

Ezra 1:1-4

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: 2 "Thus says King Cyrus 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 in Judah. 3 Any of those among you who are of his people — may their God be with them! — are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel — he is the God who is in Jerusalem; 4 and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem."

The exile posed a serious challenge to the people's belief in God. It is their faith that led them to interpret the national disaster in terms of their relationship with God. The destruction of their kingdom, Jerusalem, and the temple did not destroy their faith. Through their faith they realized that God remained committed to God's people. It is due to their covenant with God that calls for God to allow suffering because they did not live up to their end with either worshipping only the one true God or with keeping the Lord's commandments. Both Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return of some of the exiles, how they struggle to establish themselves politically, economically, and religiously as they establish a society that is based on God's laws. Ezra begins where Chronicles ends – with the return from exile in 528 BC. The exile started when Assyria conquered Israel. Babylon conquered Assyria and then Judah. King Cyrus of Persia, which is now Iran, conquered Babylon, which is now Iraq, and ruled the Medes and Persia for 30 years. He established the largest empire up to that date and power in the middle east changed hands.

Daniel was a young nobleman when he was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and served in the Babylonian court. When he was a much older man, he interpreted the handwriting on wall and prophesized to King Belshazzar of Babylon that they would be defeated. The Persian Empire rose to power and defeated Babylon. Through repatriation policy, the outlying states were allowed to live by their own laws. Cyrus issued a decree to free the Babylonian prisoners fulfilling the prophecies of both Jeremiah and Isaiah. The Hebrew people were liberated from Babylon captivity and some of them went to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The freed people were allowed to reestablish God's religion which was previously repressed by the Babylonians. Israel was able to restore itself as people of the Book. Rebuilding the temple took place in three or four stages and reestablished the Torah (Law of Moses) as the authority for all the Jews in Judah. The returned exiles were quite anxious to restore the religious institution and make sure that it conformed to the Torah. So, the Bible people use the Bible as their authority. This means that the religious rebirth focused on the word of God. They had a renewed commitment to devotion and held onto a fear that the community of faith would lapse and make the same mistakes that were made before the exile, which would lead to a new destruction. God's chosen people are a minority that is surrounded by the polytheistic Persian Empire. They establish religious boundaries which included observance of the Torah as the law. The book Ezra is a celebration of renewal and reconstruction. The people began to study the law of God, made

confessions, and pledged a new commitment to reestablishing worship services of dedication, celebration, and purification

God promised restoration on several occasions through various prophets throughout their history. During his 1st year as king, Cyrus heard the word of God through the prophet Jeremiah. He believed Jeremiah, believed in the word, and responded by sending messengers throughout the whole kingdom. He attributes his military success to God. Now he responds by helping the Hebrew's return home. They return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of the Lord. Cyrus sets financial resources to make it possible. There is a stewardship lesson in here as there are two sources of financial resources to consider. There is a large contribution of silver, gold, materials, and animals. Cyrus gave back to the people the temple furnishings that were stolen from them. There are also the freewill offerings that the returning Jews take up for supplies.

Ezra is a priest and when he arrives in Jerusalem, he starts teaching the Law of Moses. There is a dramatic revival with widespread repentance. But Ezra also received a complaint when he arrived in Jerusalem that the holy race has been polluted by mixed marriage. The Jews that were not carried away into captivity remained in Jerusalem and intermarried with the people that the Babylonians brought in to settle the land. These people were no longer considered God's people because they married Gentiles and worshiped their false gods. The elders were concerned that the Law of Moses forbids Jews from marrying Gentiles. This is what originally led to the exile and they did not want to repeat the same mistake. It started with Solomon who married Gentiles that convinced him to build shrines to their gods. Ezra orders the men not marry outside of the Jewish faith because it could lead to idolatry. So, he orders all Jewish men to divorce their Gentile wives and send them away with their children.

The temple is supported by God. Rebuilding the temple for worship is supported by God and revealed as God's will through prophecy. The returning exiles are called out from the world to be in the world but separate from the world. We too are called out from world to live by the word. Contemporary opinions and desires gain focus and dilute God's will and the teaching of Jesus. Some organizations make up their own version of doctrine instead of following Jesus who preaches love and unity. The only sure way to stay united is to stay true to the word and not follow skewed doctrine. Stay true to the word. Let the world see that we stay true to the Lord's doctrine. Show the world the love of God, the love of Jesus, and the love of a Christian. Rebuilding the temple shows that it is God that organized religion. When the exiles return it is due to the prophet Jeremiah engaging with King Cyrus to recognize the one true God. It is the recognition of God that motivates King Cyrus to support the people and build a temple for formal worship services. We are here in a house of God, not just to worship God but to gather in community in God's sanctuary.