

## Lesson 113

# Zerubbabel Returns to Israel

King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

# Overview

## Lesson Focus

The prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah finally came true! The Jews, who had been taken captive 70 years earlier, were given permission by King Cyrus to go back to their homeland. They went to work once they arrived. First, they restored worship. Then they rebuilt the temple. And when the temple was completed, they rejoiced.

## Key Passages

Ezra 1:1–6, 2:64–65, 3:10–11, 4:4–5, 6:15–17

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

Describe God's role in the rebuilding of the temple.

Describe the people's reaction to the rebuilt temple.

## Memory Verse

1 Peter 5:10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

## Prepare to Share

### Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

You have probably heard Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." We have looked at several instances in the history of Israel where God providentially directed rulers to accomplish his will: Pharaoh released the Israelite slaves; Assyria overthrew the northern kingdom; Babylon conquered Jerusalem. All of these rulers were under the divine guidance of God. Just as the Israelites were taken captive under God's direction, so, too, were they released from that captivity.

Ezra begins by pointing directly to God's sovereign hand in fulfilling the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Nearly 200 years before these events of the captivity even happened, Isaiah had named Cyrus as the one who would commission the return to Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28–45:1). It was Jeremiah who told of the duration of the captivity, and the end of that time had come. The 70 years were completed, and the Jews were about to return to Jerusalem.

Although the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem in 607 BC, the Medo-Persian Empire had risen to take control over Babylon under King Cyrus in 538. Contrary to the policies of the Babylonians, the Persians allowed the people they conquered to remain in their lands and for those who had previously been taken captive under the Babylonians to return to their homelands. And that is exactly what God stirred Cyrus to do for the Jews in 537 (Ezra 1:1). Cyrus wrote a proclamation announcing that “the Lord, the God of heaven” had given him the kingdoms of the earth and that he was to send the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Not only did God stir the heart of the king, but he also stirred the hearts of many of the leaders of the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Many of the Jews and the others around them gave richly for the rebuilding. Not to be outdone, Cyrus gave back all of the treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple 70 years earlier. These were given to Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah, who took them back to Jerusalem. Along with him, Zerubbabel led the return and became the main governor over the people in Jerusalem (Ezra 2:1–2).

As the people arrived in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns, they settled into homes and then gathered together at Jerusalem in the seventh month after their return (Ezra 3:1). They rebuilt the altar and began offering sacrifices again for the first time in 70 years. They also kept the festivals that had been neglected for so long and remembered all that God had done for them and what he would still do.

The next step was rebuilding the temple. The temple had been burned and leveled in 588 BC at the hands of the Babylonians (2 Chronicles 36:17–21), and its foundations had to be restored so that God could be worshipped in the way he had prescribed. As the foundation for the temple was completed, the people and the priests gathered around to the sounds of the singers and instruments (Ezra 3:8–11). But soon after, the jubilation stopped. Those people who had settled in the land in the absence of the Jews opposed the rebuilding and did all they could to frustrate the plans. This lasted for 16 years, during which the people became complacent and lost their focus on rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4:1–24).

At the end of this pause, God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to the people to encourage them to continue to build. As they restarted the construction, more opposition was raised and a letter was sent to the new king, Darius, to settle the matter (Ezra 5). Darius had the archives searched and found that Cyrus had ordered the rebuilding of the temple. Darius confirmed Cyrus’ command and then ordered that more provisions be given to the Jews to finish the construction (Ezra 6:1–12). God’s mighty hand had, again, ensured that the temple would be rebuilt. Construction was finally completed in 515 BC, 21 years after Zerubbabel had begun the work (Ezra 6:13–15). As the people gathered together with the priests at the dedication of the temple, the scene was again jubilant; the sacrifices for the covering of sins could once again be performed in the temple (Ezra 6:16–18).

God guided the hearts of the kings and the Jewish leaders and people to restore his worship at the temple (Ezra 6:22). The temple and the sacrifices that took place there were a shadow of Jesus. The Passover and the other festivals that were celebrated all pointed forward to Jesus. God was continuing to guide

history to the birth of the Messiah and the redemption that would be accomplished when God took on flesh to dwell with men.

## **Historical/Apologetics Background**

Just as the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians happened in three stages, so did the return to restore Jerusalem. This lesson covers only the first stage of the return that happened in 537 BC. As Cyrus decreed, the Jews from around the Persian (once Babylonian) Empire began the process of resettling Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Jeshua the priest.

The second return happened under the leadership of Ezra in 467 BC. If you read Ezra 2, you may have noticed the name Nehemiah in the list (Ezra 2:2). However, this is not the same Nehemiah you are probably familiar with from the book that bears his name. The third phase of the return to Jerusalem in the book of Nehemiah happened in 454 BC—83 years after Cyrus ordered the first return. We will talk about these phases in later lessons.

Just as Proverbs 21:1 reminds us, all of these events happened under the guidance of our wise, loving, omnipotent God. As we study his faithfulness to those in the past, let it stir us to be confident that he will be faithful to us in the future.

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