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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 22: RETURN AND REBUILD

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 15 “Ezra,” 16 “Nehemiah,” and 17 “Esther” in *Discovering the Bible*, and (optional) chapter 18 “Esther” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the specific texts as they are cited in the following material.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

“I am the LORD ... who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid” ’ (Isaiah 44:24, 28).

Many students of the Bible do not realize what a unique event it was when the Achaemenid Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon and fulfilled this prophecy of Isaiah. Normally, in the ancient world, people groups and nations attacked their neighbors for strategic reasons – to preemptively guarantee their own safety, or for the riches they felt they could acquire from weaker neighbors. Cyrus did neither.

In the middle of the seventh century BC, around the time Jeremiah was prophesying in Judah, a new religion sprang up in Persia (modern-day Iran) that became known to the outside world as Zoroastrianism after its founder, Zarathustra. The new religion taught that the universe consisted of two distinct aspects: on the one hand good and light, and on the other, evil and darkness. It is believed that Cyrus set out on a campaign of conquest not for territory or wealth but to overthrow corrupt empires and to further the cause of good over evil. His success was remarkable, and his conquest of Babylon was but one step in the establishment of the largest empire the world had ever known.

Just as Cyrus’ reason for conquest was unique, the administration of the empire he established was equally unprecedented (see Note 1). While the empires of Assyria and Babylon had destroyed cities and temples and forcibly removed their people and gods, Cyrus set about to return captive peoples to their homelands, rebuild their temples and restore their religions. The “Cyrus Cylinder,” a large clay tablet (see illustration below) discovered by archaeologists in Babylon in 1879, records Cyrus’ detailed instructions commanding this remarkable reversal of history. Although this event applied to a number of nations that the Mesopotamian kingdoms had taken captive, its impact in freeing the exiled Jews was, of course, the providential fulfillment of the promises made through the prophets.



The inscribed Cyrus Cylinder detailing Cyrus' decree allowing captive peoples to return home and their temples to be rebuilt. Image: Prioryman.

Even though they had been liberated by Cyrus, not all of the Jews went home. A great many stayed in Babylon where they had now settled, and some moved further east into the heartland of Cyrus' empire and especially to the Persian capital of Susa (biblical "Shushan"), where the story of the young Jewish woman Hadassah (better known by her Persian name, Esther) is set.

But many Jews were happy to return to their homeland, devastated though it may have been. The return occurred in at least three or four major waves. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah seem to indicate that shortly after 538 BC, over forty thousand Jews returned to Israel under the separate or combined leadership of the Judean prince Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8; etc.), who may have been Shenazzar the son of Jeconiah, king of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:18), and Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; etc.), who was also a descendant of King David. But it is possible that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same individual (see Note 2). Later, perhaps in 458 BC, around five thousand exiles returned from Babylon with the priest Ezra (Ezra 7:8), and a few years later, in 445 BC, another group returned with Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:1–9). The exact dates of these returning groups is unsure, however (see Note 3).

The returning exiles settled in what had been Judah and what the Persians now called *Yehud Medinata*, the "Nation of the Jews." The area was regarded as a self-governing province of the Persian Empire with its own laws and even issued its own coins. Nevertheless, many of the neighboring cultures – notably the Samaritans who populated what had been the northern kingdom of Israel – refused to accept the returning Jews and did much to hamper their rebuilding and reestablishment (Ezra 4:4). This animosity led to the Jew's enemies appealing to the Persian authorities with the claim that the Jews were illegally rebuilding Jerusalem in preparation for revolt, and the work of rebuilding was stopped (Ezra 4:6-24). However, because of the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2), work was resumed in the reign of Darius I, at which time the Persian governor Tattenai (see Note 4) corresponded with the monarch to check if the Jews had permission to rebuild (Ezra 5:6-17). After having the royal archives searched, Darius replied that they had indeed been given that permission and any who attempted to stop them should be harshly punished (Ezra 6:1-12). Tattenai then assisted the Jews in the process of reconstruction while commanding their enemies to leave them untroubled (Ezra 6:13). From that point on the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple were assured.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Like the book of Daniel, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were composed mainly in Hebrew, with sections in the more widely-used Aramaic language. They appear together as a single book in the Hebrew Scriptures, though there is evidence that the works were composed individually and only later combined. We will consider them separately, as they appear in the English Bible. The text of both books is simple narrative, and they are quite straightforward to understand; so in this section we will concentrate on some of the significant events they record.

EZRA, “[Yahweh] helps,” was active c. 480–440 BC. The book of Ezra tells us most of what we know about the dedication of the relatively small Second Temple once it was completed on the site of the destroyed First Temple. In keeping with the conditions of the time, its dedication ceremony was much less grandiose than that organized by Solomon, as we can see by comparing 1 Kings 8:63 with Ezra 6:16-18. One hundred bulls were sacrificed (as opposed to 22,000 oxen for Solomon’s temple), two hundred rams and four hundred male lambs (as opposed to 120,000 sheep and goats) and a sin offering of twelve goats, probably symbolizing an offering for all twelve tribes. The fact that a great Passover was organized by the post-exile generation at this time (Ezra 6:19) is also important, as this is the first Passover the Bible records since the time of the good king Josiah over one hundred years earlier. The ceremony that had originally celebrated the freedom of Israel after their bondage in Egypt was now kept with new meaning – as a celebration of freedom from captivity in Babylon.

Ezra’s own role in the national reconstruction was primarily religious. He was a priest, a descendant of the last high priest to serve in the First Temple (Ezra 7:1), and a relative of Joshua, the first high priest of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:2). He was also a scribe, knowledgeable in the law of Moses and other extant writings of the Hebrew Bible. As a result, the Persian king, Artaxerxes, sent him from Babylon to Jerusalem to teach the laws of God to the returned exiles (Ezra 7:1-10). In Jerusalem Ezra found that many Jews had been marrying non-Jewish women, and as the representative of the king he was able to enforce the dissolution of these prohibited marriages (Deuteronomy 7:1-6; Ezra 9-10). This was a purely religious issue as converts were accepted from other nations (Ezra 6:21), but these women were doubtless not converts.

NEHEMIAH, “Yahweh comforts,” was active c. 465–424 BC. Nehemiah was a “cupbearer” in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.), an important role that was much more than a personal attendant or royal wine taster. Cupbearers often carried the personal seal of the king and might have considerable administrative responsibilities. This is likely true in Nehemiah’s case as the king asks him how long he would be gone when Nehemiah requests permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls (Nehemiah 2:6) and also appoints him as governor of the area (Nehemiah 5:14). Historical events of the period indicate that Artaxerxes may have been pleased to approve the request in order to strengthen Jerusalem as a Persian- allied city in an area where Greek forces were then beginning to be active. Also, Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes, the king who married Esther – another possible reason for the king’s favorable reply.

Although the book of Nehemiah deals mainly with the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s city walls and fortifications (Nehemiah chapters 2-4, 6), it also records Nehemiah’s political and moral renewals – including the restitution of mortgaged properties and land, the restoration of the Sabbath and festivals, and the making of a national covenant of repentance and obedience (Nehemiah 9-10). Like Ezra, Nehemiah also enforced the dissolution of the marriages of Jewish men – and particularly priests – with (non-converted) foreign women (Nehemiah 13:23-30). It helps when reading Nehemiah to understand that the “officials” he mentions were probably Persian, the “Jews” were the common people, and the “nobles” were the Jewish family heads, often called “elders” earlier in the Old Testament.

Haggai, “Festive,” was active around 520 BC. Little is known of Haggai other than that like his contemporary Zechariah, he was among the exiles who returned to Jerusalem. Both actively promoted the rebuilding of the temple after work on it had been delayed eighteen years, but Haggai was particularly concerned that the Jews were spending most of their time and energy addressing their own needs and rebuilding their homes while neglecting the temple construction (Haggai 1:2-11). The prophet made the case that once basic needs were met, the first priority should be the restoration of the temple and that commitment to the worship of God would bring blessings that could not be guaranteed by their own efforts. Importantly, both Haggai and Zechariah expressed clear messianic hopes in regard to the Jewish governor Zerubbabel’s leadership of the restored nation (Haggai 2:20-23; etc.).

Zechariah, “Yahweh remembers,” was active c. 520 BC. Zechariah was a member of a prominent priestly family (Zechariah 1: 1), and his message not only emphasized the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, but also promoted the role of the high priest, Joshua, alongside the Persian-appointed governor, Zerubbabel. Zechariah’s ministry began just two months after Haggai’s, and his message complemented that of Haggai in calling for a spiritual revival among the returned exiles and stressing that spiritual rededication must precede social and political restoration. A noticeable aspect of his prophecy, however, is the apocalyptic element in which angelic-guided visions figure prominently, as they did in the book of Daniel and would, in New Testament times, in the book of Revelation.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

A key theological concept that is developed in the books of Isaiah and Daniel, and then implied in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah is that of the sovereign power of God to shape world history and the history of his people as he sees fit and not according to what we humans may feel is religiously acceptable.

Isaiah referred to the gentile Cyrus not only as the “shepherd” of God (Isaiah 44:28), but also as God’s “anointed” or “messiah” (Isaiah 45:1). To understand these statements in context, we must remember that many kings, prophets, and priests were anointed and thus could be called “messiahs” without the significance of being a savior. Nevertheless, the term messiah (Hebrew *mashiak*) is used with great emphasis in the case of Cyrus – as the “title of honor” that God promises to bestow on the king (Isaiah 45:4). He is the only foreigner identified in the Bible as a messiah, and Isaiah refers to him as “his [God’s] messiah” a description not used of any other individual called by the term messiah. In that sense Cyrus was used by God as a physical savior of the Jewish people and a type of the ultimate Messiah to come.

Interestingly, Isaiah knew full well that his Jewish audience would hardly accept the concept of a pagan gentile king as a national savior, and it is with this issue in mind that the prophet then stresses God’s sovereign right to do as he pleases in the outworking of history. That is the context of Isaiah’s famous words just a few verses after calling Cyrus God’s messiah: “Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherd among the potsherd on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ ... Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?” (Isaiah 45:9, 11). Just as it would be foolish for the clay to argue with the potter, Isaiah implies, so it would be foolish for the Jews to question God’s working through the pagan Cyrus to redeem them from exile. For a nation used to being led only by members of their own society and religion, the role of Cyrus and his successors carried important lessons regarding our acceptance of God’s will as to what is ultimately wise and right.

Another lesson that the returning exiles perhaps did not grasp, but that we might more easily see with our view of history is the way God shapes circumstances to accomplish his purposes. It was mentioned above that a possible reason that Artaxerxes was supportive of Nehemiah's request to build the defensive walls of Jerusalem (a much more politically sensitive request than to rebuild the temple) was that the Persians' major enemy, the Greeks, had just recently begun to carry out military activities in the area and had seized the coastal Palestinian city of Dor to use as a military base. God, who stirs up the minds and activities of individuals and nations, could easily have encouraged the Greeks in their brief infiltration of the Palestinian area (which did not continue at that time) to make the rebuilding and strengthening of Jerusalem desirable from the Persian perspective. For the Jews returned from exile, the nearby Greek aggression may have seemed highly undesirable, yet it may well have been orchestrated by God in order to help them.

* Note 1: The policies of Cyrus have reverberated through history to recent times. Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and author of the American Declaration of Independence, was influenced by Cyrus and urged his grandson to read a biography of the ancient king.

* Note 2: The book of Ezra begins with Cyrus returning the objects taken from the temple to Sheshbazzar, a "prince of Judah," who then essentially disappears from the story, and Zerubbabel abruptly becomes the main character. Both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are said to be governors of Judah and both are said to have laid the foundation for the temple. So it is possible that the two names represent the same person, or that Sheshbazzar was a different person – perhaps the Shenazzar mentioned in 1 Chronicles 3:18 – or that Sheshbazzar began the work on the temple foundations and Zerubbabel finished it.

* Note 3: If the Artaxerxes mentioned by Ezra was Artaxerxes II, Nehemiah would have arrived in 445 BC and Ezra in 398 BC. This is possible because Nehemiah's mission was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and Ezra 9:9 states the walls were in place when Ezra arrived. Also, while Nehemiah gives a detailed list of the exiles who returned with Zerubbabel, he seems not to mention the five thousand who accompanied Ezra. Nevertheless, this reconstruction has not replaced the traditional one followed in this unit.

* Note 4: A number of cuneiform tablets mentioning Tattenai have survived from what seems to have been a family archive. One tablet dated to the twentieth year of Darius I, 502 BC, identifies an individual as a servant of "Tattannu, governor of Across-the-River" – the Persian name for the region controlled by Tattenai – just as described in the Bible (Ezra 5:6).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

1. What archaeological artifact documents King Cyrus' decree allowing the Jews to return and rebuild?
2. Why was work on the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple halted for a number of years?
3. Name three types of anointed individuals who were "messiahs" without being considered "saviors."

Looking Below the Surface:

Briefly summarize the similarities and differences between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Everyday Applications:

In what ways has God used seemingly problematic circumstances to help you in your life?

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