

September 25, 2022

## The Bible Story Journey: The Temple

Ezra 1-6

Our scripture today picks up where our Bible story left off last week, with the proclamation of King Cyrus of Persia. We read from the Book of Ezra, chapter 1, verses 1-4:

*<sup>1</sup> In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:*

*<sup>2</sup> ‘Thus says King Cyrus 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 in Judah. <sup>3</sup>Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; <sup>4</sup>and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.’*

To hear the Bible tell it, Cyrus the Persian issued this decree specifically for the exiles from Judah, out of respect for their God. I’m sure it felt that way to the Jews, but the actual decree was a little broader. After conquering the moribund Babylonian Empire, Cyrus allowed *all* the captive peoples of Babylon to return to their homes. We know that because archeologists have found a copy of that decree, imprinted on a clay cylinder. Either way, though, the exiles from Judah and Jerusalem, who had lived in captivity for some sixty years were suddenly, just like that, free to go home.



Oh. Right. Hmm. Like the proverbial dog who has caught the car and doesn’t know what to do with it, the exiles who had prayed for decades for this moment suddenly realized what they’d been asking for. Think about it. They’d been in exile at least sixty years, long enough that most of the adults who had come from Jerusalem had died, most of the living Jewish exiles had been born in Babylon. Many of them had Babylonian names. This next generation probably spoke Hebrew at home with their families, but were more comfortable with Aramaic, the language of the empire. Their parents and grandparents might reminisce about Solomon’s temple, but for this generation, the synagogue was the only place of worship they had known. Besides, what would they be going back to? A pile of rubble covered with sixty years’ growth of weeds. “You know, I might just stay here for now. King Cyrus seems nice.”

So it was that most of the exiles declined to return. But there were some who were eager to go back, especially the ones who had lost the most when Jerusalem was destroyed: the priests. For the priests and to some degree the Levites, the temple was more than just the symbol of their faith, it was their purpose, their identity, and their livelihood. In the old temple, the priests had ruled. The people brought their sacrifices; the priests did everything else, and the meat of those sacrificial animals wasn’t just an offering to God. It was also food for the priest’s tables. In exile, they had supported this new synagogue thing, as a stopgap measure for a crisis, but now it was time to get back to *real* worship in a real temple, with the priests back in charge. So a group

formed and began preparing to leave, under the leadership of a man named Sheshbazzar, who despite his Babylonian name, seems to have been a descendant of King David. If so, he also had a vested interest in going back to the land his fathers had ruled.

As they are preparing for the return, the Book of Ezra adds an interesting detail. As people signed up, they were registered by the priests, who then checked their names against priestly genealogies. A few people from the tribe of Levi came to join the return party, but their names didn't match the genealogies exactly, so they were told, "You can go back with us, but we can't let you serve in the temple until we're sure you're of pure blood." While they had been a tiny minority group in Babylon it had seemed important to maintain their ethnic distinctiveness. Some of the priests had *really* taken that to heart.

Anyway, the band of returning exiles completed the journey safely and arrived at the disaster site that had once been their capital city. But one of the first things they did was clear a spot in the area where the temple had once stood, set up an altar, and offer sacrifices to God.

The work began – cruel, back-breaking work. They had to survive, of course, so the first order of business was to get fields and pastures ready for the crops and flocks. Then they needed homes to live in. They needed to clear paths and uncover the city streets amid the jumble of charred masonry. Somewhere along here, Sheshbazzar disappeared – no idea what happened to him – but his place as leader of the former exiles was assumed by another descendant of David with a Babylonian name – one Zerubbabel – and beside him in authority was the chief priest, Jeshua. Together Zerubbabel and Jeshua worked not only to help people start new lives for themselves but to begin rebuilding their community and their faith. In that work, their first priority was a new temple, but it was slow going. It took over a year just to clear the ground and pace out the dimensions and set the foundations. But when that work was done, and they were able to set up a makeshift altar on the foundations, they called all the community together for a celebration. Jeshua and his priests offered sacrifices, while the community cheered. Well, most of the community. There were a few among the returned exiles who had actually lived in Jerusalem before and had seen the old temple. These elders looked at the shabby clearing, smaller than they remembered and still just a flat spot among ruins, and began to weep. So, between those who cheered with hope for the future and those who wept bitterly over their memories of the past, the temple was begun.

As they worked one day, they looked up to see some people approaching. The newcomers called out a greeting, then said, "May we ask – who are you?"

"We are people of Judah, returned from Babylon to rebuild our city and temple. And who are you?"

"We are from Samaria," they replied.

I need to pause for a moment to explain who these Samaritans were, and to do that, I'm going to need to go back two empires. Before the Persian Empire, of course, were the Babylonians who had destroyed Jerusalem, but before the Babylonians were the Assyrians, and the Assyrians had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and its capital, Samaria. Now the Assyrians had a different policy for conquered peoples than the Babylonians did. Assyria didn't take conquered populations back home; they resettled them in other conquered lands, so as to break up national identity. So, when they conquered Israel, they took some of the Israelites away, and then brought other people to settle in the land of Israel. Some of those newcomers married

into Israelite families and even adopted the Israelite faith. Those were the Samaritans, and all this happened long ago. By the time of our story, the Samaritans had been living in the northern lands, worshipping the God of Israel, for almost two hundred years.

“We are from Samaria,” they replied, “and we had heard that you were here. We have come to offer our help, because, too, worship your God, like our fathers did before us.”

I think this is an important a turning point. Last week I talked a little bit about the Prophet of the Exile, a voice from the Judean exiles in Babylon who had declared that Israel’s God was the God of the whole world, the creator of all nations, and that Israel’s covenant with God came with a task: Israel was to be a light of truth to those nations, a testimony to the true God. Here was perhaps an opportunity.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua replied, “You? Help us? Half-breeds heretics, who follow a muddled, mongrelized imitation of our faith? Ew! You will never be a part of this! We are building a temple to Holy God; your unholy hands would defile it with a touch! Go away!”

The Samaritans left, but when they got home, they wrote a letter to the Persian court. It said, “We have noticed that there are Jews rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, and we wondered if you wanted that. You might take a look at the royal archives of Babylon, at Jerusalem’s history of rebellion.” The Persian officials did a search in the archives and discovered that Jerusalem had, in fact, been a pain in the royal neck for a very long time, through a dozen kings and two different empires. A message was dispatched from Persia to Zerubbabel, informing him that he was not to rebuild the city walls, nor the temple. The work stopped.

Ten years passed. Fifteen. Cyrus had died, had been briefly succeeded by his son, who was then succeeded by one of Cyrus’s generals, named Darius. Life was still hard in Jerusalem, but vineyards had been planted, fields cleared, pasturelands established, and houses built. Then came several bad years, years of drought and hunger. From among the settlers arose a prophet named Haggai. “Look at your dry, miserable fields! Do you know why you’re hungry! I’ll tell you why! God is angry at you! You live in your nice houses, but God’s house still stands in ruins! I call on Zerubbabel and Jeshua to bring the people together and start again to build God’s temple!” Haggai’s words were blunt and simple – as was his theology – but they were echoed more eloquently by another prophet, named Zechariah, who declared that in visions he had seen God anointing Zerubbabel his Messiah, his anointed one, and Jeshua as his chosen instrument. Zerubbabel and Jeshua listened to the prophets. They called the people together and began work on the temple again. Sure enough, before long a party of Samaritans came to investigate. “What are you doing? You’re not allowed to do that, you know!”

“Actually, we are,” replied Zerubbabel. “When King Cyrus sent us home, he specifically told us to rebuild God’s temple. You can look it up. Now, go away.”

The Samaritans dashed off another letter. “The Jews are at it again, and you won’t believe what they say this time. They say that Cyrus himself commanded them to rebuild the temple! Let us know what you’d like us to do to them.”

That letter came to King Darius, who sent his servants to check Cyrus’s records. In those records, they found that King Cyrus had specifically mentioned rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Darius sent the following reply: “Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. The Jewish leaders are right. King Cyrus did command that they rebuild their temple. So I want

you to designate a portion of your tax revenue to pay for their building supplies. I will send an emissary soon to make sure that my orders have been obeyed.”

And that was how the temple was finally rebuilt. The Jewish community that had refused the Samaritans’ help, was apparently all right with their financial support, and with that assistance, the work went much faster. At last, in the second year of King Darius’s reign, 520 BCE, the work was completed. The people gathered for a day of celebration. Sacrifices were offered on the altar by priests wearing their ceremonial robes. The Levites sang psalms, and the entire city celebrated the Passover. At last, things could go back to the good old ways.

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Final word: Last week I told how the Jewish exiles re-imagined their faith in the crucible of their captivity, placing the sacred writings at the center of their faith, and the community at the center of their worship. Today we have seen another option: to reject change and return to the old ways. Sometimes change feels too much, too soon, and too hard. I get that. There’s nothing wrong with cherishing tradition. Every change must be balanced against what was before. We who also live in a transitional time might pay attention to this story and what comes next.