

RETURNING FROM EXILE – PART TWO

(A Recipe for Redemption)

Lesson 58

The Northland Christian High School debate team and their parents were at our house for a meeting the other night. Following the meeting, a dessert reception enabled me to meet and visit with a number of the high school students. One of the students steered our conversation immediately to baking. She had heard that I make bagels from scratch, and was dying to talk about it. She had tried on several occasions, but each seemed to flop. She wondered what she was doing wrong. I told her that I made bagels as master baker Cyril Hitz taught me, and I tried to explain his techniques.

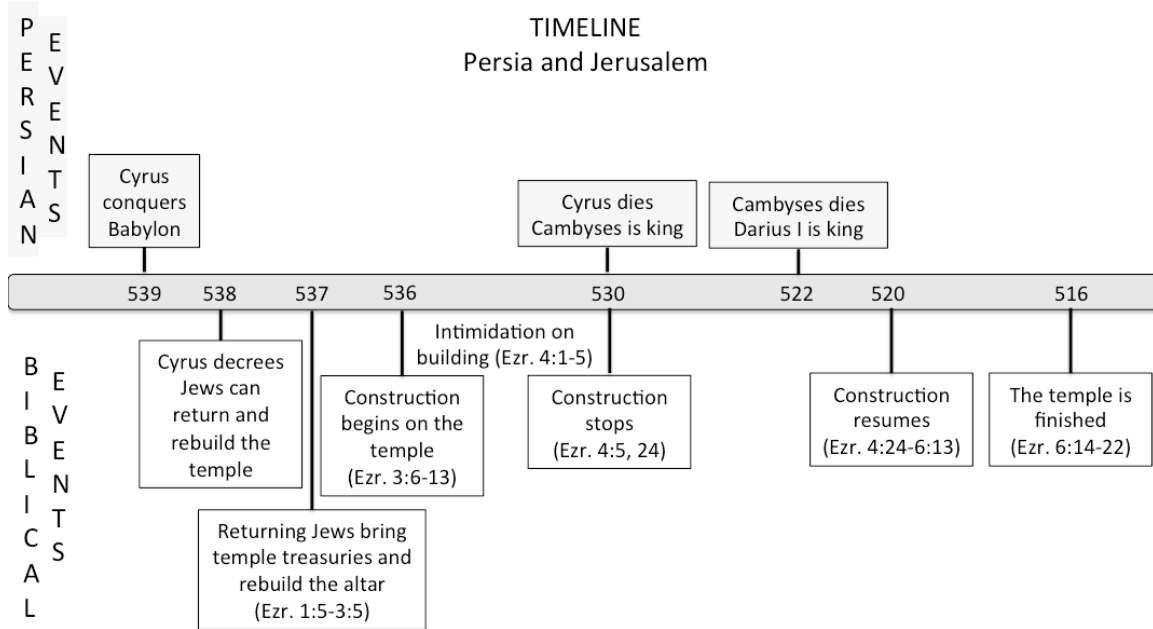
To me, baking is a wonderful metaphor for life. The ingredients that form the base of every effort can make or break a recipe. High quality ingredients can take a solid recipe and make it phenomenal. Poor quality ingredients can ruin the best recipe. The techniques of cooking reflect techniques of life. The kneading of bread, the stirring, the oven's heat, all go into an end result that can be tasteful or deplorable. Good yeast baking takes time too. The rising time (when the yeast ferments) is critical to a finished product that has the right texture and taste.

Life is much the same. What goes into life, whether good or bad quality, has a definite effect on the outcome. It is so important to me that our children (and that we parents) spend time developing the ingredients for a godly life. I want regular time in the Word and time in prayer. I need to surround myself with godly friends who invest in my life as I invest in theirs. I long for worship that takes me before the Lord in praise and petition as I remember who he is, high and exalted, worthy of all praise. I see his hand at work in me, taking the ingredients of life, and stirring them into the product that he would have me be. He can take things that alone are unsavory, and turn them into something delicious. He knows how long to knead, and when to gently fold. He knows the right heat in the oven, and the perfect baking time. He prepares things just right to an end result that feeds his kingdom.

As we continue to look at the Jews returning from exile, we are staring into the pages of history, and we are seeing God's hand move to make the product that births to the world the Messiah. It is a marvelous lesson for us whom still live history under the hand of the Master Baker.

BACKGROUND

As we continue our study of the Jews’ return from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem and Samaria/Judah, it is helpful to put certain events into a timeline. The below timeline sets out historical events of Persia above the line while the Biblical events detailed in Ezra are below the line.



Our study will follow the chronology of the key events set out in this timeline. In doing so, we will integrate the history with the Biblical narrative.

539BC – Cyrus Conquers Babylon

We referenced this briefly last lesson, but we have a chance to get into a bit more detail this time. Cyrus was the Persian king who defeated Nabonidus and Belshazzar with hardly a fight. We have several sources for the Persian victory. Babylonian inscriptions set the stage. They speak of Nabonidus abdicating effective reign of Babylon, leaving for ten years to an Arabian oasis while his son Belshazzar was acting king. The Biblical book of Daniel attests too that Belshazzar was the king during this time. As Cyrus became a huge threat, Nabonidus returned to Babylon, taking the various gods from nearby cities with him. In this way, Nabonidus tried to hedge his bets with some extra protection from any god he could find. Isaiah prophetically mocked this scene in Isaiah 46, referencing the idols Bel and Nebo as “gods” manufactured by the local goldsmiths, and then hauled around by animals. How absurd that gods who needed men and oxen to move them from one place to another might be effective

at protecting those who hauled them about! Isaiah 46:5-7 contrasts such illusory gods with YHWH who asks,

“To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?”

Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship!

They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble.

Once back in Babylon, the protection of neither gods nor armies was adequate. Cyrus took the city with ease and little opposition. Daniel chapter 5 recounted that Belshazzar was having a debauched feast/party, sacrilegiously using the vessels brought from Solomon’s temple in his drunken revelry. Daniel prophetically declared Babylon at an end, and Daniel 5:30 records:

That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede [Cyrus¹] received the kingdom, being 62 years old.

The “father of history,” the Greek historian Herodotus (c.484BC-430), wrote of the conquest that the Babylonians were

dancing and making merry at a festival...till they learnt the truth but too well. Thus was Babylon then for the first time taken²

The Greek Xenophon (c.430 BC-c.354) detailed that Cyrus timed his attack for when,

¹ For a thorough discussion on Cyrus as “Darius the Mede,” see Wiseman, D. J., *et al.*, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (Tyndale Press 1965), 9ff. An alternate theory posited by W. H. Shea, “Darius the Mede: An Update,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 20 (1982):229-248, suggests that the name referred to a man named Gubaru I, the Persian general who conquered the city of Babylon. Shea believes this is a different Gubaru than the subsequent governor of Babylon under Cyrus, who is the individual others believe to be the “Darius the Mede” to whom Daniel referred.

² Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, Book 1, at 191-192 (Trans’d by A. D. Godley, *Loeb Classical Library*, Harvard 1920).

A certain festival had come round in Babylon, during which all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.³

Xenophon then detailed how in that night, once the people discovered the king slain, they surrendered and Cyrus took possession.⁴

538BC – Cyrus Decrees Jews Can Return and Rebuild the Temple

Last week, we discussed briefly that Ezra gives the details of what happened after Cyrus conquered Babylon:

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:

“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. 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. 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.” (Ezra 1:1-4).

This is consistent with the historical views of Cyrus related in ancient histories. The Cyrus cylinder shown at right was discovered in 1879. The cylinder recounts Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon, explaining that the hostility of the Babylonian kings (termed “weaklings”) toward the local religions was a major reason that the gods called Cyrus to battle Babylon, and the reason the gods gave him victory. Giving credit



³ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, Book VII, v.15 (Transl’d by Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard 1914).

⁴ *Ibid.*, at v.32-33.

to the god Marduk, the cylinder notes that Cyrus entered Babylon “without fighting or battle.” The entire population then “bowed to him and kissed his feet.” As Cyrus conquered Babylon, he was careful to “keep in view ... all its sanctuaries to promote their wellbeing.” Even beyond the city of Babylon, the cylinder recounted Cyrus’s actions that broadly describe the specific instructions he gave for Judah:

[As for] the holy cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the gods whose abode is in the midst of them, I returned to their places and housed them in lasting abodes. I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored (to them) their dwellings.⁵

Cyrus not only gave credit to the gods for the victory, but he also was moved to send back to destroyed temples the goods of the temples, with instructions that the temples be rebuilt. While Cyrus may have thought it was Marduk moving in his heart to put him into action on the battlefield, Ezra explained who was truly at work. It was YHWH who “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus” (Ezr. 1:1).

This Hebrew word for “stirred” is *‘uwr* (עור) with the idea of “awakened” or “incited.” God was stirring in the heart and mind of Cyrus, whether Cyrus realized it or not. This same terminology was used in Isaiah’s prophetic section on this time. Isaiah 45 is the section that begins with Cyrus specified by name,

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped (Isa 45:1).

In this section YHWH makes the emphatic statement,

I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level (Isa. 45:13).

This was not something Cyrus understood. Cyrus thought it was Marduk, and did not know the hand of God working in his life. That did not stop God from working, however!

I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me (Isa. 45:4-5).

Here, we see the result of the truth in Proverbs 21:1,

⁵ Thomas, D. Winton, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, (Nelson 1958), at 93.

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

It was not only in the king's heart that God was stirring, however; he was also stirring in the heart of his people, as we see in the next section.

537BC —Returning Jews Bring Temple Treasuries and Rebuild the Altar

Ezra 1:5-7 sets out the next portion of narrative history:

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. 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. 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.

The same Hebrew word for God stirring in Cyrus's heart shows God stirring in the hearts of those he chose to "go up and to rebuild the house of the LORD." In sync with the Cyrus cylinder, the Scripture also indicates that Cyrus was sending back the temple treasures along with his instructions to rebuild it.

Chapter two of Ezra gives a number of household names and names of individuals who came up out of captivity and returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside "each to his own town." Set out separately in the numbering are those who were priests and in service of the temple and worship. The Levites, those who were singers ("sons of Asaph") and those who were gatekeepers, and general temple servants are set out by family and number.⁶ These were all people who had clearly preserved proof of their lineage. There was a second group of those who "could not prove their father's houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel." They searched in written records kept, "the genealogies," for that purpose, but were unable to find their own registration. These were not allowed to partake of any holy food until the priest was able to consult God on the matter.

In the seventh month, which is the Jewish month of Tishri (falling in the range of September/October in the modern calendar), those that returned all came to Jerusalem. Two men, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, took the lead in building the altar so that burnt offerings could be made. The text notes that there was a fear among the

⁶ All these details are not just for information, but are showing a hint of Israel coming back to life in a practical, tangible sense.

returnees because of “the peoples of the land.” We do not know precisely what the fear was, but it seems likely to scholars that the people who were living in the land during the exile, whether Jew or Samaritan, had likely continued some form of worship at the destroyed temple, as indicated in Jeremiah 41:5. The fear could be over using an altar area being used by those deemed less than pure, or it could be fear instilled as the returnees dismantled what had been used for decades and built an altar of their own. Regardless, to their credit, the people did not let their fear prevent them from worshipping God.

The people then kept the Feast of Booths, one of the three festivals God had set out as a time for the people to gather together before him (Ex. 23:14-17). This festival was instructed to run from the fifteenth day of the seventh month for eight days (Lev. 23:33-36).

Ezra does not state anything directly about the Day of Atonement. That also was set for the month of Tishri (the seventh month), and was due for observance five days before the Feast of Booths (Lev. 23:26). Perhaps the people were unaware; perhaps the people were loath to perform such a ritual when the temple was in shambles, or perhaps the sacrifices that began on the “first day of the seventh month” (Ezr. 3:6) means that the atonement was held. Regardless, it is clear that a priority for the people upon returning to the land was offering sacrifices for sin, and showing a reverent attitude toward YHWH. God had taught the Jewish people a lesson they would never forget. It was seared into them through the pain of exile and the harsh reality of return despite the great joy.

536BC—Construction Begins on the Temple

As the people had gathered for the Feast of Booths, they were acutely aware of the destroyed temple, as well as Cyrus’s charge to rebuild it. They gave money to masons and carpenters, as well as to people in Tyre and Sidon to get Lebanese cedars brought in for the reconstruction of the temple. In this, they followed a great model. Solomon himself had brought the same materials and expertise in constructing the first temple. This work began in the “second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem” (Ezr. 3:8), and the Levites over age 20 took the primary responsibility for the labor. At the completion of the foundation, a worship service was held. The Priests wore their vestments, and the singers led the people in song, with cymbals crashing in praise to the LORD. They followed closely the example of David, and used the Psalms in worship, singing responsively:

For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel (Ezr. 3:11)

This refrain was a typical refrain in the worship of Israel. When David was placing the Ark of the Covenant in the tent he had made for it, David ordered that refrain as part of a Psalm to be sung in honor to God (1 Chron. 16:34). It was also the refrain sung in Solomon's day when the Ark was brought to the temple (2 Chron. 5:13). The people again sang the refrain, with faces bowed to the ground, when the presence of YHWH filled the temple (2 Chron. 7:3). Multiple Psalms use the refrain (Ps. 106, 107, 118, 136). In Psalm 136, the refrain is echoed responsively over and over as each stanza is followed by "for his steadfast love endures forever." Even more so, however, we see this phrase as remembering the funeral dirges of Lamentations. The one uplifting section of Lamentations is the core, center verses built around this phrasing. Lamentations 3:22-24 affirmed,

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

In a touching note, Ezra adds that some of the old men who had seen the original temple, wept over the moment, even as most were shouting for joy. That is not too surprising. The original had been razed in a time of panic, disarray, defeat, and struggle for survival, with the great uncertainty of defeat. These old men no doubt had those memories seared into their brains at an early age, since the destruction had occurred fifty years earlier.

Intimidation

The joyous moment of rebuilding was not without problems. In Ezra four, we read that as the "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" heard about the rebuilding, they went to work to try and stop it. At first the adversaries tried to ply themselves into positions where they could destroy with subterfuge. They offered to help! (Not unlike the kind offer of Satan to Jesus to get him some food after forty days of fasting! "Just turn these stones into bread!") The people saw through the subterfuge and shunned the "help," noting that the returnees had been given the legal right to rebuild, not others. The adversaries, labeled "people of the land,"⁷ as opposed to the people who had returned, began working to discourage the rebuilding efforts. They intimidated those rebuilding, "and bribed counselors [Persian officials] against them to frustrate their purpose" (Ezr. 4:5).

⁷ These adversaries are likely what the Bible in other places calls "Samaritans." In Ezra 4:2, they claimed to "worship your God as you do," and to have been sacrificing to him "since the days of Earshaddon king of Assyria who brought us here." These were seen as part-Israelite at best. They were viewed a mixed breed who had corrupted not only their genetics, but their worship and beliefs as well.

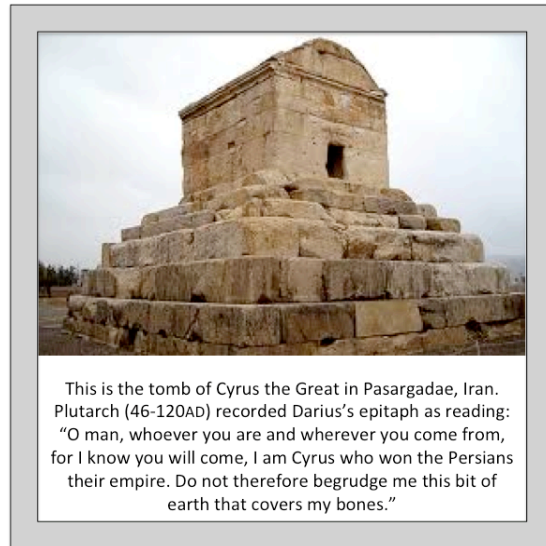
Ezra's chronological narrative is interrupted to insert a later episode where people were hostile to Judah's efforts (Ezr. 4:6-23). With Ezra 4:24, Ezra then explained that the work on the temple stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius I. The cessation of work occurred during the same year that Cyrus died and the kingdom was passed on to the hands of his son, Cambyses.

Although Scripture does not detail the reasons the intimidation worked, and stopped construction, it certainly makes sense that with the death of Cyrus, who had ordered the construction, that there was enough uncertainty of the new king, that discretion might put work on hold. This is especially true considering that the major accomplishment of Cambyses as king was his invasion and conquest of Egypt in 525BC. This would have placed Cambyses and his army in the vicinity of Judah and Jerusalem, a people who had mercenaries serving in Pharaoh's army, and who had been in many historical treaties with Egypt. The people of Judah hit the pause button on construction and did not resume until after the death of Cambyses.

522BC – Cambyses Dies, Darius Becomes King

The details of history are a bit sketchy on what exactly happened, but Cambyses dies while returning to Persia from his Egyptian campaigns. It was in the spring of 522, when Cambyses heard there as a coup d'état that was ongoing at home. He took his army and rode toward Persia, but never arrived. He died, according to Herodotus, in Syria from a self-inflicted wound when he accidentally cut himself with a sword. Cambyses was jumping on his horse when his scabbard slipped off his sword "and the naked blade struck his thigh." Herodotus then explained that gangrene set in, and Cambyses died without leaving an heir.⁸

There were several who tried to take over the throne and kingdom, mainly the usurper who had attempted the coup d'état and Darius, later known as Darius I. The ultimate winner was Darius I. History professor Edwin Yamauchi does a



⁸ Herodotus, at Book 3.64, 66.

splendid job sorting through the various accounts of this tumultuous time in his work, *Persia and the Bible*.⁹

During this time, YHWH raised up two prophets to steer the Jews into restarting their construction and finishing the temple. Ezra 5:1 sets out the prophets as Haggai and Zachariah. These prophets, considered in more detail in a later lesson, declared the word of YHWH that the people were living in “paneled houses” while the house of the LORD “lies in ruins” (Hag. 1:4). It was time, the prophets declared, for the people to resume and finish the building project. Haggai dated this word from the Lord as coming, “in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month” (Hag. 1:1). The Jews heard the prophetic word and responded. Construction began again.

520BC – Construction Resumes

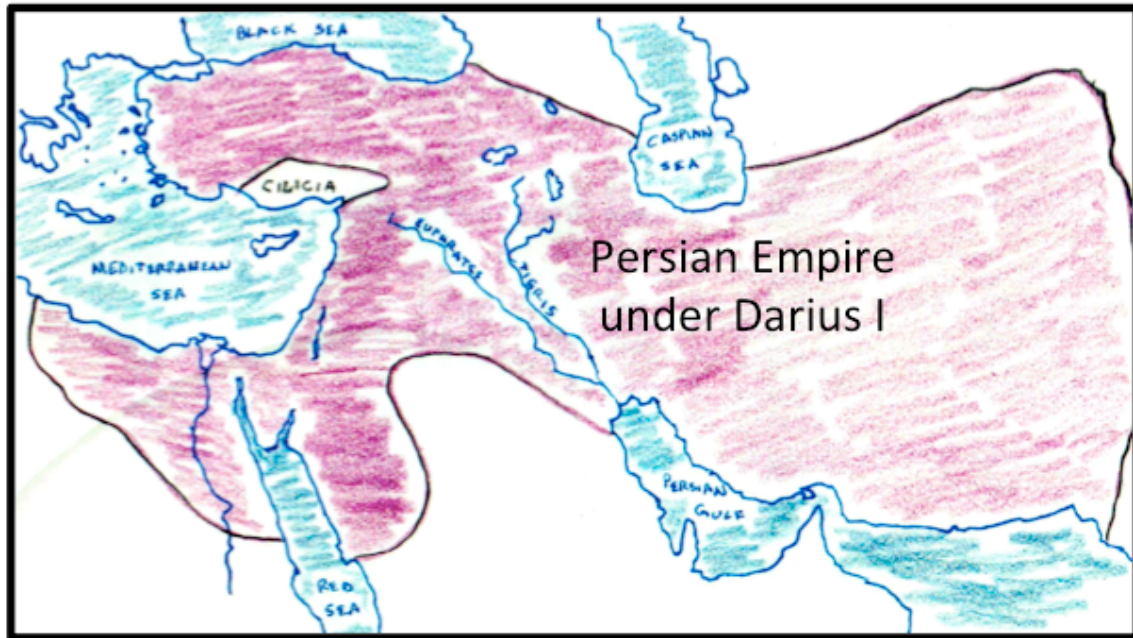
With the support of the prophets, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, the two men who had built the altar, took charge and began reconstruction of the temple. They soon ran into political trouble, as set forth in Ezra chapters 5 and 6. Of course, the political troubles were nothing in light of YHWH’s instruction that the rebuilding should commence. The narrative details the ways that, just as God stirred Cyrus’s heart, he could direct the heart of Darius like a watercourse!

The troubles begin when “Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River” and several others came up to the workers and challenged them:

Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure? (Ezr. 5:3).

The officials do not come off adversarial, as the bribed counselors did from a decade earlier. The area known as the “province Beyond the River” was an Akkadian geographical name for the region beyond the Tigris River including most of Syria and Palestine. The Persian Empire was massive, and it was divided into a number of provinces, each ruled by a Satrap or governor.

⁹ Yamauchi, Edwin, *Persia and the Bible*, (Baker 1990), at 125ff.



Earlier in 535BC, Cyrus had created a large administrative unit called “the province of Babylon and Across-the-River.” The western region of that unit was a subdivision known simply as “Across-the-River.” Tattenai is the first known governor of this province.¹⁰ As governor of the province “Beyond the River,” Tattenai oversaw the area past the Euphrates River reaching down toward Egypt, including Judah. For some time now, tablets have been translated from the time period that demonstrate that Tattenai was “governor of the province Across-the-River” who reported to the Satrap over the larger region of “Babylon and Across-the-River” named Hystanes. Hystanes reported directly to Darius the king.¹¹

The Satraps were each responsible for collecting taxes that first went back to the King to run his empire, but secondarily paid for the Satrap and his regional government. Under the various Satraps were governing officials who actually collected the taxes. These governing officials paid what was required by the Satraps, and also collected taxes for their own usage.

This information helps us understand what happened once Tattenai quizzed the Jews over the rebuilding of the temple. Tattenai sent what was likely a regular report on matters to Darius. In the report was a letter on the temple reconstruction.

¹⁰ Stolper, Matthew, “The Governor of Babylon and Across-the-River”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 48 (Oct. 1989), at 289.

¹¹ Olmstead, A. T., “Tattenai, Governor of ‘Across the River,’” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 3 (Jan. 1944), at 46.

The letter is quite straightforward and shows both the honesty of the Jews that answered Tattenai as well as Tattenai's straightforward reporting of the facts:

To Darius the king, all peace. Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?' We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. And this was their reply to us: 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; and he said to him, "Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site." Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.' Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter." (Ezr. 5:7-17).

Darius had the records searched and found out that the Jews had reported the situation accurately. Darius then instructed Tattenai not only to avoid interrupting the building, but also to pay for it! From the taxes that Tattenai was charged to collect, would need to come payment for the building of the Lord's house:

Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River (Ezr. 6:8).

Tattenai did as instructed, and the temple was finished "on the third day of the month of *Adar*, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius, the king" (Ezr. 6:15).

Adar is the final month in the Jewish calendar. The next month is the first of the year and is the month of Passover. The Jews celebrated the finishing of the temple with great sacrifices at the dedication, followed the next month with a Passover celebration for the returned exiles. The Passover must have carried special import as the Jews saw a miraculous return from bondage into the Promised Land much like their ancestors had with the Egyptian Exodus.¹² The hand of God had moved favorably, and the people dwelled in covenant with him. They kept the festival noting how God had “turned the heart” of the king to them “so that he aided them in the work of the House of God, the God of Israel” (Ezra 6:22).

CONCLUSION

This storyline had all the ingredients for a recipe of disaster. Yet as God stirred hearts and turned minds, the people of Israel took more substantial steps toward fulfilling their role in setting the stage for the coming Messiah and his kingdom. The results are not only looking forward, but they were also immediate in the lives of his followers. They got to see the hand of God move repeatedly, sustain them against adversaries, providing for them spiritually as well as physically and economically. The providing and forgiving God moved them properly to proclaim with joy, as it moves us who read the story, *for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever*. Amen!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus... Then rose up...everyone whose spirit God had stirred up*” (Ezr. 1:1-5).

The LORD, the Master Baker, who stirs up and awakens the spirits of man—are we sensitive to what he has to say to us? We see in this story the many ways God communicates. He stirs the spirit and motivates or awakens in us what he would have us do. He moves in conviction. He also spoke to his people through the prophets, giving motivation and encouragement, as well as rebuke and correction.

¹² John Monson and many others are quick to point out the many ways that the exile was an “anti-exodus,” as covenant was broken rather than made, and people went into bondage in a foreign land, rather than being released from bondage. Here we now see a re-enactment, of sorts, of the exodus, as the people are released from bondage and brought back into the Promised Land.

Unlike the generations that went into exile, the returning people who were listening, took heed to the word of the prophets. They honored what the prophets said, and built the house of the LORD.

I want to be like those people. When God stirs my heart, I want to be sensitive and move as he convicts me. I want to read his word, to hear the words of the prophets even today, and see how God would have me live for him. Every day before God is a unique opportunity to serve him that never comes again. I want, by his grace, to not miss an opportunity to serve him!

2. “*They built the altar*” (Ezr. 3:2).

It started for the Jews at the temple site. They did not first rebuild the temple; they started with an altar. Before anything else, the people set sacrifices before God for their sins. Sin is *the* impediment to fellowship with a holy God. It must be dealt with properly. It is not enough to live with it in secret, or to try to stifle and forget it. Sin needs to be set before the Father and sacrifice for that sin must be made. It is a first priority.

This is the beauty of the Cross of Christ. He came and offered a full and real sacrifice, bearing the sins of many all at once. The sacrifice of Christ meets all requirements of God’s holiness as no other sacrifice ever could. Before the cross of Christ, with his sacrifice, we have full forgiveness. This is how God can then dwell within us. In Christ, we have His Spirit indwelling and keeping us for Him, no matter where we are—in exile, in joyful return, or in permanent diaspora!

3. “*Who gave you a decree to build this house?* ” (Ezr. 5:3).

When the governor Tattenai interrupted the Jews work to ask this question, I wonder if it upset the workers. Why should there be this interference? God had told the Jews to resume building! He sent two prophets to tell them exactly that! This was HIS work they were doing. When God gives you a job, surely God is supposed to pave the way! Yet, here was an obstacle (actually *another* obstacle!) The Jews did not throw down their tools in frustration or disgust. They had heard the word of God and they were going forward trusting in him. God had not told them it would be easy; he had told them to do it! And so they did. As the story unfolded, it became clear that God’s road had even more blessings to it. By the direction of God, not only was the decree of Cyrus reasserted by Darius, but the province also was required to pay for all future construction. Persia became an umbrella of protection for the Jews, who faced constant opposition from the Samaritans, Ammonites, and other adversaries in the land.

God's road is to God's destination, not mine and not yours. But that is what we signed up for! The declaration of the child of God is not simply that Jesus is Lord, but that he is Lord and master of my life and all of human history along with it!

In John 13, Jesus taught his disciples a lesson in service and humility, washing their feet in preparation for his coming arrest and crucifixion. In his explanation afterwards there is an interesting turn of words:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet (Jn 13:13-14).

For the apostles, Jesus was Teacher first ("Rabbi"), then "Lord." Jesus reversed the order to emphasize that he is first and foremost Lord. That is why his lessons as teacher have value. I want that. I want Jesus as the Lord in my life that teaches me, not a teacher who carries the secondary title of Lord. Then, I will walk as God directs, whether the road is always clear and easy or whether there are obstacles to be overcome!