

# The Context Bible

## Life Group Lesson 5

### John 2:1-2:25

---

#### Introduction to the Context Bible

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, it makes reading like an ordinary book quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament, were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week five, along with the readings for week six appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

#### *Week Five Readings*

---

**1/27 A Celebration of Marriage**  
Jn 2:1-12

**Context:** The Song of Solomon is a celebration of marriage and marital love. Consider the wedding at Cana in that light.

Song of Sol 5-8

**1/28 John's 1<sup>st</sup> Passover**  
Jn 2:13-22

**Context:** The Song of Solomon is a celebration of marriage and marital love. Consider the wedding at Cana in that light.

Ex 4:21-8:32  
Lev 23:4-8

**1/29 John's 1<sup>st</sup> Passover**  
Jn 2:13-22

**Context:** John frequently sets Jesus' life and ministry in events and language of Moses. We see the context here for the Passover.

Ex 9:1-11:10  
Ex 12:29-13:4  
Ps 69  
Mal 2

**1/30 John's 1<sup>st</sup> Passover - Rebuild the Temple**  
Jn 2:13-22

Solomon built the first temple at great expense and effort over decades. The temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian destruction again at great expense. These readings provide that history the Jews knew well.

2 Chrn 2-5  
Num 18  
2 Kg 25

**1/31 John's 1<sup>st</sup> Passover - Rebuild the Temple**  
Jn 2:13-22

Ezra 3-7

**2/1 Jesus Knows Better than to Trust People**  
Jn 2:23-25

**There is something innately untrustworthy about fallen people. These Old Testament selections give a taste of that.**

Gen 6-8  
Ps 58

*2/2 Off*

---

## A CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE (John 2:1-12)

John 2:1-12 has the passage of Jesus' first miracle in John, the wedding at Cana. In this story, the party had run out of wine, and once Jesus' mother sought his help, Jesus turned vats of water into first class wine.

Jesus, the Son of God, celebrated marriage. Marriage was no mere contract between two folks who desired to be together. It was a holy event where God joined man and woman into one. It is a mystical union worthy of an expression of Christ and the church – his bride.

Many readings could supplement this, but we have chosen the Song of Solomon, an Old Testament poem in honor and appreciation of marriage. The readings split with half of the Song in last week's readings and half in this week's readings. We included the exposition for both readings in the last lesson, available at [www.Biblical-literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-literacy.com).

## JOHN'S 1<sup>ST</sup> PASSOVER (John 2:13-22)

The Passover is rooted in God's liberation of his people from slavery into the Promised Land. It was never meant to be the economic sideshow it had become in Jesus' day. The roots are found deep in Israel's history. Our contextual readings pick up the story with Moses going to confront Pharaoh. Unlike the synoptic gospel writers, John details more than one Passover with Jesus. This is consistent with John's continued placement of Jesus in language and situations as like Moses and even greater than Moses. John places this Passover early in his narrative as Jesus begins to liberate his people from the slavery to sin in the Promised Land of the kingdom!

Exodus 4:21-11:10; 12:29-13:4; Leviticus 23:4-8

A trip to the Cairo Museum feels like a visit to a movie set. You are transported immediately into an ancient world, where monuments, statues, and paintings stir up clear images of history from thousands and thousands of years ago.

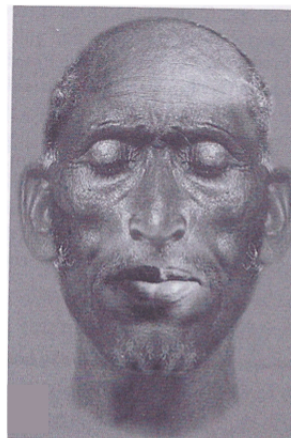
Hany, an educated Egyptologist whose soft voice and clear descriptions added to the mystique, guided us through an "after-hours" Museum visit. We were alone in these large rooms with pieces of the past that seemed to come alive. I am confident that if I listened carefully enough, the history would echo into audible noises I would understand.

The most stunning and moving moment came when we entered the room of mummies. We saw a collection of mummies, dead bodies that had been preserved and lay before us in glass cases, unwrapped to enable us to see their smallest features—fingernails, toenails, teeth, and more.

There was one mummy I wanted to see more than all the others: Ramesses II. I believe this was the man before whom Moses stood and demanded the release of God's people from the bonds of slavery. Finally we came to his mummy, lying in a glass case. I bent down, truly just inches from his face, observing the wisps of surprisingly long hair still left on the back of his head.

The hair was yellowish and Becky asked Hany what we all wondered, "Did Ramesses II have blond hair?" Hany explained that the chemicals of mummification had left the hair that color, for Ramesses II had white hair upon his death. This made sense, as Ramesses II reigned as sole Pharaoh over Egypt from 1279BC until his death in 1213.<sup>1</sup>

Caroline Wilkinson is a world-renowned specialist at facial reconstruction from the remains of deceased people. Using the mummified soft tissues of Ramesses II, she completed a facial reconstruction that takes one even beyond the reality of the mummified remains.<sup>2</sup> Looking closely at her rendering, I suspect that Ramesses II may have had a few more wrinkles upon his death (he died at age 90). She seems to have reconstructed his face as it would have been in mid-life!



Wilkinson describes a six-step process to rendering the facial reconstruction of Ramesses II from his mummified remains.

Was Ramesses II the Pharaoh of the exodus? We cannot say with certainty. The clues certainly lead me to agree with that identification by the world's leading Rammesside

---

<sup>1</sup> The authoritative work on Ramesses II is Kitchen, K. A., *Pharaoh Triumphant The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Aris & Phillips Ltd 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See Wilkinson's chapter "The Facial Reconstruction of Ancient Egyptians" in David, Rosalie, ed., *Egyptian Mummies and Modern Science* (Cambridge 2008) at 162ff.

scholar Ken Kitchen, as well as America’s leading scholar Jim Hoffmeier, but the clues also leave open other possibilities as well, but there is no shortage of ideas about the exodus pharaoh’s identity.<sup>3</sup> Rather than give pro and con to each view, we will continue to look at the archaeology and the Biblical passages consistent with the Ramesses II view. Of course much of the material we consider is equally applicable to other time periods and other pharaonic identifications as well.

The plagues - The ten plagues that God wrought upon Egypt are both a source of wonder and surprise. The plagues are clearly written (and occurred) in a way that made them easy to remember. They are set out in three series of three plagues, followed by the exceptional final plague (number ten). The pattern of the three series is consistent across the board:

	<u>Plague</u>	<u>Forewarning</u>	<u>Time of warning</u>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> series</b>	1. Blood	Yes	In the morning
	2. Frogs	Yes	None
	3. Lice	No	None
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> series</b>	4. Insects	Yes	In the morning
	5. Pestilence	Yes	None
	6. Boils	No	None
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> series</b>	7. Hail	Yes	In the morning
	8. Locust	Yes	None
	9. Darkness	No	None

Before I had studied much in the areas of Egyptology, I was always struck by the seeming absurdity, if not outright stupidity of Pharaoh in his interactions with Moses. Had I been Pharaoh, I reasoned, I might have not relented and released the Israelites from the very first plague (Nile turned to blood), but somewhere by plague 3, 4, or 5, I most certainly would have! I decided that this might be the import of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart (Ex. 4:13, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, etc.). Still, Pharaoh certainly seemed to be hardening his own heart as well! (Ex. 8:15, 9:34).

---

<sup>3</sup> Rather than reproduce the chronology and background information on this, I refer those interested to that material, available for download at: [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com).

Studying the plagues from noted Egyptologists, however, changed my view on this somewhat. I believe that these first nine plagues were miraculous works of God, but they were also related to semi-common events in the life cycle of Egypt. It is as if God took some rare, but not unheard of occurrences in Egypt and magnified them to proportions never before seen.

Some have taken this “natural” feature of the first nine plagues and used it as an argument that, (a) they were written exaggerations of normal events, or (b) God’s miraculous works involved timing and interpretation of natural events rather than something truly “miraculous.” I think both are wrong. These events by God were miracles even to Pharaoh as they occurred. Yet once they passed, Pharaoh lapsed into the rationalization that they may have been no more than an unusually bad case of a known occurrence.

Consider the various plagues:

1. Blood. God turns the Nile into blood, along with all the ponds, canals and tributaries that adjoined it. Even the water in jars (taken from the Nile?) was blood. Interestingly Pharaoh’s magicians seemingly duplicated this miracle. History and science has shown that the Nile does on occasion turn blood red. Australian English scholar Greta Hort (1903-1967) is often cited for her 1957 publication entitled “Plagues of Egypt” which set out her scientific theories of natural events that would have made up the plagues.<sup>4</sup> She opined that extreme high flooding of the Nile could bring “Roterde” (“red earth particles”) and flagellates (which contribute to form “red tides”). This, she reasoned, would kill fish, breed infections, and would also be duplicable by Pharaoh’s magicians.
2. Frogs. God brought massive amounts of frogs onto the land, another feat duplicated by Pharaoh’s magicians. Pharaoh asked Moses to make them leave, whereupon the frogs on land died in massive numbers. Hort pointed out that this occurred just seven days after the red flood and argued that the frogs brought infection with them, resulting in their death. Certainly the reproduction of frogs was not itself a miraculous plague. The miracle of this plague was the quantity and the following death on demand.
3. “Lice”. Anyone who has been to Egypt can attest that they have plenty of insects without a divine plague! Still there was something special about this third plague. The ESV translates the insects as “gnats.” Other scholars consider them to be lice (King James Version) or even mosquitoes (Jerusalem Bible). Pharaoh’s magicians could not repeat this super-abundance of insects,

---

<sup>4</sup> *Zeitschrift für Alt Testamentliche Wissenschaft* 69 (1957) at 84-103 and 70 (1958) 48-59.

and they were starting to accede that “This is the finger of God.” But not Pharaoh!

4. “Insects”. Here again is a translation issue. There is a “dog fly” or “stable fly” which is what the translators of the Hebrew Old Testament in Greek thought was meant (the “Septuagint”). This vicious blood-sucking fly normally attacks animals for sustenance, but is willing to feast upon humans when the time is right! These flies did not affect the Jewish area of Goshen, but covered the remaining parts of Egypt. Pharaoh seemed to relent on this plague, only hardening his heart after the flies left.
5. Pestilence. Some disease set in on the livestock of the Egyptians, missing those of the Israelites. Hort saw this pestilence as a by-product of anthrax, which was part of the frog’s malady in plague two. Whatever it was, it did not impress Pharaoh enough to let God’s people go. His heart hardened and the plagues continued.
6. Boils. These skin infections Hort considered a result of the fly bites in plague four. Flies carrying anthrax she believed more likely to bite the lower extremities as opposed to wasps that might target the head. Citing Deut. 28:35 (“The LORD will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed”) as an indicator the boils were primarily on the lower part of the body, she considered this a logical effect of what had preceded. This plague notably affected the magicians, but Pharaoh still would not relent.
7. Hail. Here Hort left the “natural events” she thought could flow from an overly flooded and infected Nile. Hailstorms are apparently rare in Egypt, and this hail came down big, hard, and destructively everywhere but Goshen where the Israelites were dwelling. There is a note added in the Exodus narrative that accurately reflects the growing seasons of Egypt, “The flax and the barley were struck down, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the emmer were not struck down, for they are late in coming up” (Ex. 9:31-32). This occurrence allows the dating of at least this plague. The time where flax and barley could be ruined but the wheat and emmer (spelt) remain is around February in Egypt. This helped Hort establish a logical time for each plague, showing how they would have occurred in the sequence set out in Exodus: Flooding occurred in July/August; frogs swarmed and died in August/September; insects would swarm in October/November; flies would swarm and bite anywhere from October to the following February; the pestilence plague would set in during January; the boils blister also in January; and the hail in February. February and March is also the time set for the next plague.

8. Locusts. When Moses announced coming locusts, in numbers and with damage that would wreck Egypt's economy, Pharaoh nearly let the Israelites go. Pharaoh was willing to let the men go, but insisted on the women and children staying behind (collateral for their return?). So the plague came. The wariness of Pharaoh shows that he was aware of the damage that locusts could do. Massive locust attacks are still not understood, but certainly occur in Africa.<sup>5</sup>
9. Darkness. Hort sets out the darkness as sand storms ("*khamzin*") so powerful they whipped up dense dark dirt. The timing for these storms, still known in Egypt, does correspond in a chronological order with the earlier eight plagues. These sandstorms would have been in a March/April time frame. Hoffmeier writes of being caught in these in Egypt where car lights were necessary even in the middle of the day.<sup>6</sup> This again nearly moved Pharaoh, but he would not grant a full release including cattle. This brought the climatic plague that broke all the rules.
10. Death of the firstborn. The final plague is recounted in Exodus 12. Scripture dates it as "the first month of the year. It is "Passover." On a western calendar it falls in either March or April, again fitting with the time cycles given by the likely natural occurrence of the other plagues. But there is nothing natural about this plague. It is the one that brings the people out of bondage. It forms the basis of the Lord's Supper. It is a ritual observant Jews still practice today. From this curse, the people were let go from Pharaoh. The readers on our plan have already had a chance to consider this in the reading from Exodus 12:1-28 on January 20.

Before closing, the plague section we note some information about Ramesses II as detailed in Kitchen's famous work *Pharaoh Triumphant The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt*. The Pharaoh before Ramesses II was his father, Pharaoh Sethos I. Sethos I set up Ramesses with wives and a Prince's life early. In his mid-teens, Ramesses had his firstborn son, Amen-hir-wonmef (also called Amen-hir-khopshef). This son rode with Ramesses into battle, and received tribute by carvings and paintings setting him with his father. After Ramesses II became Pharaoh, his firstborn was still working closely with his father as the senior prince in line for the throne. In time, Prince Amen-hir-wonmef became a "General-in-Chief." But something happened to the Prince by year 20 of Ramesses II's reign. The young man was no longer heir apparent and was apparently dead, although Ramesses II did not have

---

<sup>5</sup> See the January 7, 2005, National Geographic article by Brian Handwerk reproduced at: [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0107\\_050107\\_tv\\_locust\\_plague.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0107_050107_tv_locust_plague.html)

<sup>6</sup> Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, at 148f.

any cause of death recorded. Certainly, as Kitchen suggested, the Prince's death meets the criteria of what Exodus recorded with the death of the firstborn.

Ramesses II himself died at age 90, after 66 years of reigning as sole Pharaoh. Testing done on his mummy in Paris in 1976 and 1977 revealed atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) and a massive dental abscess that likely could have caused an infection that killed him. His skeleton indicated he walked with a slight limp and leaned forward aggressively in his stride.<sup>7</sup> His mummification took 70 days. If you get to Cairo, go see him!

### Psalm 69

In this Psalm, we have the cry of one who, no doubt like many Israelites in slavery in Egypt, found life overwhelming. God meets the cry with the assurance that the Exodus was not a one-time interest in the affairs of people. He heard the cry of his people and rescued them. God instituted to Passover so his people would always remember where to turn. That we can be assured that God hears our cries and brings deliverance at the right time and in the right way.

### Malachi 2

With this passage we return to the John narrative. Because Malachi indicted the leaders of the people and the priests for failing to properly honor God's name among the people. It is an attitude and approach that would turn the Passover into the economic event it was in the day of Jesus. This holy occasion became a profit engine rather than a drive to worship and respect for the Lord.

### REBUILDING THE TEMPLE (John 2:13-22)

#### 2 Chronicles 2-5 and Numbers 18

This section of the Old Testament sets out Solomon's construction of the first temple in Jerusalem. It was no easy process. It took Israel's wisest and wealthiest king, over 150,000 men, countless natural resources from Israel and neighboring kingdoms, and 20 years (2 Chron. 8:1) to construct.

The roles of the priests and the duties of the Levites shifted from the tabernacle to the temple once construction ended. These responsibilities were set out in Numbers 18.

#### 2 Kings 25

---

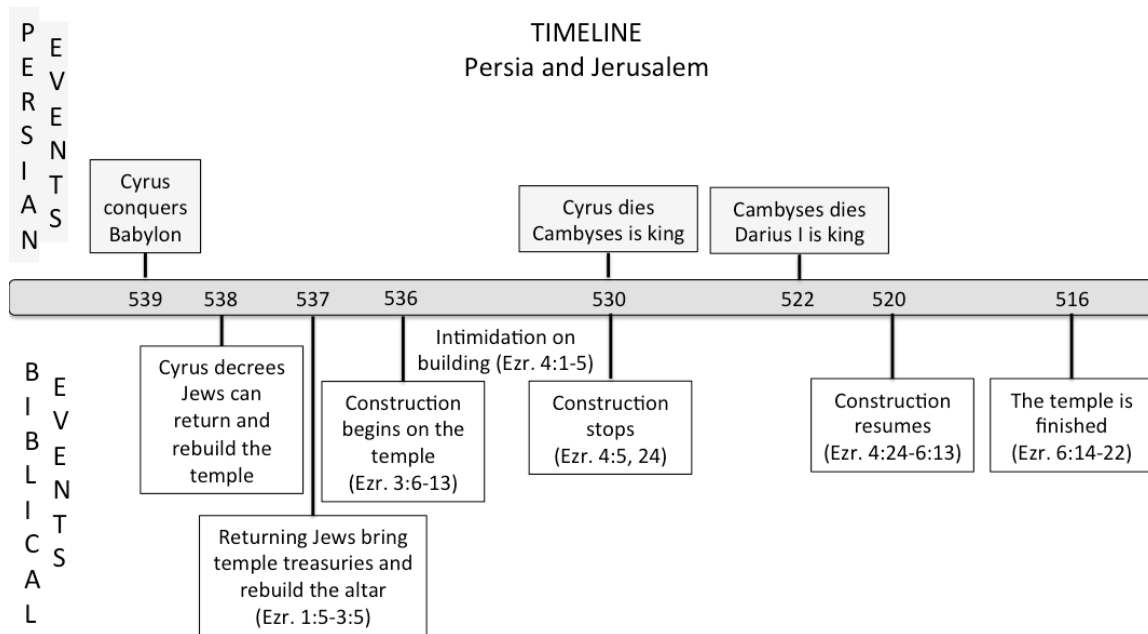
<sup>7</sup> David, Rosalie, *Conversations with Mummies: New Light on the Lives of Ancient Egyptians*, (Madison Press 2000) at 108ff.



Here we read of the matter of days involved in destroying the temple. It was burned and sacked as part of the Babylonian conquest of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra 3-7

In this passage we have the Jews’ return from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem and Samaria/Judah to rebuild the temple. 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 For those interested, we give too much additional detail below!

*539BC – Cyrus Conquers Babylon*

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 [Cyrus<sup>8</sup>] 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 taken<sup>9</sup>

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

A certain festival had come round in Babylon, during which all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, Book 1, at 191-192 (Trans’d by A. D. Godley, *Loeb Classical Library*, Harvard 1920).

<sup>10</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, Book VII, v.15 (Transl’d by Walter Miller, *Loeb Classical Library*, Harvard 1914).

Xenophon then detailed how in that night, once the people discovered the king slain, they surrendered and Cyrus took possession.<sup>11</sup>

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

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 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:



This “Cyrus Cylinder” is on display in the British Museum. It dates from the sixth century BC and was discovered in Babylon in 1879. The text praises Cyrus and denounces Nabonidus. It also attests to Cyrus’s repatriation of displaced people, his restoration of temples throughout Mesopotamia.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, at v.32-33.

[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.<sup>12</sup>

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 *ʿwr* (עורר) 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,

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*

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, D. Winton, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, (Nelson 1958), at 93.

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 treasuries along with his instructions to rebuild it.

### *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:

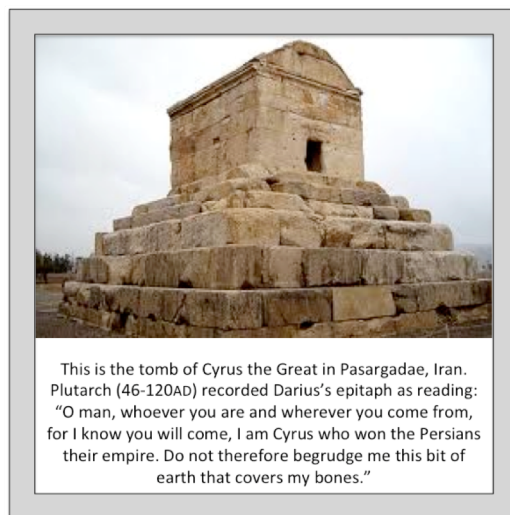
For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel (Ezr. 3:11)

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.

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,”<sup>13</sup> 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).



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

---

<sup>13</sup> 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. They become important in John's next story.

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.<sup>14</sup>

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 splendid job sorting through the various accounts of this tumultuous time in his work, *Persia and the Bible*.<sup>15</sup>

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

---

<sup>14</sup> Herodotus, at Book 3.64, 66.

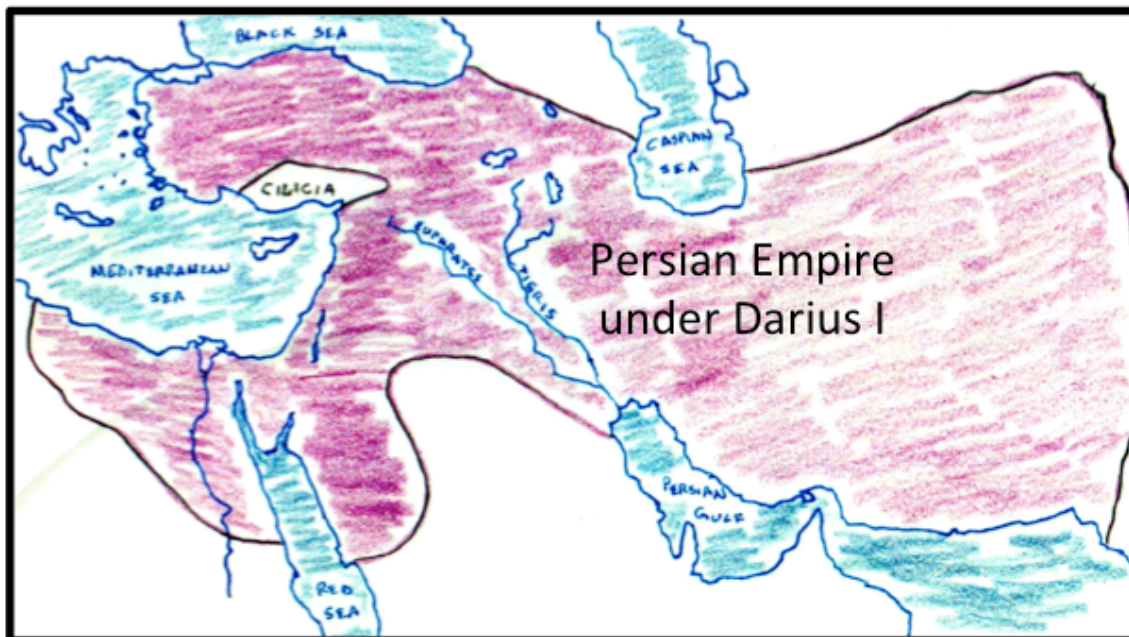
<sup>15</sup> Yamauchi, Edwin, *Persia and the Bible*, (Baker 1990), at 125ff.

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.



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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Stolper, Matthew, "The Governor of Babylon and Across-the-River", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 48 (Oct. 1989), at 289.

<sup>17</sup> Olmstead, A. T., "Tattenai, Governor of 'Across the River'," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 3 (Jan. 1944), at 46.



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. 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.<sup>18</sup> 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).

Knowing this historical information, no doubt caused much of the recoil among the Jews when Jesus made the personal claim he would,

Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19).

JESUS KNEW BETTER THAN TO TRUST PEOPLE (John 2:23-25)

At the Passover, a number of people began following Jesus and believing that he was sent from God. John draws the contrast that the people began trusting in Jesus, but Jesus knew better than to trust the people. Jesus had insight into the true unregenerate nature of humanity that does not make the unsaved particularly trustworthy!

Gen 6-8; Psalm 58

Few stories better show the nature of people than that of the flood. This tragedy came forward because of humanity’s proclivities for sin, selfishness, and rebellion. Psalm 58 puts it into a poetic form, calling on God to do something about the wickedness that is pervasive.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 5

---

<sup>18</sup> 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.

1. Over and over the plagues occurred with the writer singling out the “hand of the Lord” or the “outstretched arm of the Lord.” There is a deliberate play on this phrase, evident to one touring the antiquities of the Pharaohs. Many times we see Pharaoh memorialized with an arm outstretched smiting his enemies. He even carried the title of “Lord of the strong arm.” The Egyptians considered Pharaoh, and Pharaoh considered himself, as god on earth. Yet neither he, nor his gods were any match for YHWH Almighty. God’s deeds declared his victory total and complete.

Consider that in light of your own life. How many times have we seen seemingly insurmountable problems and circumstances in our own life? Yet the real strength, the saving outstretched arm belongs to the Lord.

2. God brought plagues upon Egypt; he intervened in history and sent forth a message that Pharaoh refused to hear. Pharaoh could write it off to circumstances, maybe bad luck. Pharaoh saw his own magicians bring frogs out of the Nile (although how they could differentiate between those brought by God and those by the magicians escapes me!) The problem of people treating deeds of God as natural or random occurrences goes deep. Many of the very events that authenticate the exodus narrative are ignored by people who resolutely resist the idea of the divine—at least of divine intervention. James encouraged the early church, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:16-17). How can we see his handiwork—in the heavens, in the world, and in our life, even in the events some consider “normal”?

3. Ezra 3:2 says that the rebuilding of the temple began with the 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.

How do we see this in Jesus’ “rebuilding” of the temple in three days?

### *Week Six Readings*

---

**Feb. 3-5 Jesus & Nicodemus**  
**Jn 3:1-21**

**2/3**

**Jn. 3:1-6**

Context: Jews were well versed in physical birth and genealogy. They also had indications in the Old Testament of something more. Contrast the first two context readings with the third.

1 Chron 3  
Ex. 22:29-30  
Ezek 36

**Jn. 3:7-8**

Context: Jesus' words readily echo Old Testament passages. Look for the echo in these.

Eccle 11:5  
Prov 30:4  
Prov 20:12  
Ps 139

**2/4**

**Jn 3:9-15**

Context: Jewish knowledge of the Old Testament would inform Nicodemus and others of the dread of God's wrath.

Jer 5  
Isa 30  
Isa 52  
Nm 21

**2/5**

**Jn. 3:16-21**

Context: While sin and disobedience brings wrath and death, Jesus brings salvation.

Rom 5  
Hb 2:1-2  
Dt 23:2-14, 19-25  
Dt 24:4-25:4  
Dt 25:11-19  
Hb 2:3-4  
Rm 1:16-17

**Feb. 6-7 John models humility**

**Jn. 3:22-30**

Context: We see in this passage of John the Baptist a model of humility. The Old Testament had much to say about the value of humility and the harms of pride.

**2/6**

**Jn. 3:22-30**

Ps 18  
Ps 25  
Ps 147  
2 Chron 6-7

**2/7**

**Jn. 3:22-30**

1 Pt 5  
1 Chron 21  
Isa 23  
Prov 16:19  
Prov 21:4  
Ezek 28:1-10

**Feb. 8-10 The Prophetic Ministry and Salvation from**

**Wrath**

**Jn 3:31-36**

**2/8**

**Jn 3:31-36**

Context: The "wrath" of the Lord was a real concept deeply experienced and taught in Jewish history

2 Chr 34  
2 Chr 36:1-15  
Jer 13  
2 Chr 36:16-21  
Lam 1-2

**2/9**

**Off**

---