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The Decree of Cyrus

Ezra 1: 1-4

The decree of Cyrus DIG: Was Cyrus a believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? How does Cyrus' decree strike you (a) Déjà vu (see Second Chronicles 36:22-23)? (b) Usual? (c) Noteworthy? (d) Legally binding? (c) Predictable (see Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10)? In what sense is Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled by Cyrus? By the "people of any place? By their neighbors? By God? Who moves whom to do what? Compare this decree with its "memo" version in 6:3-5. What is the difference?

REFLECT: Has God ever used unbelievers in your life to affect you? How so? Which factors from Cyrus' story have also shaped who you are: (a) Building projects? (b) Mercy toward others? (c) Service offerings? (d) Family ties? Explain. What does the polytheist Cyrus believe about the locale of the Lord? What do you believe about God's "primary address" or sphere of influence?

538 BC During the ministry of Zerubbabel (to see link click [Ag](#) - The First Return).

Compiled by the Chronicler from the Ezra memoirs

(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: **The Ezra Memoirs**).



And in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia (1:1a). The scroll begins with the Hebrew conjunction *waw* (and), and the rabbis teach that this fact may indicate that Ezra is a continuation of Dani'el. Born in Elam, **Cyrus was a**

Persian by descent from **his** great-grandmother. Although **he** had by this time been **king** of Elam for twenty years, of Media for eleven years, of **Persia** for ten years, and had now conquered **Babylon**, **he** is described as **king of Persia**, the most important lands over which **he** ruled (see the commentary on **Dani’el**, to see [link click Ag - Cyrus and Darius](#)). This made **the Persians** a world power. **Dani’el** had prophesied that **Babylon** would fall to **the Persians (Dani’el 5:25-31)**. Once **Darius**, a general under **Cyrus**, conquered **Babylon** in 539 BC, **he** ended **Babylonian** dominance of **Isra’el** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Rule Babylonian Rule](#)). **Darius** was appointed by **Cyrus** to rule over **Babylon**, a small portion of the Medo-Persian Empire. **In order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, "After seventy years for Babylon are complete, I will visit you - to bring you back to this [Palestine].**

ADONAI stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia (Jeremiah 51:11; Haggai 1:14; First Chronicles 5:26; Second Chronicles 21:16 and 36:22) to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing for future reference (**1:1b**). The official written document was then given to the communities as proof of **the proclamation**. Consequently, there were actually two such documents, the first one here, and the second, **a memorandum** from **Cyrus**, also known as **Darius**, to the treasury authorizing the funds to resume the work in 520 BC (see [Bc - King Darius Endorses the Rebuilding of the Temple](#)).¹⁴ That **memorandum** would play a vital part in a later crisis eighteen years later. But meanwhile, the voluntary return of **the Jews** to **their** land of promise is the climax of this present chapter.

Seen against the backdrop of ancient history, however, there is little to commend regarding the boldness of **Cyrus’** claim. The motivation, at least from **Cyrus’** point of view, was merely political. As the long inscription known to us as the **Cyrus** Cylinder (a lengthy inscription on a cylindrical tablet now in the British Museum) makes plain, **the Persian** throne returned *all* the exiled communities without distinction and covered the initial costs of the rebuilding of their sanctuaries. Whereas **the Babylonians** did what many other conquerors had done; **they** removed a large portion of the population to **their** own homeland in order to prevent an uprising, and brought **their** conquered gods back to **Babylon** as a trophy. The Hittites took the statue of Marduk when they conquered the city of **Babylon**. **The Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the temple of Dagon (First Samuel 5:2)**. Since **the Jews** did not have a statue of YHVH,

Nebuchadnezzar carried off **the** Temple **vessels** instead. The Hebrew of **Second Kings 24:13** indicates that **he** cut up the larger pieces of gold to facilitate **their** transportation back to **Babylon (Second Kings 25:13; Jeremiah 52:17)**.¹⁵

The Persians, however, thought it was better to provide the conquered peoples with a measure of self-determination and religious autonomy in the hope that it would instill a feeling of loyalty. Whereas their images had been treated as trophies by his predecessors, he who restored them to their “sacred cities,” rebuilt their temples and repatriated their worshipers. So if religious motivation was mingled with political cunning it was entirely in terms of **his** own polytheism. From the famous **Cyrus** Cylinder the proud words of the proud monarch cry out, “Let all the gods, which I have brought to their cities pray daily to Bel and Nabu for my length of days.”¹⁶

In the book of **Isaiah**, **ADONAI** calls **Cyrus His “anointed”** (see the commentary on **Isaiah 4c - This is What the LORD says to Cyrus His Anointed**). If **Isaiah’s hearers** were shocked earlier at **Cyrus’** being called “**God’s shepherd**” (**Isaiah 44:28**), **they** must have been even more so at **his** now being called “**My anointed**.” This title had previously been reserved only for priests, prophets, and kings of **Isra’el**. Could **God** possibly use a Gentile to accomplish **His** purposes? Yes! That is exactly the point that **Isaiah** is making. **God** is not **the LORD** of **Isra’el** alone; **He** is the **God** of the whole world. **Isra’el’s** election is not merely for **herself**, and thus neither is **her** deliverance necessarily affected by **herself**. It is this sense in which **anointed** is used here; **Cyrus** has been especially chosen and empowered to carry out the purposes of **God**. In that sense **he** is **ADONAI’s** chosen instrument through whom **God’s** gracious purposes will be accomplished, especially that through **him** **YHVH** will be revealed to the world. **To subdue the nations before him (Cyrus) and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut (Isaiah 45:1c)**. The true **Messiah** will bring spiritual deliverance to **Isra’el**, but **Cyrus**, pointing us to the true **Messiah**, would bring physical deliverance to **Isra’el**.¹⁷

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth (1:2a). From this language, it might seem that **Cyrus** was a believer in **YHVH**. But **he** was not. **His** policy was to please the subject nations that **he** had conquered and appears as their liberator. To **the Babylonians**, **he** said that **he** conquered them at the command of **their** god Marduk. So it was therefore natural, that when

addressing **the Israelites**, he would describe **himself** as the person chosen by **their God** to fulfill **their** long-cherished hope.

And He (very emphatic in the Hebrew) **has appointed me to build a Temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of His people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the Temple of the LORD, the God of Isra'el, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them (1:2b-3). ADONAI** had not forgotten **His** promise to save **His people** (see the commentary on [Isaiah Hu - I Am the LORD, Your Holy One, Isra'el's Creator, Your King](#)).

But it must have been extremely difficult for those who decided to return to **Jerusalem**. Most had no homes or property there that they could call their own.

The majority of the **[Jewish] survivors** decided to stay in **Babylon**, especially the second and third generation, who did not wish to leave the land of **their** birth. In addition, there is more than a hint here that many of the enterprising **Jews** had taken **Jeremiah's** advice (**Jeremiah 29:5-7**) and had become exceedingly successful in **their** undertakings. Hence, **they** were reluctant to return to the Land of the fathers.¹⁸ **They were to provide the returnees to Jerusalem with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the Temple of God in Jerusalem (1:4).** It was this kind of cooperative effort among the early **Israelites** that enabled **the Tabernacle** to be build (**Exodus 35-36**). But **God's stirring** did not diminish **their** required obedience; rather, it merely drew attention to it. This showed that both the exodus back to **Jerusalem** for **the returnees** and **the provision of the ones** who stayed behind, ultimately proceeded from the prompting of **the LORD**.¹⁹

While we are impressed by the courage and devotion of **those** who returned, we cannot view **those** who stayed behind to live out **their** lives in **Babylon** as disobedient. Notice that there is no criticism in **Ezra-Nehemiah** of **those** who did not make *'aliyah* (immigrate to **Isra'el**). **Those** who do not hear **God** calling **them** do what **others** are doing are not necessarily wrong.²⁰

This reminds us of **the Exodus** from Egypt when **Ha'Shem** miraculously took the nation out of bondage and had the Egyptians aid them with gifts of **silver, gold** and clothing. Now **YHVH** was affecting a new "Exodus," again bringing **His people** who had been in bondage back to the Promised Land, much as **He** had done under **Moses** and **Joshua**. **The Israelites** had been in bondage to **Babylon** because of

their failure to keep the commandments of the Torah that Moses had given them during the first Exodus.²¹

Once more, it was the sovereignty of **ADONAI** working in the life of the nation. It may have been **Cyrus** who had issued the decree for **the Jews** to return to **Yerushalayim**; but from another point of view – and far more important – it was **the LORD's** doing. Like the old Yiddish adage, “Mann Tracht, Un **Gott** Lacht” or, “Man Plans, and **God** Laughs,” despite our most careful planning, **God** is in control. And in this situation, at no time did **God** lose control.

From the point of view of the exiles, it was reassuring that **God** had not forgotten them, nor were they beyond **His** reach. What a blessing it is to know that even in the darkest of places, **ADONAI** can overrule politicians and leaders to turn events around to favor the church of **Yeshua Messiah!** **God** had a plan, and not even **Cyrus** could impede it; in fact, **he** was part of it. From one point of view, these events were the result of human planning and ingenuity; from another point of view, it was the hand of **YHVH**.

The initiative of mankind and the sovereignty of **Ha'Shem** are parallel events. Without violating our free will, **God** ensures that **His** sovereign will prevail. *How He* does this is a mystery to us, but it is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

God keeps working out all things according to the purpose of His will (Ephesians 1:11).

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For the One working in you is God - both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

Even if pure **evil** is intended by someone, **Ha'Shem** may override it to ensure **His** good purpose, as in the case of **Joseph**, who said to **his brothers**, **You yourselves planned evil against me. But God planned it for good (Genesis 50:20).**

Sadly, the same is true of the crucifixion of **Yeshua**. **Peter** told **his** Shavu'ot audience that **this Yeshua, given over by God's predetermined plan and foreknowledge, was nailed to the cross by the hand of lawless men (Acts 2:23).**

We **sin** and are responsible for our actions, yet **Ha'Shem** is not the author of **sin**, but it's **Judge**. **Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God" - for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He himself tempts no one. But each one is tempted when he is dragged away and enticed by his own desire. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is full grown, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (James 1:13-17).**

The cause of **Isra'el's** downfall was no accident. The prophet **Amos** made this clear to the northern Kingdom facing the threatening might of Assyria: **If there is calamity in a city, has not ADONAI caused it (Amos 2:6b)?** The **Babylonian** exile itself was the result of **Judah's** rebellion. **YHVH** came in judgment as **He** had threatened to do (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Dy - Wineskins and the Threat of Captivity](#)). **God's** sovereign involvement at every point did not negate **Judah's** responsibility for **her** failure.

Confused? Yes, to some extent! How many of us can say we understand this? Our free will and **God's** sovereignty are both true. It is an antimony, meaning two things that seem to be opposite, but both are true. For example, **the Trinity** is an antimony, **God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)**, yet there is obviously a plurality in **the Godhead**. So even though our free will and **God's** sovereignty is hard for us to understand, it is, nevertheless, it is a most encouraging truth. Do you really want to believe that in your darkest hour **God** is not in full control? No, of course not! We act according to our own will and ability, but at the same time, **YHVH** acts to accomplish **His** sovereign will and purpose. And that is a most reassuring thought. In the final analysis, **His** will is done. The future that **God** has willed is certain.²²