

## **EZRA AND NEHEMIAH, THE RESTORATION MEN**

Judah and the surrounding nations groaned under the control of Babylon. To outward appearances, the gods of Babylon had proved stronger than the God of Israel. But Isaiah and Jeremiah had insisted that the fall of Jerusalem was God's punishment for the unrepented sins of His people. And they promised that a merciful God would one day restore them to the land again. Jeremiah actually named a time period – *“thus says the LORD”*, he wrote, *“when **seventy years** are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”* Jeremiah 29:10.

Nebuchadnezzar helped his father destroy the Assyrian capital Nineveh in 612 BC. He became sole ruler of the Babylonian Empire in 605 BC. His mighty kingdom stretched from Egypt to Iran. But it collapsed overnight with the capture of Babylon by **Cyrus king of Persia** and **Darius the Mede** in 539 BC. That is pretty close to 70 years. And guess what? In his first year Cyrus issued an amnesty, permitting the Jewish captives in Babylon to go home, as described in 2 Chronicles 36:21-23. If you wish to confirm this, his monument with the decree can be seen in the British Museum in London. Bible prophecy is amazingly accurate!

The next two books, **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**, describe the Return. There was great joy and excitement among the exiles as the families listed in Ezra chapter two agreed to go back and rebuild the Temple. But the hardships that faced them when they got there – ruined houses and fields overgrown with decades of weeds – damped their enthusiasm. They laid the foundation of a new Temple, but there it stayed. Ezra chapter four lists the opposition they faced from Gentiles (non-Jews) who had enjoyed the use of their land during their absence. It was twenty years later, and only with the encouragement of the prophets **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, that the temple was completed.

Ezra himself comes on the scene for the first time in his seventh chapter, some 58 years later still (around 458 BC). He led a second wave of émigrés from Babylon. He set out to improve the spiritual state of the returnees by teaching the Law of Moses. He successfully persuaded the Persian king, Darius, to back his mission. *“The hand of the Lord my God was on me”* is his enduring phrase as he goes about organising the expedition. Reforms were needed, and on his arrival he chastens the people of Jerusalem for marrying foreign women.

**Nehemiah** belongs to the reign of **Artaxerxes**, in 444 BC. Eighteen years after Ezra arrived at Jerusalem, Nehemiah, an important Jew in the court of the Persian king, learned of the dilapidated state of Jerusalem and like Ezra, begged leave to go there and rebuild the broken walls and gates. Answering his prayer, God softened the heart of the king, and he set off with authority to buy materials and complete the repairs. His short book is a gripping read. It is written as an autobiography, and records his tenacity and courage as he overcomes one obstacle after another – a century of accumulated rubble, Gentile enemies who thrived on the status quo, threats of assassination, and grumbles from the builders. It is good to see Ezra alongside Nehemiah on the Day of Atonement, following the completion of the walls, leading the worship, and teaching the Law of Moses. *“They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly”*, says the chronicler, *“and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”* Nehemiah 8:8. It is good example of the importance of public Bible reading, and a tribute to the faith of the two men, showing that with God's help, we can accomplish great things.