

## DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Fifty-Second Week - Monday

### THE RETURN BEGINS

*"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth Yahweh God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of Yahweh God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem'" (Ezra 1:1-3).*

It had been foretold by the prophet Jeremiah that at the expiration of seventy years (dating, it would seem, from the first expatriation under Jehoiachin) the captive Jews should return to their own land; and before that, Isaiah had predicted that this should take place under an unborn king called Cyrus, of whom high things were spoken.

When the seventy years had expired, the Babylonian empire had ceased and Cyrus the Persian had become master of the many realms of which it had been composed, as well as of the more eastern empire of the Medes and Persians. In the very first year of his imperial reign this king issued a decree distinctly recognizing the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, acknowledging the authority by which they were given, and his obligation to act upon them. He accordingly permitted those who had the desire to return to their own country and rebuild the temple at Jerusalem to do so, allowing them also to collect funds from those who chose to remain behind. Cyrus also promised royal protection and encouragement in the undertaking.

Accordingly, a large caravan was formed of the more devout and zealous Jews (as they now begin to be called) who were liberally supplied with treasure from the bounty of those who preferred to remain in the east. Cyrus also placed in their hands the vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple. The leader of the caravan was Zerubbabel, a grandson of Jeconiah and thus a lineal representative of the house of David. He is distinctly recognized by Cyrus as "the prince of the Jews." Zerubbabel was born in Babylon, but as appears usual with the great men of Judah during the captivity, he was given another name, that of Sheshbazzar, by which he was known among the heathen.

Now a question likely occurs to everyone who opens the Book of Ezra: How did Cyrus become so well informed of the matters to which his proclamation concerning the Jews refers, and how did he become so impressed with the power of Jehovah as to acknowledge him as "the God of heaven" to whom he owed all the greatness which he had attained?

It is not difficult to answer this question. When Cyrus first came to Babylon he found the prophet Daniel there, who was an old minister of state renowned throughout the empire for great wisdom, faithfulness, and experience. How well Cyrus knew and respected his character is shown by the fact that Daniel not only continued to maintain his office, but on settling his newly acquired empire Cyrus made him superintendent over all the provinces. This was an office which gave Daniel a rank and power scarcely less, if at all less, than the equivalent of an eastern vizier or European first minister.

This position was just the one which rendered Daniel qualified to be of most essential service to his own people. He himself informs us that his attention had been particularly drawn to the fact that the seventy years of the captivity had expired. Nothing, then, can be more probable than that Daniel brought the prophecies of Isaiah concerning himself under the notice of the king. Daniel could prove that these prophecies had been written long before Cyrus was born, that his victories were foretold, and that the Lord declared himself to be the giver of all his greatness and claimed him as His "servant" (one appointed and commissioned to do His pleasure).

Cyrus could not fail to acquiesce in the evidence presented. And it is likely that when this disclosure had made its proper impression, Daniel opened the prophecy of Jeremiah and showed the king that the time for the restoration of Israel had come.

After so long an interval very few of the original captives could be alive. The great body of the existing generation had been born and raised in Babylon, which was in fact their native country. They had thrived there, pursuing such employments as traders, peddlers, money-changers, money-lenders, jewelers, etc. Upon the whole, they were so comfortable and satisfied with their position that they felt little disposition to break up their homes and encounter the perils of the wilderness, although they remained unshaken in their attachment to Judaism. The largest, wealthiest, and noblest portion of the nation, therefore, took no part in the movement, except by contributing bountifully to the needs of those who left.

The pilgrims arrived and by the fourteenth month after their return they laid the foundations of the temple. It was a great day, and the ceremony honoring it was filled with as much grandeur and solemnity as their means allowed. While the younger men who had been born in a strange land shouted with joy to see the foundations laid in the sacred city of their fathers, the older men who had seen the first temple (Solomon's) wept with a loud voice. This certainly was not because the foundations were inferior in extent, but because this effort of a small company of strangers in their own land could never make even the most faint approach in splendor and magnificence to the ancient temple, on which the years-long savings of David and the wealth of

Solomon were lavishly expended.

Some say the people lamented over the absence of the five great things that glorified the first temple--the ark of the covenant, the sacred fire on the altar, the Urim and Thummim, the Shekinah or sacred symbol of the Divine presence, and the spirit of prophecy. But the spirit of prophecy was not then extinct, seeing that Haggai and Zechariah prophesied. As for the Shekinah and sacred fire, how could they know they were lacking until the building was completed? We therefore think their mourning arose from the perception that the new temple as a whole would be as nothing in comparison with that of Solomon. And this is what Haggai says (Hag. 2:7,9), who was commissioned to comfort them by the assurance that the deficiency of this temple in exterior glory should be abundantly compensated by the coming of the Messiah, whose presence should give this second house a glory greater than that of Solomon's.