

Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)

First Return to Jerusalem

Readings: *Ezra 1:1-4:5; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23*

Reflections:

- The rise of the Persian Empire begins a new phase for the exiled nation. Where the Assyrians and Babylonians would take captives and create a slave class, the Persian policy was to encourage the return of people to their homelands. This was to encourage peace and stability and minimize the desire to rebel. Cyrus gives a decree in 539-538 BCE for a group of Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. This decree begins the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy.
- The decree recorded by Cyrus suggests that Cyrus feels he is being moved by the God who is in Jerusalem. Cyrus would have acknowledged and worshipped many gods and so this was just another attempt to get a god on his side. God can use people to fulfill his purposes even if their motives and understanding are completely out of line with the truth. This reveals the sovereignty of God.
- The exiles have settled for over a generation and so there are Israelites who have never even seen Palestine. They speak a different language, they live within a different culture, a prosperous one at that, and they only have their community's history to learn about this place called Jerusalem. It makes sense that only a limited number have the desire to uproot everything they know and relocate to rebuild this old city and temple.
- People do contribute towards this cause, and even Cyrus helps by giving back articles from the temple that Nebuchadnezzar had looted. It takes two years but by 536 BCE the initial resettlement is completed and a new foundation for the temple is laid. Approximately 42,000 people return and form this new community.
- There is great concern to restore the priesthood as their function is essential to the operation of the temple according to the Law. One group of priests, although descendants by tradition, can't produce their family records and so they are excluded from this role. This is a great example of the consequences of living by the letter of the law.
- The rebuilding of the temple has echoes of the construction of the tabernacle and first temple. There is a sense of generosity, unity and common vision. When the foundation is laid, people begin to praise God with a shout!

- This restoration of the temple though, is filled with pain as well as joy (Ezra 3:12-13). “But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.” Were these tears of joy? It seems that the weeping is distinct from the sounds of joy. It may be possible that they were weeping because the foundation was so small and that in the rebuilding of the temple, this new temple was going to be so much smaller and more humble. In a sense, they could be grieving because in the restoration of temple they are seeing the ongoing consequences of their broken relationship with God. The new temple itself would be a reminder of their failure as a nation. We see evidence throughout the story of “what doesn’t work” that pain is a consistent part of Israel’s struggle. They are constantly battling the difficulty, pain, and failure of trying to live under the Law. Even in this time of restoration, we see that it is far from a full restoration as only a remnant return and what they build is far from magnificent.
- More pain is now added to their restoration project as enemies descend on them and attempt to infiltrate their ranks. When that attempt fails, the enemies hire people just to berate them and discourage them with insults. Again, we see here how incredibly humble and even pathetic this restoration is. Israel was to live as one nation in a secure land without enemies and without threat. They were to live in peace and prosperity to serve God as a light to the nations. Now, most of their people live integrated with other nations, only a remnant has returned to restore the vision, and enemies surround them to taunt them. The story of “what doesn’t work” is illustrated for the reader in full color and in 3D.
- Zerubbabel, whose name means something akin to “sown of Babylon” or “born in Babylon” will be a key leader through this period. It is interesting to reflect on the impact of the leader’s name and identity referring to the enemy nation. It is as if the consequences of the nation’s sin are everywhere, reminders everywhere the people turn, that although they were rebuilding this humble temple, their whole experience is under the shadow of failure and brokenness. We as humans are addicted to our self-saving ways and God knows this all too well. Only when we come to the stark realization of what doesn’t work to change the human heart, will we be open to embrace what does work. Only then will we be ready for a truth as radical as Jesus’ message.