



The unabridged writings of Fred Morris, Manna Publications

History in the Bible CYRUS THE GREAT



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MANNA FOR ALL

To the reader: Have your Bible open as you study these notes. Remember that they have not been edited by the UK editorial team but are part of Fred's legacy of Bible teaching literature he wrote after his retirement to the USA in 1990. These notes also serve as the legacy of the late Jim Norman, Manna Publications UK, who checked and formatted and archived Fred's writings for him. Invite a friend to study with you. You will be blessed.



CONTENTS

BABYLON, ANCIENT STRONGHOLD	3
CYRUS TAKES BABYLON	4
BABYLON WAS FEASTING	4
THE BIBLE RECORD	5
SEVENTY YEARS OF EXILE	5
THE IDOLS OF BABYLON	6
GOD HATED THESE EVIL PRACTICES	6
ISRAEL HAD TURNED AWAY FROM GOD	7
CYRUS WORSHIPPED MANY GODS	7
THEY COULD NOT BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS	8
GOD'S WORD BY THE PROPHET	8
CYRUS TOOK GREAT SPOILS	9
ARTICLES TAKEN FROM THE TEMPLE	9
MANY JEWS LEFT BABYLON	10
REBUILDING THE TEMPLE	10
A NEW RULER IN PERSIA	11
MANY JEWS STAYED IN BABYLON	11
THE PROPHETS' WORDS CAME TRUE	12
A MESSAGE FOR ALL	12
A REVIVAL OF FAITH	13
A DAY SACRED TO THE LORD	14

It is said that two dreams about a great leader to be born heralded the birth of Cyrus II. He was the son of a Persian king, descended from the royal line of Achaemenes. Cyrus proved himself to be an able commander and administrator (559-530 BC). Historians call him "Cyrus the Great." No one knew much about Cyrus until he conquered the Medes in 550 BC.

The Persians and Medes were semi-nomadic tribes that invaded the great valley of the Euphrates River. They came from the mountains east of Mesopotamia. They joined forces under the command of Cyrus. He had become king of Persia in 559 BC and had spent 20 years consolidating the kingdom as far north as Lydia in Asia Minor – capturing Sardis in 546 BC.

Careful scrutiny of Herodotus' "Persian Wars" and "The Babylonian Chronicle" show that Cyrus was the chief of a Persian tribe who won a struggle for power with Astya, the last king of the Medes (550 BC).

BABYLON, ANCIENT STRONGHOLD

In the ancient world, powerful nations developed and spread along the Nile River in Egypt and in the Mesopotamian Valley (Babylonia). Two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, watered the valley then flowed into the Persian Gulf. This part of the Middle East is known as "the Fertile Crescent" because it is good land for growing crops.

In the earliest times the area of the lower Euphrates was called Shinar; only later was it called Babylonia or Chaldea (Genesis 11:28).

Babylon was a great city on the lower Euphrates River. Some believe the original city was built by Nimrod (Genesis 10:10). This would make Babylon one of the oldest cities in the ancient world (Babel is the Hebrew spelling for Babylon; Genesis 11:9).

Babylon was the glory of its kings and queens. Its palaces, hanging gardens and pagan temples were among the wonders of the ancient world. Every evil practice also flourished in Babylon. Satan ruled over the people of Babylon. No one but God could break Satan's power.

About 1250 BC the Assyrians attacked and plundered Babylon. Five hundred years later they attacked the northern tribes of Israel and captured the capital city of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24). The cruel Assyrians brought God's judgment on the people of Northern Israel because they had turned their backs on the Lord and worshipped idols.

Cyrus took Babylon in a single night and without the killing, looting and burning that accompanied most invasions at that time. Cyrus' army defeated the Babylonian Empire and entered the city of Babylon while the 'king' and his officials feasted (Daniel 5).

CYRUS TAKES BABYLON

In the centuries before Cyrus, many nations – Hittites, Assyrians – had tried to capture Babylon. All had failed so that Babylon with its huge walls and high gates was thought to be secure against all invaders.

Cyrus made a plan to take Babylon that had never been executed before in military history. This is recorded in cuneiform script on a clay cylinder, the Cyrus Cylinder which remains to this day.

The Euphrates River flowed under the great walls of Babylon and through the city. In the night, the Persian soldiers turned the waters into a new channel and marched into the city along the dry river bed. No temples or palaces were destroyed, no houses set on fire and not one life was lost.

All this was accomplished without a sound. In the morning Cyrus and his men held the city.

BABYLON WAS FEASTING

Belshazzar was a son and viceroy of Nabonidus, the king of Babylon (Dan 5:1-2). One night, while he and his officials were feasting in his palace in Babylon, a strange thing happened. A hand appeared near the lamp and wrote words on the plaster wall of the palace. The king's knees knocked as he watched the hand write words he could not understand (Dan 5:1-28). Belshazzar called his wise men and diviners, but they could not read the writing.

Every king used men who worked witchcraft or magic. They were also called diviners. Evil forces gave them power to work magic and to tell what was going to happen. God told His people not to practice these heathen ways (Deut 18:10-11).

The queen heard the voices of the king and his nobles and came into the room. She said to the king, "Don't be alarmed. There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods. Call for Daniel, he will tell you what the writing means."

Many years before, Daniel had been taken captive to Babylon (Dan 1:1-8). God had saved him from wicked king Nebuchadnezzar and the lions' den and given him a high position in the land. Daniel was now old and no longer in the king's service.

When Daniel came into the banquet hall the king asked him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?" And he promised Daniel precious gifts if he could read the writing on the wall.

Daniel gave glory to God and told the king he could keep his gifts. The message for Belshazzar came from Almighty God. The words written on the wall had this meaning: "God has numbered the days of your reign and brought

it to an end...Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan 5:26-28).

That night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians was killed and Cyrus the Mede took over the kingdom (Dan 5:30-31). Darius I ruled after Cyrus and continued a policy of letting each people group worship their own gods in their own way.



TALK ABOUT

1. Why would the living God have an interest in great cities built by heathen kings?
2. What were the Jews doing in the city of Babylon?

THE BIBLE RECORD

The writer of Chronicles received special spiritual insight into the mind of King Cyrus. He wrote, "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah'." (2 Chronicles 36:23).

Cyrus was quick to set up local gods and shrines that had fallen into ruin. He worshipped the chief god of Babylon, Marduk. Cyrus did the same in the city of Ur where the Cyrus Cylinder was found.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of Cyrus. He said, "He (Cyrus) is My (God's) shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt; and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid'." (Isaiah 44:28)

SEVENTY YEARS OF EXILE

When Cyrus captured the city of Babylon, the Jews had already been captives or exiles there for 70 years. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed their land and burned the city of Jerusalem and the Temple (586 BC). In three separate invasions Nebuchadnezzar's commanders took the people of Judah and Jerusalem captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:13-20).

God had allowed this judgment to fall on the people of Judah and Jerusalem because of their rebellion and idolatry. The prophets warned them that God would punish their sin. The Bible record says, "The Lord...sent word to them through His messengers again and again, because He had pity on His people and on His dwelling place (the Temple). But they mocked God's messengers, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against His people and there was no remedy" (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

The prophet Jeremiah told the people of Judah, "The Lord Almighty says, 'Because you have not listened to My words, I will summon all the people of the north and My servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon...I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants...I will completely destroy them...' (Jeremiah 25:8-9).



TALK ABOUT

1. Does God always warn people before He brings judgment on them?
2. Who was able to read the strange writing on the palace wall (Dan 5:25-28)?

THE IDOLS OF BABYLON

The people of Babylon worshipped many idols. They honored gods of the air, the rivers, the sun and moon. Ishtar, goddess of love and war, was honored with a special place among them. Ishtar was a symbol of mother earth and the natural cycle of birth, growth and death. Temples of Ishtar employed many priestesses who were temple prostitutes by profession. The Assyrians brought their god Marduk (also spelled Merodach, Jer 50:2) to the region, so that he became a chief deity. They built temples where many priests served the gods. All idol worship was joined with sexual perversion and excess.

Nebo (Isa 46:1) was the god of education, literature, wisdom and the arts. In his name the sciences flourished and men made great strides in understanding the physical properties of the heavens and the earth. The Babylonians gave names to many of the planets we study and explore at the present time.

Some gods (idols) demanded child sacrifice as part of worship (2 Kings 17:31). God told the people of Israel not to sacrifice their children to idols. He told them not to worship images they made with their own hands. They were to worship Him only as He carefully set down in the first two Commandments (Ex 20:1-4).

GOD HATED THESE EVIL PRACTICES

Diviners studied the stars and used manuals to predict omens. Kings relied on the diviners and astrologers to tell them when to go to war. Many clay tablets have been found telling of the diviner's spells and curses. When King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, he called the palace diviners to tell him what the dream meant (Daniel 2:1-3).

In the ruins of a palace library in Nineveh, excavators found tablets bearing the Gilgamesh Epic, the story of a hero who survived a great flood. The eleventh tablet tells the story of a great flood and a ship built to escape the wasters. The story tells of the ship coming to rest on Mt Nisir.

In many ways the story is like the flood account in the Bible (Genesis chapters 7 and 8), from which it may have been taken. This is just a story told at the time and not a true record of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6-8).

The ancient people built ziggurats (stepped pyramids) to worship the sun and moon. Some of these dated back to the time when the patriarch Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:28).

The prophet Isaiah told of the defeat of Babylon, "Sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon: without a throne, daughter of the Babylonians" (Isaiah 47:1).

ISRAEL HAD TURNED AWAY FROM GOD

The Lord God of Israel commanded: the people: "Do not worship any other gods or bow down to them...or sacrifice to them." But they would not listen. "Even while these people (the Israelites) were worshipping the Lord, they were serving their idols" (2 Kings 17:35-40). So God turned away from them.

The prophet Jeremiah and other prophets before him had warned the Israelites. God was angry with them. Jeremiah said, "The Lord has sent all His servants the prophets to you again and again; you have not listened or paid any attention.. Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways...'But you did not listen to Me, and you have provoked Me with (the idols) that your hands have made...Therefore...I will summon...My servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. I will bring (him) against the land and its inhabitants... and make them an object of horror and scorn...this whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years'." (Jeremiah 25:4-11).

CYRUS WORSHIPPED MANY GODS

Cyrus Himself was a heathen king. He did not worship the living God. To Cyrus the Jews' God was just another deity which he included in his pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Yet Yahweh, the living God, put His hand on Cyrus and honored him. God told Isaiah, "I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild My city and set My exiles free, but not for a price or reward..." (Isaiah 45:13).

Cyrus the Great is famous in Christian history for his decree which set the Jewish captives free. God's Spirit moved in his heathen king's heart. "God stirred up one (Cyrus) from the east...calling him to His (God's) service" (Isa 41:2). One hundred and fifty years after this prophecy the Persians ruled over Medo-Persia and Cyrus led their armies to victory.

In the first year after he captured Babylon, Cyrus favored the Jews. He made and published a remarkable decree. His decree said, "The Lord, the God of heaven...has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of His people among you...let him go up to Jerusalem and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 36:23; Ezra 1:2-3).

Because the Jewish captives spoke Hebrew, Cyrus wrote his decree in the Hebrew language. He also wrote the decree in Aramaic, the new official language of the Persian government. His edict or law was recorded and kept at

the palace library in Ecbatana (Ezra 6:2-5). This was the capital city of the Medes. Cyrus captured the city in 550 BC and made it his summer capital.

All this was God's plan. He is in control of all the world Empires and those who rule them rise and fall at His command (Proverbs 21:1). He knows everything that will happen in this world. Nothing takes God by surprise.



TALK ABOUT

1. How do we know that God was angry with the Jewish people?
2. How was Cyrus generous and kind to God's people?
3. Why was this when he was the conqueror of Babylon where they were exiles?

THEY COULD NOT BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS

When God moves in men's hearts – heathen men or righteous – He always accomplishes what He has planned. The decree went out from Cyrus, but it was the word of the Lord to His people (Isaiah 55:11).

Cyrus' decree opened the way for the Jews to return to their homeland. Cyrus promised help to those who would return to Jerusalem. His decree directed the people of Babylon "to provide silver and gold, goods and livestock and freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:4).

The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins and the temple had been destroyed. For many years men like Nehemiah wept and prayed to God for Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:3-11). Would God restore their city and their land? To many Jews the future seemed hopeless.

The exiles doubted and hesitated. It was risky business to leave a secure lifestyle and set out on a long journey (approx. 800 miles) back to a war-ravaged land and a very uncertain future. So Isaiah added an appendix to the Lord's word about Cyrus. He said, "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker...Does the clay say to the Potter, 'What are you making?' This is what the Lord says – the Holy one of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question Me about My children, or give Me orders about the work of My hands" (Isa 45:9-11)?

Isaiah had said, "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground (a piece of broken pottery lying in the dust)." God knew what He was doing! But His people doubted!

GOD'S WORD BY THE PROPHET

The prophet Isaiah gives a record of God's word spoken of Cyrus about 100 years before Cyrus lived (Isaiah 44:28-45:7). This prophecy was fulfilled with remarkable accuracy.

First the prophet pointed his listeners to the power of God shown in creation and in history (Isaiah 44:24-28). No king of Judah had helped the people and the oracles of false prophets had proved wrong.

So God would raise up one who did not know Him or worship Him to deliver Israel out of Babylon (Isaiah 44:28). "This is what the Lord (God) says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd (My anointed). He will accomplish all I please; he will say to Jerusalem, Let it be rebuilt, and to the temple, Let its foundations be laid'." (Isaiah 44:28).

The people of Israel were God's flock, but they were in exile because they had trespassed His Law and turned their back on their God. Cyrus would be 'the shepherd' to release them from their bondage.

Cyrus would not adopt the Jewish faith (Isaiah 45:4). He was but God's instrument to accomplish God's purposes for the Jews. "So that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides Me...I, the Lord, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:6-7).

CYRUS TOOK GREAT SPOILS

Cyrus had taken great spoils in his victory over Egypt. These, "the products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush" were carried back to Babylon. And, at Cyrus' command, much of the wealth of the nations was given to the Jews returning to Judah (Ezra 1:4; Isaiah 45:14).

At the same time God moved in the hearts of His people: "Family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and priests and Levites – everyone whose hearts God had moved – prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. All their neighbors assisted them...with valuable gifts..."

Cyrus and his soldiers had brought the spoils of war from Egypt and many other lands they had passed through at various times. The city was made rich with the plunder of the nations and God's people share in it!

ARTICLES TAKEN FROM THE TEMPLE

Nebuchadnezzar's army looted the temple in Jerusalem. His soldiers took all the articles of gold and silver to Babylon.

Cyrus gave these precious things back to the Jews. He brought out of his treasury "the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god" (Ezra 1:7).

Cyrus had his treasurer count them. Ezra a Jewish priest wrote down an inventory of the articles given to the Jews (Ezra 1:9-10). In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. The exiles who went with Ezra carried these with them to Jerusalem.

When Cyrus issued his decree, Zerubbabel with Jeshua the High Priest, stepped forward and gathered a large group of people. He led the first group to set out on the four-month journey to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:2).

According to the best scholars Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes I (458 BC, Ezra 7:8) with a second group. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in the King's 20th year (445 BC, Neh 2:1) with the third group of exiles.



TALK ABOUT

1. Do you think Cyrus believed he could score points with God by releasing the Jews to return to Palestine?
2. What decree did Cyrus make concerning the Jewish exiles (Ezra 1:2-4)?
3. Do you believe that praying for our leaders will make a difference to our country?

MANY JEWS LEFT BABYLON

God's Spirit stirred the hearts of faithful Jews. Many had kept faith in the living God. They had not joined in the idol worship of those around them. They were glad and came out of Babylon. They feared the Lord and obeyed the word of His servant, they had nothing to fear and they did not leave in haste, because Cyrus protected them (Isa 52:12).

Zerubbabel was a leader in the tribe of Judah (Ezra 3:2, 8; Haggai 1:1). He was directly descended from King David (Luke 3; 27). He had gained favour with the exiles and was called "the prince of Judah." He may have served in the King's court; later the Persians made him governor of Judah (Hag 1:1).

The party led by Zerubbabel numbered 42, 360 persons, plus 7, 337 servants and two hundred singers – men and women. Mules, camels and horses carried their food and goods (Ezra 2:64-67).

The priests took with them the family records of their tribes. These had been carefully kept during the long years of exile. The records were very important to the Jews.

Note: The leaders used these family records to decide who would be priests when worship at the temple was restored (Ezra 2:61-63).

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Men of faith and courage - prophets, priests and tribal leaders - worked with Zerubbabel for more than 20 years to rebuild the city and the temple, dedicate it and establish again the worship of God.

Fifty-seven years later Ezra the scribe led the third group of exiles back to Judah. Ezra studied the Hebrew Scriptures and taught the people what God required of them.

In Jerusalem Ezra prepared the people to renew their covenant relationship with the Lord. They gathered at the new temple. This was known as Zerubbabel's temple.

Nehemiah, who served the King at the palace in Susa, led a smaller group to Jerusalem. He led the people in repairing the gates and rebuilding the walls of the city (Neh 2:6-11).

The Jews in Babylon continued to enjoy the king's favor. After Cyrus, his son, Cambyses II, came to the throne. He extended the Medo-Persian empire from India to the Nile river. He was followed by Darius I, who confirmed the decree issued by Cyrus. The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem had stopped. In the reign of Darius I it began again. Many official letters passed between the Persian court and Jerusalem on this subject (Ezra 5:6-6:12).

A NEW RULER IN PERSIA

Darius I ruled in Persia (522-485 BC). He continued Cyrus' policy to restore the Jews to their homeland. Many had returned and work on the temple had started, but then they stopped working. In the second year of Darius' rule, the Jews in Jerusalem started to work again to rebuild the temple (Zechariah 1:1). The work had been left at a standstill for twenty years. Darius was sympathetic and sent money from the royal treasury to help the work (Ezra 6:4).

MANY JEWS STAYED IN BABYLON

God used Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. At that time God did many wonders and brought His people out of bondage "with a mighty hand and outstretched arm" (Deut 26:8; Jer 31:32).

But the remnant of people that came out of Babylon left there of their own free will. No one forced them to leave. No angel appeared to take them by the hand and escort them out of the city as they did Lot from Sodom (Genesis 19:16).

Through many prophets God appealed to His people to "Come out of Babylon." Isaiah called to them, "Leave Babylon! Flee from the Babylonians. Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it...say, 'The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob'." (Isaiah 48:20).

But the people were too satisfied with their way of life. They had settled down in wicked Babylon. They were not forced to make bricks as they had been in Egypt. Business thrived and their children had married and had families.

Business documents on clay tables tell of the Murashus enterprise. This business was owned by exiles and consisted of banks, insurance and real estate offices in many places. The head office was at Nippur and dated from 587 BC. Property deeds were stored in large clay jars, sealed with pitch.

Many Jews had turned their backs on the living God and now worshipped the gods of Babylon. The Babylonians built temples to dozens of different gods and goddesses. The idolatry of Babylon reached to the heavens and the prophet declared, "Babylon...will be overthrown" (Isaiah 13:19).

God raised up prophets to tell His people to turn from their idols. His prophets had warned them. Through Jeremiah God said, "I will make My words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes" (Jeremiah 5:14).

Ezekiel and Daniel gave the people God's message, but the people did not want to hear it. These prophets were God's watchmen, warning the careless people (Ezekiel 3:17-19).

Isaiah cried out, "Depart, depart, go out...Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the Lord" (Isa 52:11). The "unclean things" may have been the idols they held in their hands.



TALK ABOUT

1. Have you had to move and leave behind a place you really loved? Some of the Jews who left Babylon felt that way.
2. Are family records important to you?

THE PROPHETS' WORDS CAME TRUE

God had promised: "You will not leave (Babylon) in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rearguard" (Isa 52:12).

The return to Jerusalem of a remnant of God's people is presented as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophesy, "I Myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number" (Jer 23:3).

Isaiah said, "In that day the Lord will (gather) from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one...Those who were perishing in Assyria and who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain in Jerusalem" (Isaiah 27:12-13).

Jeremiah gave us a beautiful picture of God leading the exiles back to their own land: "They will come with weeping; they will pray and I will bring them back. I will lead them besides streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's Father...and they will sorrow no more" (Jer 31:9-12).

A MESSAGE FOR ALL

The prophet wrote, "Babylon must fall because of Israel's slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon" (Jeremiah 51:49). Babylon killed men and women with the sword and they 'killed' their spirits with idol

worship and the sex sins that were practiced by temple prostitutes. Babylon was like a great cancer in the earth.

Because the devil occupied a prominent place in Babylon, God decreed, "Babylon's thick wall will be leveled and her gates set on fire..." Jeremiah wrote these things about Babylon on a scroll and sent it to the exiles there (Jeremiah 51:58-61).

Babylon's idol worship spread into all the world and it is still with us today. To the apostle John, Babylon represented the sum total of all the evil in the world, all the enemies of Christ pictured in one word. John called them "Babylon the Great" (The Revelation 18:1-3).

Paul wrote letters to the church at Corinth. It was reported to him that some among its members lived sinful lives. They lived in the Babylon of this world and followed its ways. He said, "there is sexual immorality among you, and of the kind that does not occur even among pagans" (1 Corinthians 5:1).

Because the believers at Corinth had joined themselves to non-believers (in marriage and business), Paul told them, "Come out from them and be separate," says the Lord. "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a father to you, and you will be My sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

We who serve the Lord "carry the vessels of the Lord." We serve in the house of the Lord. We are His treasure and His inheritance. Paul told Timothy that true believers are sealed with this inscription: "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Timothy 2:19).

God calls all His people to come out of the world. John wrote, "Do not love the world or anything in the world...For everything in the world – the craving of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting – comes not from the Father but from the world..." (1 John 2:15).

God knows everything. He knows all about you and me. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12-13). All our ways are known to the Lord.

A REVIVAL OF FAITH

In the Hebrew Old Testament the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. These two men ministered side by side in Jerusalem after a remnant of Jews returned from Babylon, Nehemiah worked to build up the broken walls of the city and Ezra taught the Law of God, the Psalms and the Prophets to the people.

"Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came to Jerusalem" with Ezra (Ezra 7:7).

Ezra worked to restore the faith and worship of God's people. God had preserved this remnant and now they must worship Him as He had commanded in the law of Moses. Ezra engaged all the priests and Levites in the worship of Yahweh and the remnant of Israel kept the Passover. For 70 years Israel had not been able to do this freely. And many of the new generations did not know God's Law.

Ezra called all the people to a public square "before the Water Gate," and read God's Law to them (Neh 8:5-7). Men, women and all who were able to understand (children) stood from morning till noon and listened.

The Levites went among the people and instructed them in the Law, "making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand."

God's word spoke to the hearts of the people. They were guilty of not keeping God's Law. They wept openly.

A DAY SACRED TO THE LORD

After this solemn assembly had ended, Nehemiah the governor told them, "This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep...Go and enjoy food and drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared" (Neh 8:9-10). When our faith is made strong, we rejoice in God's blessing and we care for others. God's love in our hearts reaches out to "those who have nothing prepared."

Three papyrus documents discovered in 1905 confirm the Bible record. They were dug up on the island of Elephantine. This island lies near the Aswan Dam on the Nile River in Upper Egypt. The papyri were written around 419 BC in the Aramaic language.

One bears a message from Darius II telling the Jewish military outpost how to keep the Passover. It was signed by "an agent for Jewish affairs at the court of the Persian governor (or satrap) for Egypt."

For at least two centuries after Cyrus took Babylon, the Persians had some control over Palestine. Persian satraps ruled over each region or province (Ezra 8; 36; Esther 3:12).



TALK ABOUT

1. What did the name 'Babylon' come to represent to Christians? Is there any word in the English language that has taken on a similar meaning?
2. When we have many friends who are not Christians is it hard to leave them and "be separate," the term the Bible uses for living clean lives (2 Corinthians 6:17-18)?

Cyrus the Great died on an expedition to the east in 530 BC. His body was placed in a vault in the palace at Persepolis. A stone crypt still stands where the palace ruins lie covered by the desert sands. Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses II who extended the Persian Empire to Egypt and to the distant lands of India, making it the greatest empire the world had ever known.

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