

# CHAPTER 1

In this chapter we have,

- I.** The proclamation which Cyrus, king of Persia, issued out for the release of all the Jews that he found captives in Babylon, and the building of their temple in Jerusalem (v. 1-4).
- II.** The return of many thereupon (v. 5, 6).
- III.** Orders given for the restoring of the vessels of the temple (v. 7-11). And this is the dawning of the day of their deliverance.

## <1500> EZRA 1:1-4

### THE PROCLAMATION OF CYRUS

It will be proper for us here to consider,

**1.** What was the state of the captive Jews in Babylon. It was upon many accounts very deplorable; they were under the power of those that hated them, had nothing they could call their own; they had no temple, no altar; if they sang psalms, their enemies ridiculed them; and yet they had prophets among them. Ezekiel and Daniel were kept distinct from the heathen. Some of them were preferred at court, others had comfortable settlements in the country, and they were all borne up with hope that, in due time, they should return to their own land again, in expectation of which they preserved among them the distinction of their families, the knowledge of their religion, and an aversion to idolatry.

**2.** What was the state of the government under which they were. Nebuchadnezzar carried many of them into captivity in the first year of his reign, which was the fourth of Jehoiakim; he reigned forty-five years, his son Evil-merodach twenty-three, and his grandson Belshazzar three years, which make up the seventy years. So Dr. Lightfoot, It is charged upon Nebuchadnezzar that he *opened not the house of his prisoners*, <23417> Isaiah 14:17. And, if he had shown mercy to the poor Jews, Daniel told him it would have been the *lengthening of his tranquillity*, <2007> Daniel 4:27. But the measure of the sins of Babylon was at length full, and then destruction

was brought upon them by Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian, which we read of, Daniel 5. Darius, being old, left the government to Cyrus, and he was employed as the instrument of the Jews' deliverance, which he gave orders for as soon as ever he was master of the kingdom of Babylon, perhaps in contradiction to Nebuchadnezzar, whose family he had cut off, and because he took a pleasure in undoing what he had done, or in policy, to recommend his newly-acquired dominion as merciful and gentle, or (as some think) in a pious regard to the prophecy of Isaiah, which had been published, and well known, above 150 years before, where he was expressly named as the man that should do this for God, and for whom God would do great things (<sup>2340B</sup>Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, etc.), and which perhaps was shown to him by those about him. His name (some say) in the Persian language signifies the *sun*, for he brought light and healing to the church of God, and was an eminent type of Christ the *Sun of righteousness*. Some was that his name signifies a *father*, and Christ is the everlasting Father. Now here we are told,

**I.** Whence this proclamation took its rise. *The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus*. Note, The hearts of kings are in the hand of the Lord, and, like the rivulets of water, he turneth them which way soever he will. It is said of Cyrus that he knew not God, nor how to serve him; but God knew him, and how to serve himself by him, (<sup>2360B</sup>Isaiah 45:4. God governs the world by his influence on the spirits of men, and, whatever good is done at any time, it is God that stirs up the spirit to do it, puts thoughts into the mind, gives to the understanding to form a right judgment, and directs the will which way he pleases. Whatever good offices therefore are, at any time, done for the church of God, he must have the glory of them.

**II.** The reference it had to the prophecy of Jeremiah, by whom God had not only promised that they should return, but had fixed the time, which set time to favour Sion had now come. Seventy years were determined (<sup>2425D</sup>Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10); and he that kept the promise made concerning Israel's deliverance out of *Egypt to a day* (<sup>1024B</sup>Exodus 12:41) was doubtless as punctual to this. What Cyrus now did was long since said to be the *confirming of the word of God's servants*, (<sup>2340B</sup>Isaiah 44:26. Jeremiah, while he lived, was hated and despised; yet thus did Providence honour him long after, that a mighty monarch was influenced to act in pursuance of the word of the Lord by his mouth.

**III.** The date of this proclamation. It was in his first year, not the first of his reign over Persia, the kingdom he was born to, but the first of his reign over Babylon, the kingdom he had conquered. Those are much honoured whose spirits are stirred up to begin with God and to serve him in their first years.

**IV.** The publication of it, both by word of mouth (he *caused a voice to pass throughout all his kingdom*, like a jubilee-trumpet, a joyful sabbatical year after many melancholy ones, proclaiming liberty to the captives), and also in black and white: he put it in writing, that it might be the more satisfactory, and might be sent to those distant provinces where the ten tribes were scattered in Assyria and Media, <sup><1776></sup>2 Kings 17:6.

**V.** The purport of this proclamation of liberty.

**1.** The preamble shows the causes and considerations by which he was influenced, v. 2. It should seem, his mind was enlightened with the knowledge of *Jehovah* (for so he calls him), the God of Israel, as the only *living and true God*, the *God of heaven*, who is the sovereign Lord and disposer of all *the kingdoms of the earth*; of him he says (v. 3), *He is the God*, God alone, God above all. Though he had not known God by education, God made him so far to know him now as that he did this service with an eye to him. He professes that he does it,

**(1.)** In gratitude to God for the favours he had bestowed upon him: *The God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth*. This sounds a little vain-glorious, for there were *many kingdoms of the earth* which he had nothing to do with; but he means that God had given him all that was given to Nebuchadnezzar, whose dominion, Daniel says, was *to the end of the earth*, <sup><1702></sup>Daniel 4:22; 5:19. Note, God is the fountain of power; the kingdoms of the earth are at his disposal; whatever share any have of them they have from him: and those whom God has entrusted with great power and large possessions should look upon themselves as obliged thereby to do much for him.

**(2.)** In obedience to God. He had *charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem*; probably by a dream or vision of the night, confirmed by comparing it with the prophecy of Isaiah, where his doing it was foretold. Israel's disobedience to God's charge, which they were often told of, is aggravated by the obedience of this heathen king.

2. He gives free leave to all the Jews that were in his dominions to go up to Jerusalem, and to *build the temple of the Lord* there, v. 3. His regard to God made him overlook,

(1.) The secular interest of his government. It would have been his policy to keep so great a number of serviceable men in his dominions, and seemed impolitic to let them go and take root again in their own land; but piety is the best policy.

(2.) The honour of the religion of his country. Why did he not order them to build a temple to the gods of Babylon or Persia? He believed the God of Israel to be the *God of heaven*, and therefore obliged his Israel to worship him only. Let them *walk in the name of the Lord their God*.

3. He subjoins a brief for a collection to bear the charges of such as were poor and not able to bear their own, v. 4. “Whosoever remaineth, because he has not the means to bear his charges to Jerusalem, *let the men of his place help him*.” Some take it as an order to the king's officers to supply them out of his revenue, as ~~1506~~ Ezra 6:8. But it may mean a warrant to the captives to ask and receive the alms and charitable contributions of all the king's loving subjects. And we may suppose the Jews had conducted themselves so well among their neighbours that they would be as forward to accommodate them because they loved them as the Egyptians were because they were weary of them. At least many would be kind to them because they saw the government would take it well. Cyrus not only gave his good wishes with those that went (*Their God be with them*, v. 3), but took care also to furnish them with such things as they needed. He took it for granted that those among them who were of ability would offer their *free-will offerings for the house of God*, to promote the rebuilding of it. But, besides that, he would have them supplied out of his kingdom. Well-wishers to the temple should be well-doers for it.

## ~~1506~~ EZRA 1:5-11

### THE PROCLAMATION OF CYRUS

We are here told,

I. How Cyrus's proclamation succeeded with others.

1. He having given leave to the Jews to go up to Jerusalem, many of them went up accordingly, v. 5. The leaders herein were the *chief of the fathers* of Judah and Benjamin, eminent and experienced men, from whom it might justly be expected that, as they were above their brethren in dignity, so they should go before them in duty. The priests and Levites were (as became them) with the first that set their faces again towards Zion. If any good work is to be done, let ministers lead in it. Those that accompanied them were such as God had inclined to go up. The same God that had raised up the spirit of Cyrus to proclaim this liberty raised up their spirits to take the benefit of it; for it was done, *not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts*, <sup><3046></sup>Zechariah 4:6. The temptation perhaps was strong to some of them to stay in Babylon. They had convenient settlements there, had contracted an agreeable acquaintance with the neighbours, and were ready to say, *It is good to be here*. The discouragements of their return were many and great, the journey long, their wives and children unfit for travelling, their own land was to them a strange land, the road to it an unknown road. Go up to Jerusalem! And what should they do there? It was all in ruins, and in the midst of enemies to whom they would be an easy prey. Many were wrought upon by these considerations to stay in Babylon, at least not to go with the first. But there were some that got over these difficulties, that ventured to break the ice, and feared not the lion in the way, the lion in the streets; and they were those whose spirits God raised. He, by his Spirit and grace, filled them with a generous ambition of liberty, a gracious affection to their own land, and a desire of the free and public exercise of their religion. Had God left them to themselves, and to the counsels of flesh and blood, they would have staid in Babylon; but he put it into their hearts to set their faces Zionward, and, as strangers, to ask the way thither (<sup><2815></sup>Jeremiah 50:5); for they, being a new generation, went out like their father Abraham from this land of the Chaldees, not knowing whither they went, <sup><3818></sup>Hebrews 11:8. Note, Whatever good we do, it is owing purely to the grace of God, and he raises up our spirits to the doing of it, *works in us both to will and to do*. Our spirits naturally incline to this earth and to the things of it. If they move upwards, in any good affections or good actions, it is God that raises them. The call and offer of the gospel are like Cyrus's proclamation. *Deliverance is preached to the captives*, <sup><4088></sup>Luke 4:18. Those that are bound under the unrighteous dominion of sin, and bound over to the righteous judgment of God, may be made free by Jesus Christ. Whoever will, by repentance and faith, return to God, his duty to God, his happiness in God, Jesus Christ has opened the way for

him, and let him go up out of the slavery of sin into the *glorious liberty of the children of God*. The offer is general to all. Christ makes it, in pursuance of the grant which the Father has made him of *all power both in heaven and in earth* (a much greater dominion than that given to Cyrus, v. 2) and of the charge given him to *build God a house*, to set him up a church in the world, a kingdom among men. Many that hear this joyful sound choose to sit still in Babylon, are in love with their sins and will not venture upon the difficulties of a holy life; but some there are that break through the discouragements, and resolve to *build the house of God*, to make heaven of their religion, whatever it cost them, and they are those *whose spirit God has raised* above the world and the flesh and whom he has made *willing in the day of his power*, <sup><BIB></sup>Psalm 110:3. Thus will the heavenly Canaan be replenished, though many perish in Babylon; and the gospel-offer will not be made in vain.

**2.** Cyrus having given order that their neighbours should help them, they did so, v. 6. All those that were about them furnished them with plate and goods to bear the charges of their journey, and to help them in building and furnishing both their own houses and God's temple. As the tabernacle was made of the spoils of Egypt, and the first temple built by the labours of the strangers, so the second by the contributions of the Chaldeans, all intimating the admission of the Gentiles into the church in due time. God can, where he pleases, incline the hearts of strangers to be kind to his people, and make those to strengthen their hands that have weakened them. *The earth helped the woman. Besides what was willingly offered* by the Jews themselves who staid behind, from a principle of love to God and his house, much was offered, as one may say, unwillingly by the Babylonians, who were influenced to do it by a divine power on their minds of which they themselves could give no account.

How this proclamation was seconded by Cyrus himself. To give proof of the sincerity of his affection to the house of God, he not only released the people of God, but restored the vessels of the temple, v. 7, 8. Observe here,

**1.** How careful Providence was of the vessels of the temple, that they were not lost, melted down, or so mixed with other vessels that they could not be known, but that they were all now forthcoming. Such care God has of the living *vessels of mercy, vessels of honour*, of whom it is said (<sup><BIB></sup>2

Timothy 2:19, 20), *The Lord knows those that are his, and they shall none of them perish.*

**2.** Though they had been put into an idol's temple, and probably used in the service of idols, yet they were given back, to be used for God. God will recover his own; and the spoil of the strong man armed shall be converted to the use of the conqueror.

**3.** Judah had a prince, even in captivity. Sheshbazzar, supposed to be the same with Zerubbabel, is here called *prince of Judah*; the Chaldeans called him *Sheshbazzar*, which signifies *joy in tribulation*; but among his own people he went by the name of *Zerubbabel* — *a stronger in Babylon*; so he looked upon himself, and considered Jerusalem his home, though, as Josephus says, he was captain of the life-guard to the king of Babylon. He took care of the affairs of the Jews, and had some authority over them, probably from the death of Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah, who made him his heir, he being of the house of David.

**4.** To him the sacred vessels were numbered out (v. 8), and he took care for their safe conveyance to Jerusalem, v. 11. It would encourage them to build the temple that they had so much rich furniture ready to put into it when it was built. Though God's ordinances, like the vessels of the sanctuary, may be corrupted and profaned by the New-Testament Babylon, they shall, in due time, be restored to their primitive use and intention; for not one jot or tittle of divine institution shall fall to the ground.