to declare both destruction and salvation, but the former for the wicked, the latter for the devout. It is very important to note this in all the prophets. In this way those wonderful counsels of divine majesty made fools of the wicked. In fact, even the devout were unable to understand them" (AE 18:237). (TLSB)

**1:7** It was the custom for conquerors to carry off the images of the gods of conquered cities. Since the Jews did not have an image of the Lord (see note on Ex 20:4), Nebuchadnezzar carried away only the temple articles. (CSB)

The preservation of the sacred temple vessels so that they could be restored to the temple was a special blessing of God's grace. (PBC)

Precious items used for worship, originally made for Solomon's temple (1Ch 28:13–18; 2Ch 5:1). (TLSB)

*Nebuchadnezzar*. King of Babylon (604–562 BC), a country located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (present-day Iraq) to which many Judeans and the temple vessels were carried off in 587 BC (2:1; 2Ch 36:10, 18; Jer 27:19–22). (TLSB)

**1:8** *Mithredath*. A Persian name meaning “given by/to Mithra,” a Persian god who became popular among Roman soldiers in the second century A.D. (CSB)

*Sheshbazzar*. A Babylonian name meaning either “Sin, protect the father” or “Shamash/Shashu, protect the father.” Sin was the moon-god, and Shamash (Shashu is a variant) was the sun-god. In spite of his Babylonian name, Sheshbazzar was probably a Jewish official who served as a deputy governor of Judah under the satrap in Samaria (see 5:14). Some believe that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person and give the following reasons: 1. Both were governors (5:14; Hag 1:1; 2:2). 2. Both are said to have laid the foundation of the temple (3:2–8; 5:16; Hag 1:14–15; Zec 4:6–10). 3. Jews in Babylon were often given “official” Babylonian names (cf. Da 1:7). 4. Josephus (*Antiquities*, 11.1.3) seems to identify Sheshbazzar with Zerubbabel. (CSB)

Appointed governor of Judah by Cyrus (5:14–16), he apparently died soon after returning to Jerusalem. His successor, Zerubbabel, resumed rebuilding the temple (5:1–2; Hg 1:14). (TLSB)

Others point out, however, that the Apocrypha distinguishes between the two men (1 Esdras 6:18). Furthermore, it is likely that Sheshbazzar was an elderly man at the time of the return, while Zerubbabel was probably a younger contemporary. Sheshbazzar also may have been viewed as the official governor, while Zerubbabel served as the popular leader (3:8–11). Whereas the high priest Jeshua is associated with Zerubbabel, no priest is associated with Sheshbazzar. Although Sheshbazzar presided over the foundation of the temple in 536 B.C., so little was accomplished that Zerubbabel had to preside over a second foundation some 16 years later (see Hag 1:14–15; Zec 4:6–10). (CSB)

Still others hold that Sheshbazzar is to be identified with Shenazzar (1Ch 3:18), the fourth son of King Jehoiachin. Zerubbabel would then have been Sheshbazzar’s nephew (compare 3:2 with 1Ch 3:18). (CSB)

*prince*. Hbr *nasi*’, usually a royal title, but also given to other leaders (1Ch 2:10). (TLSB)

**1:9–11** When Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors carried off plunder, their scribes made a careful inventory of all the goods seized. The total of the figures in vv. 9–10 adds up to 2,499 rather than the 5,400 of v. 11. It may be that only the larger and more valuable vessels were specified. (CSB)

**1:9–10** *basins ... censers ... bowls*. Vessels for use in temple worship (v 7). Cf Ex 25:29. (TLSB)

**1:11** We are not told anything about the details of Sheshbazzar’s journey, which probably took place in 537 B.C. Judging from Ezra’s later journey (7:8–9), the trip took about four months. (CSB)

*all the vessels ... 5,400*. Items listed in vv 9–10 add up to 2,499, far short of the reported total, suggesting that not all vessels had been itemized. (TLSB)

*brought up*. The exiles were likely provided with some kind of escort (8:21–23; Ne 2:9). (TLSB)

**Ch 1** The Lord stirs Cyrus the Persian to send home a remnant of the Judean exiles, as prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah. Today, the Lord of heaven and earth continues to govern the nations for the good of His people. Though the news we hear each day is often bad, we can rejoice that the Lord of heaven is at work amid tumultuous events. Consider how He wrought our salvation through the decisions of Roman and Judean rulers who crucified our Savior! • Lord of history, stir my heart to praise You and to serve my neighbor according to Your merciful goodness. Amen. (TLSB)