

Triennial Torah Study – 4th Year 31/08/2013

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By Joseph F. Dumond

We continue this weekend with our regular Triennial Torah reading which can be found at https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf

Deut 33		2 Chron 35-36	Rev 20-21
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Deu 33

Though still not commonly recognized or believed, many have come to the realization that most of the tribes of Israel later migrated to Northwest Europe following their Assyrian captivity.

The primary peoples of all the tribes of Israel would be those of Joseph. The father of Ephraim and Manasseh (Deuteronomy 33:17), Joseph was given the birthright, after Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, disqualified himself (Genesis 49:3-4; 1 Chronicles 5:1). Among those who accept the truth of the Israelite migrations to Northwest Europe, Joseph is commonly understood to be the forefather of the English-speaking peoples of the United States and the former British Commonwealth. Identifying the other tribes is more difficult, as there are not nearly as many biblical and historical clues to go on. Nevertheless, they apparently may be found among such nations as France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland. Simeon (not mentioned in Deuteronomy 33) and Levi were to be scattered throughout the other tribes (Genesis 49:5-7)—though Levi was given the job of teaching God's truth to His people (Deuteronomy 33:8-10).

Verse 27 contains a wonderful promise to Israel that certainly applies to the spiritual people of God today and always: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." This reminds us that God will be there to "catch" us when we fall, if we devote our lives to serving Him.

Josiah's Passover (2 Chronicles 35:1-19; 2 Kings 23:21-25)

Josiah wasn't just content to remove all the paganism. He purged spiritual "leaven" from the land in preparation of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. For his next reform was to reintroduce God's sacred festivals. These begin with the Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (March-April on the modern Western calendar).

Josiah showed his love for his people by his generosity, providing animals for the sacrifices and offerings from his own herds and flocks. This was a magnificent celebration. Some commentators have called the numbers a gross exaggeration, yet when we consider the scope of the celebration, that there had never been a Passover like it in Israel or Judah, the number is realistic. Even so, it was still far short of the number of animals used by Solomon at the dedication of the temple (see 1 Kings 8:63). The sheep and goats were used for the Passover lambs. The cattle would have been used for peace offerings and most likely for general use through the Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed the Passover for a further seven days.

Again it is made clear that the Passover was kept by "all Judah and Israel who were present." The northern kingdom had been taken captive a century prior. But this makes sense when we realize that a sizable group of Israelites reoccupied the northern territories at this time, known to history as the Scythians. Perhaps many of

them responded to the preaching of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 3—wherein God instructed them to return—and to the tremendous leadership and example of King

Message Regarding the New King (2 Chronicles 36:9; 2 Kings 24:8-9; Jeremiah 22:24-23:40)

When Josiah's son Jehoiakim died in 598 B.C. after an evil reign of 11 years (2 Kings 23:36-37; 2 Chronicles 36:5), Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin—also known as Jeconiah (1 Chronicles 3:16-17; Jeremiah 28:4; 29:2; Matthew 1:11-12) or simply Coniah (Jeremiah 22:24, 28)—was crowned king of Judah.

But here we encounter what appears to be a contradiction. The Chronicles version of the story says that Jeconiah was eight years old when he began to reign, whereas the 2 Kings version says eighteen. Which was it? The archaeological and biblical evidence proves that he had to be much older than eight at the time he took over the rule of Judah and reigned for three months (from December 598 through March 597 B.C.). For he had at least five children while a captive in Babylon only five years later, as mentioned on a Babylonian ration receipt (see Expositor's Bible Commentary, notes on 2 Chronicles 36:7, 9). And "the scriptural descriptions of Jehoiachin seem to represent him as a mature young man (Jer. 22:24-30; Ezek. 19:6)" (Nelson Study Bible, note on 2 Kings 24:8).

The answer is probably fairly simple. Jeconiah was no doubt 18 when he succeeded his father in 598 B.C. Ten years earlier, at the age of 8 in 608 B.C., his father must have installed him as coregent—probably just in name rather than critical function, so as to perpetuate the dynasty in the event the whirlwind of events removed Jehoiakim from the throne (as Jehoiakim's brother Jehoahaz had been removed the previous year, 609 B.C.). A coregency of Jehoiakim and Jeconiah could explain why Jeremiah addresses the "kings" of Judah in Jeremiah 17:19-20. But as Jeconiah likely assumed no actual power until his father died, he is credited with a reign of only the three months rather than 10 years.

As king, Jeconiah follows in the footsteps of his father—continuing in evil rather than turning to God (even though Nebuchadnezzar is in the process of mobilizing his forces against Jerusalem during Jeconiah's entire three-month reign, as we will later see). Since Jeconiah's mother Nehushta, the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem, is mentioned prominently, including the fact that she would and later did suffer deportation with her son (2 Kings 24:8, 12; Jeremiah 22:26-27; 29:2; 13:18), it seems likely that she wields considerable influence over the young ruler. As earlier noted, Nehushta's father is probably the same Elnathan mentioned elsewhere as the son of Achbor, the official in the administration of Jehoiakim who apprehended Urijah the prophet but later tried to talk Jehoiakim out of burning the scroll of Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 26:21-23; 36:12, 25). In Jeremiah 22, God's message regarding Jeconiah quickly moves from third person (verse 24a) to second person—addressing the king directly (verses 24b-26). God tells Jeconiah that even if he were the signet ring on God's right hand, "the most important private possession bearing the owner's mark and authority" (New Bible Commentary, note on verses 24-30), God would still pluck him off and hand him over to others. Continued rebellion against God by Judah's rulers would be tolerated no longer. Jeconiah and his mother would soon be carried captive to Babylon (verses 25-26). Switching back to third person in verse 27, we are told that "they"—Jeconiah and his mother—will not return to the land of Judah.

In verse 28, Jeconiah is described as a "broken idol." The Jews idolized their Davidic ruler, likely expecting him to save them from the Babylonians. Yet Jeconiah himself would be taken captive to Babylon. In verse 30, God declares him "childless"—which is qualified by what follows, as Jeconiah actually had seven sons (1 Chronicles 3:17-18; compare Matthew 1:12). Indeed, in the same verse God says Jeconiah would have "descendants" (Jeremiah 22:30). But they, like him, would not "prosper" as a king. They were, in effect, banned from the throne of David. Thus, it was only in regard to the throne that Jeconiah was to be regarded as childless.

It should be mentioned that though Jesus Christ, the ultimate heir of David's throne, "was lineally descended from Jeconiah [see Matthew 1], it was only through Joseph, who, though His legal, was not His real father. Matthew gives the legal pedigree through Solomon down to Joseph; Luke the real pedigree, from Mary, the real parent, through Nathan, brother of Solomon, upwards (Luke 3:31)" (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary, note on Jeremiah 22:29-30). We will look more closely at these genealogies later in the Bible Reading Program. "Woe to the Shepherds" (2 Chronicles 36:9; 2 Kings 24:8-9; Jeremiah 22:24-23:40)

While Jeremiah 23 may constitute a separate prophecy, it is also possible that it follows right on from chapter

22. Chapter 22 decried the three failed Davidic rulers who followed Josiah, ending with Jeconiah. Chapter 23 begins with a message of “woe to the shepherds,” the leaders, of God’s “sheep,” His people (verse 1), and then speaks of the future King of the line of David who finally will save Judah and set things right (verses 5-8). In verses 1-2 the leaders, both civil and religious, bear a huge responsibility for driving God’s people away from Him, which is why the people are driven from the land and scattered into distant parts. The leaders have failed to “attend to” or take care of the people—so God will take care of them (that is, in an altogether different sense). The prophet Ezekiel would later convey a very similar message from God concerning the wayward shepherds of His people (see Ezekiel 34).

Verses 3-8 of Jeremiah 23 are parallel with 3:14-18. Eventually, God would gather a “remnant” of His flock, bringing them “back to their folds,” and appoint new, caring shepherds for them (verses 3-4). This would be fulfilled in part when a small remnant of the Jewish people later returned from Babylonian captivity—the shepherds being Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel and others. There would be a later fulfillment through the Church of God as the “remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5)—the shepherds being Jesus Christ and His true ministers (the word “pastor” actually means shepherd). And, of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is when Jesus Christ takes over the world at His return, when all people—including a regathered Israel—will be governed and taught by Him, His glorified saints and spiritually converted human leaders. In Jeremiah 23:5, the “Branch” from David’s genealogical tree is the Messiah, Jesus Christ (see also 33:14-16; Isaiah 4:2; 11:1-5; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12). The mention of both Judah and Israel in Jeremiah 23:6-7 makes it clear that this is an end-time prophecy—referring exclusively to the return of Christ in power and glory to rule all nations. Verses 7-8 explain that the great “Second Exodus” of the house of Israel (compare 3:18; Isaiah 11:11-16) will surpass even the ancient Exodus from Egypt (compare Jeremiah 16:14-15). This is certainly not referring to the small Jewish return from Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C. Instead, it is clearly speaking of a great and awesome return that is yet future.

The rest of Jeremiah 23 contains a scathing denunciation of the religious shepherds of God’s people: “For both prophet and priest are profane” (verse 11). The same is true today. The word “prophet,” it should be pointed out, can simply mean preacher, especially in the New Testament. In other words, “prophet” refers to those who foretell the future and those who forthtell God’s truth—that is, who preach and teach it according to His direction. Yet not all who claim to represent God actually do—in fact, most don’t.

There is one true God, who reveals divine truth, and calls a relatively few to be His followers, prophets and ministers. But the world has always been filled with many counterfeit and alternative religions and religious leaders. If a false religion teaches some good values and good works, it is still damaging in an overall sense because any false religion ultimately deprives its followers of a genuinely committed and close relationship with God and the one path that leads to eternal life. Compounding the evil is the utter blasphemy and disgrace of leaders who claim to represent God while setting examples of corrupt and immoral behavior, implying that such conduct is God’s nature or that it is acceptable to Him. God is outraged when people claim to be His spokesmen when they are anything but—living and preaching totally contrary to His will (compare Matthew 15:1-9).

Beginning with Jeremiah 23:9, Jeremiah’s conscientious character and compassionate personality are shown. He reels in shock and misery as if drunk at the harmful message of the false prophets and because of the judgment God has proclaimed for his countrymen. Terrible droughts continue (compare verse 10; 12:4; 14:1-6) because the land, Jeremiah says, “is full of adulterers” (verse 10). And no wonder, for the spiritual leaders themselves “commit adultery” (verse 14). “This term could apply to those who practiced immoral sexual behavior, those who committed spiritual adultery by pursuing other gods, and those who were involved in cultic prostitution” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 9-10).

The deplorable situation God addresses here through Jeremiah certainly existed in the prophet’s day—and the message was clearly applicable to that time. But there are indications that the message was also, even primarily, for the end time. While “the year of their punishment” (verse 12) may have referred in part to the year of ancient Jerusalem’s fall, 586 B.C., the primary fulfillment, we may ascertain from verse 20, was to come in “the latter days.” Surprisingly, the end-time year of punishment usually refers to the final Day of the Lord, after the time of “Jacob’s trouble” (30:7), when God punishes the enemies of Israel. Perhaps God views the false prophets in Jeremiah 23, who represent spiritual Babylon, as Israel’s enemies. Verse 12 may mean that they will suffer through the darkness of the Great Tribulation to meet with final disaster in the Day of the Lord. In verse 20, God says that we would understand all of this perfectly in the latter days (other translations say

“clearly”). But do we—even though it appears we are in the latter days? Verse 20 seems more likely to mean that after these things are actually fulfilled in the latter days, then we will understand perfectly. Part of Jeremiah 23:15 is a reiteration of 9:15, where God decreed punishment for following false religion (see verses 13-14). And the false prophets are the source of this abomination.

The false prophets basically told the people what they wanted to hear, which was, “You shall have peace” (verse 17). The people did not appreciate Jeremiah telling them otherwise—and people still don’t want to hear what God actually says. Ironically, this runs counter to the main reason for prophecy. Verse 22 highlights an important truth: the primary purpose of a prophet of God was not to merely foretell the future, but to turn the hearers “from their evil way and from the evil of their doings.” Instead, these prophets shamefully “cause [God’s] people to err by their lies and by their recklessness” (verse 32)—shrugging off any damage they may be doing. Rather than delivering God’s messages, they “steal [God’s] words every one from his neighbor” (verse 30). That is, they plagiarize each other and often take God’s actual words (those in Scripture being the prime example) and twist them to suit their own messages.

From verse 33 to the end of the chapter, God is warning them not to mock Jeremiah, sarcastically asking him, “What is the sad news from God today?” Jeremiah’s experiences are sobering because they give us insight into the hostile resistance God’s Church can anticipate as its end-time warning message becomes stronger and more and more people become aware of it.

Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1; 6:3)

We come now to the conclusion of Chronicles and the beginning of the book of Ezra, named after the priest and scribe who, as described in the book, led the second return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. Just as the Jews had been taken into Babylonian exile in three stages, those who later returned to Judah under the Persians did so in three stages. The first group, under the governor Zerubbabel, returned when Cyrus issued his decree in 538 B.C. The second group returned with Ezra in 457 B.C. And the third group later returned in 444 B.C. under the leadership of Nehemiah, a Jewish official in the court of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes I. Nehemiah is the principal character in the biblical book bearing his name.

“The Book of Ezra does not name its author, but Jewish tradition ascribes the book to Ezra along with the books of Chronicles and Nehemiah. Modern scholars generally agree with this tradition. Despite some dissimilarities, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah form a connected work. The themes of the temple and the Levites, and the focus on lists, appear in all three books. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are together as one book. Thus it seems that one author compiled all three books” (Nelson Study Bible, introductory notes on Ezra). “With such priestly interests, the one who masterminded this long document [with God’s inspiration] may well have been a priest-like Ezra” (introductory notes on Nehemiah).

Ezra is the main character of major sections of the book of Ezra, yet he does not appear until the latter part of the book (chapters 7-10). He also appears in chapters 8-10 of Nehemiah. “Both passages are written in the first person and provide detailed descriptions. Such vivid descriptions point to an eyewitness as the author. It is generally agreed that these chapters at least were drawn directly from Ezra’s memoirs” (introductory notes on Ezra).

The rest of the material is evidently a compilation from other sources—as Chronicles is. “The first half of Ezra records events that occurred nearly sixty years before Ezra returned to Judah. If Ezra compiled the book, he had to consult other sources for those passages. In fact, much of the Book of Ezra consists of information obtained from other official sources: (1) the decree of Cyrus (1:2-4), (2) the list of the articles of the temple (1:9-11), (3) the list of those who returned to Jerusalem (2:2-58), (4) the letter to Artaxerxes (4:11-16), (5) the reply of Artaxerxes (4:17-22), (6) the report of Tattenai (5:7-17), (7) the decree of Cyrus (6:2-5), (8) the reply of Darius (6:6-8), (9) the genealogy of Ezra (7:1-5), (10) the authorization of Artaxerxes (7:12-26), (11) the list of the heads of the clans (8:1-14), and (12) the list of those involved in mixed marriages. Over half the book of Ezra consists of official documents and lists. Moreover, the book is written in two languages. Most of the royal correspondence in the book is written in Aramaic, the international language of the Persian world, while the narrative sections are in Hebrew” (same notes). The Hebrew sections of Ezra are: 1:1-4:7; 6:19-7:11; 7:27-

10:44. The Aramaic sections are: 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26.

The compilation of various documentary sources helps to demonstrate that this is the recording of genuine history rather than folkloric storytelling.

Concerning Nehemiah, “many readers naturally conclude that the book was written by Nehemiah because of the words of the first verse, ‘The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.’ It is widely believed that Nehemiah originated the following passages: 1:1-7:5; 12:27-43; 13:4-31? (introductory notes on Nehemiah). Ezra probably compiled Nehemiah’s memoirs along with his own and other sources into his historical account.

Yet Ezra-Nehemiah “is not simply a string of historical facts about the returning exiles. Instead, the narrative shows how God fulfilled His promises announced by the prophets. He brought His people back from Babylon, rebuilt the temple at Jerusalem, restored the patterns of true worship, and even preserved the reassembled community from fresh relapses into heathen customs and idolatrous worship. Through the prophets and leaders He had called, the Lord had preserved and cultivated a small group of returning exiles, the remnant of Israel” (introductory notes on Ezra).

The Bible Reader’s Companion puts it this way: “The Book of Ezra, and then of Nehemiah, tells what happens when a small contingent of Jews returns to resettle the Promised Land. Despite opposition from neighboring peoples, discouragement, and even lapses into sin, a Jewish presence is restored in the Holy Land and another temple erected on the site of Solomon’s earlier edifice. There, in a tiny district of what was once its own land, the little Jewish community struggles to survive and awaits God’s promise of a coming Messiah, God’s agent, who will see that all the ancient promises made to Abraham are fulfilled” (Lawrence Richards, 1991, introductory notes on Ezra). Indeed, the Jewish nation had to be restored to set the stage for the first coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Yet the restoration described in Ezra and Nehemiah was but a small foretaste of the great return and restoration of all Israel that will take place under Jesus Christ at His second coming.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah also provide inspiring lessons and parallels with the end-time work of building the New Testament spiritual “temple” of God, the Church, in preparation for Christ’s return.

Cyrus’ Decree (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1; 6:3)

The book of Chronicles closes with the same wording that opens the book of Ezra-describing a remarkable proclamation by Cyrus that allows the Jewish captives to return to their homeland from Babylon, grants them religious freedom, encourages them to rebuild the Jerusalem temple and provides for funding of the move and reconstruction. Cyrus issued this decree in his first year (2 Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1; 6:3). “As Cyrus entered Babylon on 29 October 539 B.C., this was counted as his accession year. Babylonian and Persian scribes hold that his first regnal year over the Babylonians began on New Year’s Day, 1 Nisan (24 Mar.) 538? (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, introductory notes on Ezra).

We are told that God stirred Cyrus to issue this decree “that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled” (1:1; 2 Chronicles 36:22). This has caused some confusion. God had foretold through Jeremiah that the Babylonian captivity and desolation of Jerusalem would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). Based on that, many assume that this decree must exactly mark the end of the 70-year period. Yet as explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Jeremiah 25, the 70-year desolation of Jerusalem extended from the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. to the rebuilding of the temple in 516 B.C. There was also a 70-year subservience of nations to Babylon prophesied there-the length of the Babylonian Empire, from 609 B.C. to its fall to Cyrus in 539 B.C. Jeremiah 29:10 states that “after seventy years are completed at Babylon” God would cause the people to return. This seventy could be the length of the Babylonian Empire-after which God would cause people to return. Yet notice that the prophecy did not specify immediately after. Given all this, to fulfill Jeremiah’s prophecies, a way for the Jews to return had to come sometime after the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. and yet soon enough after to give ample time for the rebuilding of the temple by 516. Cyrus’ decree in 538 is what began the process.

Moreover, Jeremiah’s was not the only prophecy that Cyrus’ decree fulfilled. For God specifically prophesied through Isaiah: “I am the LORD...who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be built,’ and to the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’” (Isaiah 44:24, 28). God had also foretold Cyrus’ overthrow of Babylon (45:1-5).

This particular decree of Cyrus is not attested to in any contemporary Persian or Greek documents.

Archaeology has not as yet uncovered inscription evidence of it. That, however, should not surprise us, as hard evidence regarding vast numbers of ancient decrees—the overwhelming majority, in fact—has never been found. Most of the documents of antiquity were destroyed or lost over the centuries. Interestingly, this very decree had been forgotten within decades of its being issued. It was sought out and rediscovered around 520 B.C., as related in Ezra 6.

Nevertheless, historical factors attest to its genuineness. As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes on Ezra 1:2, "The formulation 'Jerusalem that is in Judah' is characteristic of Persian bureaucratic style." Moreover, the decree is consistent with what we do know of Cyrus and his policies as attested to in ancient sources. For on one level, Cyrus' decree reflected his patronage of religion and cultural pluralism in general. Biblical historian Eugene Merrill explains: "In the nineteenth century a barrel-shaped inscription which records Cyrus the Great's decree authorizing captive peoples in Babylonia to return to their places of origin was discovered. This inscription [known as the Cyrus Cylinder, currently housed in the British Museum] was primarily a propaganda piece designed to demonstrate that Cyrus had been called by Marduk, god of Babylon, and that his rule there and over all the earth was at the behest of the gods" (*Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 491).

Indeed, as Merrill also relates, "one reason for the ready capitulation of Babylon to Cyrus was the bitter antagonism that the Babylonians felt toward Nabonidus and his son [Belshazzar] for their anti-Marduk religious posture. Cyrus had already gained a reputation as an enlightened ruler who was extremely lenient and eclectic in his viewpoint. He maintained the status quo in lands which fell to his control, at least as much as he could without jeopardizing his sovereignty. One feature of his policy was to recognize the claims of native gods over their followers and to make no effort to supplant them with gods of his own. In fact, he [supposedly] came to Babylon at the express wishes of Marduk himself, since Marduk had become angry at Nabonidus's irreverence and wished to replace him with another king, a shepherd who would more faithfully tend Marduk's human flock. That shepherd, of course, was Cyrus" (p. 480). "One cannot deny the political and psychological genius of the man; indeed, his policy of permitting aliens to return to their homelands and to establish self-rule within the larger structure of the empire was nothing short of brilliant" (p. 491).

"Cyrus's enlightened policy also had direct bearing on the plight of the exilic Jewish community in Babylonia, for Cyrus accorded to Yahweh, their God, the same deference he paid to Marduk and all other deities. A logical outgrowth of this policy was his decree that the Jews be allowed to return to their homeland. Only in a restored temple in Jerusalem could Yahweh function effectively as the God of Judah. And so, in eager solicitation of the favor of Yahweh, Cyrus repatriated the Jewish people and provided them with the authorization and wherewithal to rebuild their city and temple as a fitting place for their God" (p. 480).

The Nelson Study Bible further suggests that "Cyrus's decrees might have been part of a clever military strategy. At this point, he had not yet conquered Egypt. A strong settlement of loyal people between him and the Egyptians would have been wise. This was a novel political policy; for the first time in hundreds of years, a king permitted a subjected people to return to their homeland" ("*INDepth: Cyrus, the King of Persia*," comments on Ezra 1).

Of course, there was more to it than all that. The same source goes on to say, "But the point of [the] Scriptures is to assert that God was at work through this powerful ruler of the ancient world." The Bible, in fact, explicitly states that God stirred Cyrus' spirit to issue the proclamation (2 Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1). While this could mean that God simply gave Cyrus a nudge to do what he was already likely to do anyway, it may well indicate—especially given the specific prophecies of Cyrus—that God had been working behind the scenes in Cyrus' life and in Medo-Persian politics in such a way that caused the king to adopt the outlook he had.

Moreover, it appears that Cyrus' proclamation regarding the Jews was specially inspired. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus says that God's command regarding Cyrus' rebuilding of the temple "was known to Cyrus by his reading the book which Isaiah left behind him of his prophecies.... Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 11, chap. 1, sec. 2). Indeed, it seems that Cyrus would have to have seen these prophecies in order to fulfill God's words in Isaiah. Speaking directly to Cyrus (45:1), God says He will give the king victory and treasures "that you may know that I, the LORD, who call you by your name [long before your birth], am the God of Israel" (verse 3). For this to make sense—for Cyrus to know from these words in

the book of Isaiah that he was personally named in advance and for this to serve as a proof to him of God's divinity-the king must have personally read these words or listened to someone reading them to him. "What role Daniel may have played in all this is unclear, but one cannot help feeling that it was major" (Merrill, p. 492). Daniel was now the prime minister of Babylonia serving under Cyrus' deputy king and governor Darius. There is no question that Daniel would have had contact with Cyrus. Indeed, it is almost certain that Cyrus had heard all about the recent episode with the lions' den. Would not Cyrus have inquired of Daniel regarding his religion? It seems rather likely that Daniel would then have shown the king that he was directly foretold in Scripture. Indeed, Daniel may have gone further and pointed out the prophecies of Jeremiah regarding the Jewish return and the return of the temple vessels and utensils.

"We know that the Persian kings paid close heed to prophecies: Cambyses to Egyptian oracles, Darius and Xerxes to Greek oracles (Herodotus 8.133; 9.42, 151)" (Expositor's, note on Ezra 1:1). How much more closely would Cyrus have paid heed after staring at his own name in a prophecy written down about 150 years earlier-part of which had already been fulfilled? He would have been utterly astounded. And it seems most likely that he would have been motivated to act accordingly-"stirred" in his spirit by the Word of God.

Still, "no one should read into the accounts that Cyrus had become a worshiper of Yahweh; he was no more a worshiper of Yahweh than Nebuchadnezzar had been when he extolled Yahweh before Daniel. Both were syncretists who were willing for reasons of politics [and lack of full biblical and spiritual understanding] to welcome any new god into their respective pantheons. One cannot deny, however, that both were under the control of the sovereign God of heaven and earth who used them, witting or not, to achieve his holy purposes" (Merrill, p. 492).

First Return Under Sheshbazzar (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1; 6:3)

God stirred the spirits of others too-causing a number of the Jews to enlist in the return to Judah (verse 5). Notice that the returning captives are described as being "of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites" (same verse). The return from captivity was not a return of all 12 tribes of Israel, as many today maintain. Rather, it was simply of those of the nation of Judah who had been taken captive by the Babylonians. In fact, we see in Ezra and Nehemiah that only a small portion of the Jewish people returned-those specially stirred by God. This parallels the experience of Christians, who must be specially drawn by God (see John 6:44).

Why would the vast majority of Jews choose to remain in Babylon? Josephus remarks: "Yet did many of them stay at Babylon, as not willing to leave their possessions" (sec. 3). Expositor's comments: "A fascinating light on the Jews in Mesopotamia is shed by the Murashu tablets. In 1893, 730 inscribed clay tablets were found at Nippur.... The archive dates from the reigns of Artaxerxes I (464-424) and Darius II (423-404). Murashu and sons were wealthy bankers and brokers who loaned out almost anything for a price. Among their customers are listed about sixty Jewish names from the time of Artaxerxes I and forty from the time of Darius II. These appear as contracting parties, agents, witnesses, collectors of taxes, and royal officials. There seems to have been no social or commercial barriers between the Jews and the Babylonians. Their prosperous situation may explain why some chose to remain in Mesopotamia. With the birth of a second and a third generation, many Jews established roots in Mesopotamia" (introductory notes on Ezra).

However, we should not be quick to fault everyone who remained. God did not stir them up as He did the others. It was evidently in His ultimate purpose that most not return to the Promised Land at that time. The Jewish Diaspora (Dispersion) through other countries caused by the exile provided the basis for a widespread Judaism-which would later provide a foundation for a widespread Christianity. We should also note that many of those who did not return at that time nevertheless supported those returning with gifts (1:4).

In Ezra 1:8, Cyrus commits the Jerusalem temple articles to "Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah." And in verse 11 we see that this Sheshbazzar takes them with the captives in the return to Jerusalem. In an official letter to a later Persian emperor, Sheshbazzar is named as the governor of Judah and the one who lays the foundation of the Jerusalem temple (5:14, 16). Yet earlier in the same chapter, the one who, along with the priest Jeshua or Joshua, "began to build the house of God" is Zerubbabel (verse 2; see 3:8-11). Zerubbabel and Jeshua had earlier been the ones to build the altar to God upon first arriving in the Promised Land (3:2). Zerubbabel is shown to be the leader of the first return in Ezra 2:2. As the grandson of the former Jewish king Jeconiah (see 1 Chronicles 3:17-19), Zerubbabel could properly be referred to as the prince of Judah.

Given all this, Sheshbazzar seems to be one and the same with Zerubbabel. While other possibilities are

offered, this one seems to make the most sense: "The name Sheshbazzar occurs only in two passages...both related to official Persian actions. On the other hand, the name Zerubbabel is used in passages related to Jewish activity.... It is possible that Sheshbazzar was a name by which Zerubbabel was known in Persian circles" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 😊).

Regarding the returned temple articles, "the separate items listed in vv. 9, 10 total 2,499. However, the total for all the articles given in v. 11 is 5,400. Probably vv. 9, 10 list only the larger and more important items that were transported back to Jerusalem" (note on verses 9-11).

Note the detailed cataloging and careful preservation of these items. As suggested previously in the Bible Reading Program, it seems likely that Daniel had a hand in this-as a high official of both Babylon and Persia. Yet of course the one mainly responsible was God. He was bringing to pass what He had foretold in Jeremiah 27:22-that the temple articles would be returned after Babylon's fall.

In the next chapter we will see a listing of the nearly 50,000 people who returned to Judea at this time. The journey probably took about three and a half to four months, as this is how long Ezra's group would later take (compare Ezra 7:9; 8:31). Historian Werner Keller writes in his book *The Bible as History* (1981, p. 302): "We can vividly imagine their journey into the land west of the Jordan. Almost 800 miles have to be covered between Babylon and distant Jerusalem, with the clouds of dust churned up by the caravan as a faithful companion throughout the whole journey. One day they would pass the site of old Mari. They would reach the spot where, on the opposite side of the river, the Balikh, on whose lower reaches Haran was situated, enters the Euphrates. From then on the returning exiles were following the same track which had been taken by Abraham 1,400 years earlier, when he left the land of his fathers to go to Canaan, via Damascus and along the foot of Hermon to the Lake of Galilee. Then came the day when from among the brown peaks of the mountains of Judah the desolate ruins of the city of Zion rose before their eyes-it was Jerusalem. What fateful significance this journey had for the generations that were still to come!"

Revelation 20

John sees a messenger coming down from heaven and he binds the dragon for a thousand years in chains. The dragon is thrown into the pit of the deep and shut up. He will no longer lead the nations astray for a thousand years. Then, after that, he will be released once again for a short time.

He sees the martyrs living and reigning with Yeshua for these thousand years. The first resurrected group of the saints. The second resurrection group are not there, they are still asleep in the dust. The second death has no power over the overcomers of the first resurrection.

When satan is once again released after the thousand years he goes again to lead the nations against Elohim into the four corners of the earth. Gog and Magog are the rebellious ones. They come forth and surround the set apart ones and the beloved city. At this action, Elohim casts fire down out of the heaven and consumes them all. The devil is thrown into the lake of fire where the false prophet and beast are already at.

John sees the great white throne and Elohim sitting upon it. All beings great and small were standing before the King. All the books were opened, even the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to their works, according to what was written in the books. The death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire and this is the second death.

Anyone not found in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 21

Then renewed heaven and renewed earth are now manifested. John sees also the renewed Jerusalem coming down from heaven adorned as a bride for her husband. And Elohim now dwells among and with men. He will be their Elohim and they will be His people. He shall wipe away every tear, there will be no more death, nor mourning, nor crying. Also no more pain for all those things are gone away.

Elohim makes all things new. The thirsty will get the water of life and the overcomers shall inherit it all.

John is taken and shown the bride, the Lamb's wife. He was taken to a great and high mountain and he saw all of Jerusalem. It was shining as crystal having 12 great and high walls, each gate written on them for the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

John was given a golden measuring rod to measure the city. The city was as jasper, crystal, and gold and many other precious and beautiful stones. There was no need for the sun, nor moon to shine for the esteem of Elohim lightened it, and the Lamb is its lamp. The gentiles shall walk in its light and the sovereigns of the earth bring their esteem into it. The gates shall never shut. No manner of uncleanness enters the city, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.