

May 1 : Scriptures 2 Chronicles 25-28

SUMMARY

In today's reading, we'll take a closer look at Judah's kings, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, and Ahaz.

In the previous chapter, we met King Joash. He started well as a seven-year-old boy under the tutelage of the High Priest Jehoiada. In chapter 25, we begin with Amaziah. He's twenty-five and rules for twenty-nine years (54 years old). What's the Chronicler's assessment? "He did what was right in the Lord's sight but not wholeheartedly" (25:2). For example, King Amaziah kills his father's assassins. Still, unlike other royal despots, he doesn't eliminate their families (as retribution or for fear of reprisal) but spares their lives per the Torah.

Next, King Amaziah assembles his army for war. It appears he might trust in human strength or numbers. As seen with other kings, it's best to count on the Lord rather than figure out a victory by counting soldiers. But King Amaziah decides to hire many mercenaries from the northern kingdom of Israel. A prophet pops up and warns the king not to do that because the Lord isn't with Israel because of their idolatry.

The king faces a big decision. Either trust in large numbers or trust in the Lord and lose not only numbers of soldiers but the immense sum of silver he paid those mercenaries to join him in battle. Here's the king's cost in silver alone for the 100,000 soldiers: 7,500 pounds of silver (109374 troy oz @ \$25/oz. = \$2,734,350). What does the prophet encourage him to do? "Let it go. God can give you more than that. But if you really want to, go, and the Lord will let you crash and burn because the key is whether the Lord is with you and helping you or not."

This situation is similar to what happened to Amaziah's father, King Joash, "Although the Aramean army came with only a few men, the Lord handed over a vast army to them because the people of Judah had abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors" (2 Chronicles 24:24).

What happens next is best understood if we look back and forth between this account and the one in 1 Kings 14:1-14.

In the Chronicles account, per the prophet's word, Amaziah dismisses the mercenaries. The mercenary Ephraimite division, having been denied the glory of battle, decide to take their frustrations out on some of Judah's cities. They "got very angry with Judah and

returned home in a fierce rage" (25:10), and along the way, they killed "three thousand (Judahites) and took a great deal of plunder" (25:13). What rotten ingrates! But before King Amaziah finds this out, he attacks and defeats the Edomites in the Valley of Salt (located at the southwestern tip of the Dead Sea) and treats his Edomite prisoners terribly by throwing them all off a cliff. Next, King Amaziah takes the Edomite gods ("Seirites – the Edomites lived at Mt. Seir"), stupidly brings them home, and worships them. Really? Didn't he just experience a victory through the Lord's help with an army he believed was too small for the task? And now he wants to snub his Divine Helper? A prophet starts to rebuke the king, and King Amaziah stops him saying, "Who made you my counselor? You'd better stop, or you're going to die." The prophet wisely stops but adds that the Lord will now destroy King Amaziah for his idolatry, refusing to listen and repent (25:16).

But in the 1 Kings 14 account, King Amaziah goes from defeating the Edomites to directly threatening Israel's, King Jehoash. In that account, King Jehoash warns Amaziah to stay home, or he'll get hurt, but Judah's king advances anyway. King Jehoash and his army defeat King Amaziah and his troops. Jehoash captures Amaziah, the Israelites march to Jerusalem, break down a large part of the fortified wall, grab all the gold and silver in the Temple and some hostages, and return to Samaria. That's it. But the 1 Kings 14 account doesn't explain why King Amaziah went after Israel. Per the Chronicler, King Amaziah likely went after Israel because of the Ephraimite soldiers' attack on Judah's cities, the taking of 3,000 hostages, and a lot of loot. Everything else is the same, except King Jehoash dumps King Amaziah back in the now-trashed Jerusalem to lick his wounds (25:23).

So, what was King Amaziah's problem? He initially listened to the Lord but then went off and did things his way. Did he ask the Lord if he was to attack Israel to retrieve his people and goods? Even if he had, would the Lord have answered since he was all wrapped up with the Edomite gods? The text says the Lord orchestrated King Amaziah's humiliation because of his idolatry (25:20), just like Yehovah caused the small Aramean army to humiliate King Jehoash for his sinful actions (killing his mentor's son, Zechariah) and refusal to listen and repent.

Sadly, both father and son, Kings Joash and Amaziah, meet the same death by assassination (24:25, 25:27). Pride and unwillingness to follow Yehovah with all their hearts marred their reigns. And yet, despite his ignoble end and straying from God, the Chronicler says King Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (26:4). Be sure to read the "Insight" at the end of today's reading.

Chapter 26 introduces King Uzziah to us. Now we come to one of Judah's greatest monarchs. No, he's not a paragon of virtue like King David or Jehoshaphat were. He was

a remarkable over-achiever and gifted designer, builder, and administrator. He ascended the throne at age 16 and reigned for a long fifty-two years! But you'll find out it was a co-regency with his son for a critical and sad reason.

King Uzziah's name means "the Lord is my strength." The Chronicler shares the secret of King Uzziah's success, "He sought God throughout the lifetime of Zechariah, the teacher of the fear of God. During the time that he sought the Lord, God gave him success" (26:5). Uzziah (Azariah in 2 Kings 15) has a much longer bio in Chronicles than in the book of Kings, which says he "did what was right in the Lord's sight" and suffered from a late-onset skin disease that lasted until his death. Because of the skin disease, he had to live in quarantine while his son ruled on his behalf. But now, the rest of the story.

Uzziah was a strong military commander who defeated many of Judah's ongoing enemies (26:7). Under his leadership, the awesome king's influence stretched from Judah to Philistia to Egypt. He built towers and fortifications for Jerusalem, was a primo cattle rancher, and was also a farmer, "a lover of the soil" (26:10). Already you can see how the land and people prospered under his kingly management. He built a well-ordered, powerful, and organized army. He also "made skillfully designed devices in Jerusalem to shoot arrows and catapult large stones for use on the towers and on the corners" (26:15). How could he do all this so well? "God helped him" (26:7) and "for he was wondrously helped" (26:15).

Until...

"Until" is the active word. It seems like Uzziah's father and grandfather before him, success and self-reliance (and pride) went to his head. "He grew arrogant, and it led to his own destruction" (26:16). Unlike the writer of the book of Kings, the Chronicler pulls no punches. King Uzziah sinned brazenly before the Lord by attempting to perform tasks that belonged only to the priests. He wanted to offer incense to the Lord, which meant standing inside the Holy Place in front of the Parochet (the curtain) that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies where God's presence hovered above the Ark. *What was he thinking?* Did he think he could willfully invade the Lord's "throne room" and perform the incense service next to the Almighty's presence, and nothing would happen to him? The last time someone tried something like this, the Lord fried them (Nadab and Abihu, Leviticus 10:1-2). But this time, Yehovah executed a more severe punishment upon the king, who thought he could barge into the Lord's presence.

A skin disease breaks out on Uzziah's forehead, and if you've read through Leviticus, a skin disease causes the afflicted person to be isolated from God and all other people. The

strong king who sought to do things his way and in his strength was forever banished from the Lord's presence and isolated from his subjects (26:21). In a sense, Uzziah got a living death, wholly isolated from human touch. His son, Jotham, had to reign for him until the day he died (26:21).

One final note before we go on to the next chapter. Note in 26:22 that a prophet named Isaiah, son of Amoz, wrote about King Uzziah. Isaiah is among the early prophets who were the beginning of a long line of illustrious prophets whose prophecies contributed to the Bible. Depending on how much they wrote, these prophets are known as "major" or "minor," but all are significant. Here is the opening line from Isaiah's book to let you know how long he ministered to Judah's kings. "The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of *Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah*, kings of Judah" (Isaiah 1:1).

Chapter 27 focuses on King Uzziah's son, Jotham. He's a good king who begins his reign at the age of twenty-five and lasts for sixteen years. I like the Chronicler's assessment that "He did what was right in the Lord's sight just as his father Uzziah had done" but tags it with "he didn't enter the Lord's sanctuary" (27:2). I guess he learned from his father's mistake.

King Jotham is a good king, but the people still suffer from spiritual corruption (27:3). 1 Kings 15:35 says the people "continued sacrificing and burning incense on the high places." This note is an important lesson. Once corruption enters, it's tough to root it out. Not much is recorded about him other than he was a builder and a commander like his father, and in both cases, King Jotham was successful. Why? You should be able to guess by now, "because he did not waver in obeying the Lord his God" (27:6).

Finally, in chapter 28, we meet King Ahaz again. He was twenty years old and reigned for sixteen years. Alas, he wasn't godly like his father (Jotham) and grandfather (Uzziah). 1 Kings 37 says that in the days of King Ahaz's father, the Lord started to bring the kings of Aram and Israel against Judah as judgment for the Judahites' idolatry. Well, here it comes!

King Ahaz does some of the most detestable things in idolatry, making idols and human sacrifice – *his own children!* Wow, what a beast! His actions draw the Lord's judgment down like a sledgehammer. First, Aram attacks, and Judah loses many captives. Then the northern kingdom of Israel hits Judah, brutally killing 120,000 soldiers in one day. Once again, it's because "they had abandoned the Lord God of their ancestors" (28:6). King Ahaz loses his son, his palace governor, and his right-hand man. The resoundingly

victorious Israelites grab 200,000 captives from Judah and march them north to Samaria. This is God's punishment for Judah's idolatry, in line with the penalties listed for covenant unfaithfulness.

With their captives, the victorious Israelite army meet the Lord's prophet as they approach the city of Samaria. He says to them, "Don't even think about bringing those people here to enslave them! Your sin already stinks to high heaven. Send 'em home." And with the leaders of Samaria's help, that's what they do. They feed and clothe and bandage the captives and take them south to Jericho, where they are safe in Judah's territory.

Did I say safe? Oh, no. This isn't over! The Edomites attack Judah from the south, the Philistines attack them from the west, and the Assyrians, whose help King Ahaz tried to buy, turn on him and attack from the north. Sheesh! All of this warfare was the Lord trying to humble the idolatrous king, and it didn't work. King Ahaz only grew worse.

First, he figures that since Damascus' gods help them, maybe he should worship them. Nope. It only leads Judah into more sin, and that sin leads to Judah's downfall. Second, King Ahaz destroys the Temple's implements, shuts the doors, and floods Jerusalem with idol altars, totally clueless that those altars are what brought all of the trouble in the first place.

Thankfully, King Ahaz dies and is disgracefully buried apart from Judah's other kings. It truly is a dark time for God's people in Judah when he dies. Is there any hope?

INSIGHT

Both King Amaziah and his son, King Uzziah, did good things for the Lord. But they both had an incident or two where they turned from God for a short or longer while. And yet, they get the stamp of approval from the Holy Spirit-inspired Chronicler. It's good to know that even though we're not perfect and prone to slipping, the Lord doesn't instantly or permanently write us off. He may have to discipline us for our head-strong and prideful decisions severely, but the Lord is ultimately a loving and forgiving God. Let us not take our relationship for granted, but let's not live in fear that the Lord is holding a sword over our heads just waiting to strike us down, either. Let's seek the Lord in all things and trust Him for our guidance and strength.

May 2 : Scriptures 2 Chronicles 29-31

SUMMARY

Yes! There is hope for Judah! After rotten King Ahaz, his righteous, God-fearing, God-loving son, Hezekiah, follows. He's one of Judah's great kings because of his devotion to Yehovah. Is he perfect? Of course not. As you've already read in the book of Kings, one of his grave mistakes is showing the envoys from the budding Babylonian empire all the treasures of Judah's kingdom. Sadly, the Lord will use that information to draw Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army to Jerusalem to execute His judgment against Judah. But overall, Hezekiah does marvelous things for the Lord and His people. Hezekiah is such a big deal, he gets four chapters worth of space from the Chronicler.

As you read through chapters 29-31 and into chapter 32, notice how the Chronicler focuses on spiritual matters and Temple operations instead of just kingly issues.

King Hezekiah starts his reign at twenty-five (that seems to be the magic number for most of Judah's kings) and reigns for twenty-nine years until age fifty-four. Right off the bat, he gets big kudos from the writer, "He did what was right in the Lord's sight just as his ancestor David had done" (29:2). King Hezekiah picks up where his father's destruction left off. The good king unlocks and reopens the Temple doors and calls the priests and Levites together in the "eastern public square," i.e., the area within the Temple walls to the east of the Bronze Altar. He commands his spiritual partners to prepare themselves spiritually for the work of purging the Temple precincts of all vestiges of idolatry and reconsecrating the Temple to Yehovah. He rightfully points out that God's wrath was hanging over the nation (29:8-9). Because of that, Hezekiah plans to hold a covenant recommitment ceremony (29:10). Consecration all around – the priesthood, the Temple, and the nation!

The priests that step up are from the Kohathites, Merarites, the Gershonites, and Elizaphanites. The Levites are from the Asaphites, Hemanites, and the Jeduthunites (29:12-14). Once again, the Chronicler not only traces the priesthood but those Levite families covering the music and other Temple duties.

The dates that they begin and end their work are essential to note. The work starts on Aviv 1 (outer court) and reaches the entrance of the Temple's portico, the entry to the Holy Place, on Aviv 8. Their cleaning and reconsecration process completes on Aviv 16 (29:17). If you remember your Hebrew/Biblical calendar, Unleavened Bread week begins on Aviv 15 with Passover and continues for seven days through Aviv 21, so the cleaning process goes past Passover.

With the work complete and Yehovah's house in order, King Hezekiah holds the massive reconsecration ceremony on Aviv 17. The priests perform the sacrifices (29:22-24) while the Levites attend to the worship music (29:25-26). Once the reconsecration is complete, King Hezekiah invites all worshippers forward to give their offerings to the Lord. I find it a bit funny that there aren't enough consecrated priests to handle the great number of sacrifices, so they conscript some of the Levites to jump in and help. Why? "For the Levites were more conscientious to consecrate themselves than the priests were" (29:34). That would be like the worship team members jumping in to help with the elder/pastoral duties because the leaders hadn't sufficiently prepared for the congregation's worship service.

Now that the Temple is fully operational, the fun is just starting. In chapter 30, King Hezekiah will host an alternative nationwide Passover celebration in Jerusalem. He invites *ALL* Israelites from every tribe to join in regardless of whether they were part of the northern or southern kingdom (30:1, 5). Since the Temple was just finishing up the reconsecration project and there weren't enough consecrated priests to handle the Passover prep and celebration, King Hezekiah uses the Torah-granted allowance of *Pesach Sheni*, Second Passover in Numbers 9:9-12 (30:2). The Torah says if someone misses Passover in the first month, qualified people can celebrate Passover "legally" on the same day in the second month, so that's what King Hezekiah does.

The king's letter is powerful. It's an open invitation to all the Israelites left in the northern kingdom who weren't taken captive by the Assyrian and exiled. Hezekiah rightly calls them out for their idolatry but graciously invites them to join with the rest of their fellow Israelites to seek the Lord for forgiveness and cleansing. He encourages them to turn to the Lord and reminds them of Yehovah's promise to turn to His people when they return to Him (30:6-9). The letter is a gracious and loving call to repentance with the hope of restoration according to God's promises.

What's the response? Some mocked, but some returned. It's the closest thing to a national restoration and unification since the kingdom split under King Rehoboam. How was this possible? Because of King Hezekiah's devotion and dedication to the Lord and his reconsecration of the Temple, "the power of God was at work in Judah to unite them to carry out the command of the king and his officials by the word of the Lord" (30:12).

And what a Passover celebration it was! But there is a large contingent of "unclean" priests and attendees in attendance. The Temple rules are firm that only the ritually clean may approach God for sacrifice and Feasts of the Lord like Passover. However, in this case, the Lord looks at the heart. After so many decades of neglect and outright rebellion, to have such a sizeable inter-tribal gathering, King Hezekiah calls out to Yehovah to

forgive the people anyway, to look on their reconsecrated hearts, and to show His acceptance by healing people – *which He did* (30:19-20)! Now usually, Passover is a one-day party with the Lord, but in this case, the people went into a full-blown revival! They rejoiced before the Lord for seven days while King Hezekiah encouraged the Levite worship team to play all day long (30:22).

When we read through Leviticus, I asked you to learn and remember the various Hebrew names for the five types of Temple sacrifices. One of those was the Fellowship offering called the *shelemim* (*peace offering*). This offering aims to praise Yehovah's goodness, thank Him for all the gracious things He's done for you, and tell Him how much you love and appreciate Him. Part of the animal goes up in smoke on the altar. Some of the meat is shared with the officiating priest, and the rest is shared by the worshipper and their family and friends. In truth, it's one big "church lunch" with praise and worship. Imagine a church potluck that starts on Sunday and ends the following Saturday night, and you get the idea.

Not content with just one week of festivities, the celebration erupts into another week-long party. This time, King Hezekiah provides the vittles for everyone (30:24). This kind of excitement, emotion, and enthusiasm for the Lord is a biblical mark of a true revival, a heart-felt return to God. May we see it in our days across the United States and the world!

The Chronicler writes the priests bless the people, and God hears their prayers. After the two-week Passover celebration, everyone goes home. Isn't it remarkable that the text says nothing like it had occurred since King Solomon's days? After such terrible idolatry, I'd say it was long overdue!

In chapter 31, as is typical with genuine revival, the people show their repentance by getting rid of the sin and ungodliness in their lives. The remnants of Baal and Ashtoreth worship are completely demolished (31:1). On the plus side, the people also begin tithing as required in the Torah. Coupled with renewed hearts, the contributions flood into the Temple storehouses (31:8) so the priests and Levites can concern themselves with the Lord's work rather than spend their energies on self-support. The contributions are so outstanding that King Hezekiah must build even more storage space!

Finally, the Chronicler records more information about the Temple's operations as he is wont to do. The last reading ended on a depressing note. This reading is exhilarating, "Hezekiah did this throughout all Judah. He did what was good and upright and true before the Lord his God. He was diligent in every deed that he began in the service of God's temple, in the instruction and the commands, in order to seek his God, and he

prospered" (31:20-21). Thank God for men and women of God who serve Him with all their hearts. And what a commendation from the Lord, "Hezekiah did this throughout all Judah. He did what was good and upright and true before the Lord his God. He was diligent in every deed that he began in the service of God's temple, in the instruction and the commands, in order to seek his God, and he prospered" (31:20-21). No wonder Yehovah blessed his efforts with a revival.

INSIGHT

According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus was crucified on Friday, Aviv 15, the day of Passover, the first day of Unleavened Bread Week. In the Feast cycle, the Feast of FirstFruits (a spring celebration that thanks God for the start of the year's harvest) is observed on the "day after the Sabbath" (Sunday) of Unleavened Bread Week.

Jesus rose on the third day (Aviv 17), early on the first day of the week (Sunday). That would make Jesus' resurrection day the Feast of FirstFruits. A "firstfruit" is a grain offering of barley to thank God for the full harvest of the year to come, and *firstfruits are a declaration of new beginnings*.

Jesus is our First Fruits, the first resurrected human being, presenting Himself to our Heavenly Father as a "thanks-in-advance" for the harvest of resurrected humanity yet to come at the end of God's redemption season. Pretty powerful, isn't it? But there's more.

Solomon's Temple dedication occurred on Aviv 17, the day after Aviv 16, when the priests and Levites finished preparing the Temple. Yes, that would make King Hezekiah's reconsecration *a celebration of a new beginning* to the day!

May 3 : Scriptures 2 Chronicles 32-34

SUMMARY

Once again, God's blessing doesn't mean there will be no troubles. "After Hezekiah's faithful deeds, King Sennacherib of Assyria came and entered Judah. He laid siege to the fortified cities and intended to break into them" (32:1). Wouldn't you know it? After all the wonderful things King Hezekiah experienced, a test comes to see if he'll hold tight to the Lord. You know, *like what happens to us all?*

King Hezekiah handles this threat wonderfully. He makes extensive preparations while encouraging the people to stand fast with Yehovah and trust that He will deliver them (32:7-8). Here's the key that we should all remember, "He has only human strength, but we have the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles" (32:). Yes!

The hilarious part about Sennacherib's representative's speech is *he doesn't have a clue* about Yehovah or Judah's covenant relationship with Him. The representative thinks Yehovah is just another puny god. The Lord indeed sent the Assyrian army to discipline His people in the northern kingdom and allowed them to attack neighboring countries. But Judah is off-limits, and the Assyrians soon find that out. The Chronicler is briefer than the writer of 1 & 2 Kings. Chronicles says an angel annihilates the Assyrian army, and Sennacherib goes home and dies. Done. But the credit and the Judahites' response are the critical points (32:22-23) – the Lord did this, and the people exalted Him.

2 Chronicles 32 finishes with two shorter versions of King Hezekiah's illness, wealth and construction projects, and death. Ho-hum. That's kingly stuff and not "spiritual" stuff, *except* for one sentence about King Hezekiah's foolishness, "When the ambassadors of Babylon's rulers were sent to him to inquire about the miraculous sign that happened in the land, God left him to test him and discover what was in his heart" (32:31). Of course, the Chronicler would focus on the king's heart. After all, it was out of pride that Hezekiah showed off all he had, and it brought a lot of trouble to Judah in the end. It was the lure that Yehovah used to draw the Babylonians as His judgment upon Judah. And so ends the life of an excellent king.

You'd think that a son who had such a model father would learn from him. But how many pastor's kids go rogue when they reach adulthood, even to the point of rejecting "the God of their father?" It's not uncommon. Just because a person has godly parents, that's no guarantee of godly offspring. Manasseh is a prime example.

We meet him in chapter 33, and he goes bad from the start. Perhaps it was because he became king at twelve years old, one year before modern Judaism says a boy officially becomes a man and a son of the covenant (Bar Mitzvah). This way-too-young king has an unfortunately long run as Judah's regent, fifty-five years, during which he wreaks spiritual havoc on Judah. How does the Chronicler remember him?

He was horrendous!

Everything his father did away with, King Manasseh brought back and more. He did it all. "He did a huge amount of evil in the Lord's sight, angering him" (33:6). The worst thing that the Chronicler points out is how King Manasseh violated the center of Yehovah's worship – the Temple. Rather than being the place for Yehovah's name in Israel, it became the place of rampant, disgusting idolatry. That won't end well. Why? Because Yehovah's covenant was explicit and conditional, "I will never again remove the feet of the Israelites from the land where I stationed your ancestors, *if only they will be careful to do all I have commanded them through Moses—all the law, statutes, and judgments*" (33:8) which King Manasseh and the straying people weren't doing. The apostasy (turning from God) was so bad the Judahites were worse than the nations God wiped out for their idolatry. Guess what's going to happen to Judah? Same thing. They knew the covenant. They brought it on themselves.

The Babylonians crash Judah's idolatry party, capture King Manasseh and drag him to Babylon by hooks and chains. But then something truly amazing happens that 2 Kings 21 doesn't talk about. King Manasseh comes to his senses! He repents, earnestly humbles himself, and calls out to the Lord. And like Yehovah promised King Solomon at the Temple's dedication, the Lord listens to King Manasseh and brings the king back to Jerusalem! Well, slap me silly and call me a goose! King Manasseh "came to know that the Lord is God." I guess some guys just have to learn by experience.

Now he's finally following his father, Hezekiah. King Manasseh refortifies Jerusalem and other cities after the Babylonian attack. He cleans out the idols from everywhere, rebuilds the trashed Bronze Altar, and commands the citizens to worship Yehovah alone. The people still have their high place sacrificial altars (which they weren't to do), but at least they only sacrificed to Yehovah (33:17).

As usual, King Manasseh's obituary completes his life account. However, the text talks about more info on his radical conversion found in records called the Events of Hozai (33:19). Man, I wish we still had that to read.

Chapter 33 ends with King Amon's short bio. He was terrible, and then he died. Okay, there's a little more to it. He did just as much evil as his dad did, but he didn't repent. His apostasy brought even more guilt on himself. Conspirators kill him after a rotten two-year reign. The people kill the conspirators and set his son Josiah on Judah's throne.

Chapter 34 gives us the godly king, Josiah. Like the earlier King Joash, Josiah becomes king at an early age – eight years old – and reigns for thirty-one years. Josiah is one of the bright spots on David's royal offspring list, alongside Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah. Again, the key was that he "did what was right in the Lord's sight and walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or the left" (34:2).

Even as a young boy, King Josiah sought the Lord. Four years after becoming king (age twelve), he goes through the same process his righteous predecessors did – removing idolatry (even up into the now-destroyed northern kingdom territory, formerly of all Israel) – and at the age of eighteen, he repairs the Temple. After collecting the money, he gives it to the workers who handled the Temple funds "with integrity" (34:12) and sets priestly supervisors over the restoration team.

As Kings reports, Josiah's workers find the Temple Torah scroll (likely thrown aside by his father, King Amon). When they read it, they realize they are all in deep trouble! Josiah sends a delegation to a prophetess, Huldah, who tells the king, "Yup. You and everyone else are in deep trouble. Except for the King. Because he turned his heart toward God and humbled himself, he won't see the onslaught of judgment chuggin' down the tracks toward y'all."

So, what did King Josiah do? He didn't respond like King Hezekiah did when Isaiah told him about what would happen after the Babylonian envoys left. "Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good,' for he thought, 'Why not, if there will be peace and security during my lifetime?'" (2 Kings 20:19). King Josiah called all the leaders and people together to hear the entire scroll and recommitment themselves to their covenant with Yehovah (34:31). Evidently, it stuck (34:33).

INSIGHT

King Manasseh may have been a horrible person early on in life, but he's an excellent example of why we should never write anyone off. I'm convinced that everybody has a chance to change for the good up to the point of their death. Only then will their future be sealed, either for an eternal life with God or eternal separation from Him. But just because people think they have time, they shouldn't assume they'll be able to make the change at the last moment because the longer one goes, the more they get set in their

ways. Furthermore, we don't know the day of our death, which could catch us ill-prepared.

Therefore, we need to make things right with God as soon as we hear His call. No matter how nasty, horrible, or wickedly ungodly our lives are, Jesus is more than able to create a saint out of a sinner in an instant.

May 4 : Scriptures 2 Chronicles 35-36

SUMMARY

And here's the latest Judah Kings scorecard: From Hezekiah to Manasseh to Amon to Josiah – Great to Bad/Good to Bad to Great.

Josiah has already launched the Great Reform. Now he calls the priests and Levites to restart the Temple services. First, he reinstates the divisions for service. Next, King Josiah commands that the Ark of the Covenant be returned to its place in the Temple's Holy of Holies (35:3). It seems King Manasseh or King Amon had it removed from the Temple, and it was never put back.

Next, King Josiah prepares for the nation's required Passover observance. Ah, Passover tells us when this account takes place – springtime – likely in late March because Passover is Aviv 15 (in early to mid-April by our calendar). Josiah puts his money where his mouth is, and he contributes a *massive* number of lambs for the Passover and a significant amount of livestock for offerings. Like King David's generous offering for the Temple inspired the leader to follow suit (1 Chronicles 29), the same thing happens here with Judah's leaders after King Josiah's example.

And so, "the service was established" (35:10). What follows is a wonderfully detailed description of the Temple sacrifices and Passover preparations, and it's something we would expect from the Temple-focused Chronicler. "So all the service of the Lord was established that day for observing the Passover and for offering burnt offerings on the altar of the Lord, according to the command of King Josiah" (35:16).

This observance was no ordinary Passover for Judah. It was a one-of-a-kind, over-the-top celebration! Check this out – "No Passover had been observed like it in Israel *since the days of the prophet Samuel*. None of the kings of Israel ever observed a Passover like the one that Josiah observed with the priests, the Levites, all Judah, the Israelites who were present in Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (35:18). King Josiah's Passover eclipsed his great-grandfather's Passover because the Bible describes Hezekiah's Passover as "nothing like this was known since the days of Solomon son of David, the king of Israel" (30:26). King Josiah's Passover was the most glorious of *all* the Passovers *ever*, short of the first Passover that freed Israel from Egypt and her gods.

King Josiah, the Establisher of Yehovah's Worship! The King of All Passovers at age twenty-six (35:19)! And he still had another thirteen years of his reign ahead of him. It is

a bittersweet moment. While God accepted King Josiah's efforts, His judgment is still coming.

It's telling that so much of the Chronicler's account records what Josiah did for Yehovah and relatively little about what he did as a king regarding non-spiritual matters. In Hebraic thinking, there is no separation between sacred and secular. Every aspect of our life is sacred because it's all dedicated to God, and God spells out how His people should live. However, even within this mindset, we can see a line between the king's service to God and the king's service to the people.

King Josiah's final act was questionable whether the Lord sanctioned his battle against Pharaoh Neco or not. The book of Kings says King Josiah went out to confront Pharaoh Neco as the Egyptian king traveled through Judah's territory on the main highway. Perhaps King Josiah saw this as a threat. Maybe he was motivated by pride. We don't know. 2 Kings 23 simply says King Josiah fought Neco, was wounded, and died shortly after. However, Chronicles gives us a little more info. Pharaoh Neco waves King Josiah off as Josiah comes to meet him for battle. "What is the issue between you and me, king of Judah? I have not come against you today, but I am fighting another dynasty. God told me to hurry. Stop opposing God who is with me; don't make him destroy you!" (35:21).

Neco's statement is confusing until we read the Hebrew word for "God" used here. The word is *elohim*, generally meaning a god. If capitalized or in context, it can be read *Elohim*, referring specifically to Yehovah as the God of all "gods," the *Elohim of all elohim (spiritual beings who are viewed as gods but are nowhere near the Creator God)*. So I have to interpret the verse as "My god told me to hurry. Stop opposing my god who is with me; don't make him destroy you!" In that context, the zealous and devoted King Josiah may have gone to battle against the Pharaoh, trusting that Yehovah would give Josiah the victory. Sadly, it wasn't to be. We could say it was presumption. We could say it was just life – kings fighting kings. We could say Yehovah planned or allowed it to further His purposes somehow. We don't know. We know that one of Judah's great kings died, and from this point, the downward slide toward punishment and exile accelerates.

I want to point out that the account introduces the prophet Jeremiah who "chanted a dirge (mourned) over Josiah" (35:25). We've already met the prophet, Isaiah. As we leave the histories and move into the major prophets, keep in mind that Isaiah lived through the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. According to tradition, King Manasseh killed Isaiah by putting him in a hollow log and sawing him in two. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry covered the reigns of Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and a little beyond that.

Chapter 36 is Chronicles' final chapter as well as Judah's. It's blunt. After King Josiah's devastating and fatal defeat, Pharaoh Neco plays the first role in Judah's subjugation. After King Josiah's death, the people make his son, Jehoahaz, king. Yeah, he lasts only three months. Neco deposes him, takes tribute from Jerusalem, and sets up Jehoahaz's brother, Jehoiakim (formerly known as Eliakim), as his vassal-king. Did you catch the name change? That's a sign of authority over something or someone else. The name change and demand for tribute tell us clearly that Jehoiakim and Judah are Egypt's vassal (servant) king and state.

The Chronicler describes Jehoiakim as evil because he didn't follow Yehovah and did evil things (36:5). Evil is as evil does. Therefore, because of Judah's ongoing apostasy, Babylon arrives, captures Jehoiakim, and takes him to Babylon along with much of the Temple's treasures. The Chronicler is not kind to King Jehoiakim, "the detestable actions he committed, and what was found against him" (36:8).

Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, becomes Judah's king. He only reigns "three months and ten days in Jerusalem." Nebuchadnezzar removes him and takes him to Babylon along with more Temple treasures, and installs his brother, Zedekiah, as vassal-king. There is a conflict in the text. In 2 Kings 24:17, Zedekiah is Jehoiachin's uncle. Here in 36:10, Zedekiah is Jehoiachin's brother. The scholars I've read lean toward "uncle." Here's a summary by a great website, gotquestions.org/King-Zedekiah.html. So, here's the scorecard if you're keeping track of the final kings: *Josiah (father) to Jehoahaz (Josiah's son) to Jehoiakim (Josiah's son) to Jehoiachin (Josiah's grandson) to Zedekiah (Josiah's son)*.

Politically, what we see regarding Judah is the back-and-forth pull between the Egyptian and Babylonian kingdoms. At first, Egypt has the upper hand, but then Babylon's power grows. Egypt makes Judah its vassal state against Babylon, then Babylon invades Judah's territory, takes Judah from Egypt, and makes Judah Babylon's vassal state. King Zedekiah rebels against Yehovah (36:12) and Babylon (36:13), bringing the wrath of both down upon Judah per the Lord's prophetic decree to Kings Hezekiah and Josiah. The people of Judah have left their God, and they also finally suffer God's ultimate discipline (36:14).

The Chronicler summarizes the reason for Judah's downfall in 36:15-20. Their sin was walking away from the God who saved them from Egypt and made them His covenant people.

The people are killed or deported, and the Temple and Jerusalem are leveled just like Yehovah said he would do through Moses (the Torah) and the prophets (36:21).

But the Lord's wrath doesn't last forever. He also prophesied through Jeremiah that Israel's "time-out" in Babylon would only last 70 years. True to his word, the Lord used Persia to overthrow Babylon. Persia's King Cyrus issues a grand decree of God's mercy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: The Lord, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a temple at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord his God be with him" (36:23). Hallelujah!

Congratulations! We've now cruised through a significant part of Israel's history – the period of the kings. But there's more history to come. After the exile come God's restoration. In our next reading, we'll jump ahead 70 years to Judah's release and return, in which some (not all) of the Jews living in Babylon will participate.

INSIGHT

Things aren't as bleak as we might think they are. Look at the Jewish exiles in Babylon. They knew God had tossed them aside because they had tossed Him aside. But God didn't leave them. He was in Babylon with them through the prophet Daniel who was actively living under the Holy Spirit's presence and inspiration, as we'll see. The people may have thought they were finished. But before the exile, God promised He would restore them (the prophet Jeremiah said that). Daniel was watching over them. And when the time came, the Lord moved a pagan Gentile king's heart and mind to fulfill His plans for His people.

You may have gotten off track and feel isolated from the Lord. But take heart. He knows you, where you're at, and knows the plans He has for you. Hang in there. You might be very surprised when the Lord acts on your behalf and how it changes your life!

May 5 : Scriptures Ezra 1-3

SUMMARY

Yehovah's covenant punishment ends, and he causes King Cyrus to release the Jews by His sovereign hand. King Cyrus' declaration is so good that I want to include it in this *Cruisin' Through The Bible* commentary.

"This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. Let every survivor, wherever he resides, be assisted by the men of that region with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2-4).

Coming from a pagan king, Cyrus' declaration that Israel's God told him to rebuild the Temple is *amazing!* And it demands God's people be released because who knows best what Israel's God requires but the Israelites themselves, although now they will be referred to as Jews (because most of the returnees are from Judah).

After the book of Chronicles' dismal end, Ezra the priest records the Holy Spirit is not just motivating King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian empire, but the Jews themselves (1:5) and their pagan neighbors (1:6). Remember in the last reading that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken the Temple treasures and placed them in the temples of Babylon's gods (2 Chronicles 36:7,10, 18)? Cyrus now finds those treasures and gives them to the returning Jews to restore to a rebuilt Temple. Maybe, just maybe, could Yehovah have used the Babylonian exile to punish His people and *preserve* His people and the Temple furnishings? While there are a lot of Temple articles accounted for, we don't read of the main furnishings – The Bronze Altar and Laver, the Gold Menorah, Table of Showbread, and Incense Altar. And we certainly don't see the Ark of the Covenant listed. So, what became of the Ark?

We're not sure. There's a lot of speculation out there. 1) Some say the Ark was copied by the Queen of Sheba's son Menelik (allegedly by Solomon). It's alleged that Menelik left the copy in Jerusalem. The actual Ark was brought to Ethiopia, where Ethiopian Christians claim it's being kept safe in a compound in the city of Aksum. 2) Some say the Copper Scroll, found with the rest of the Dead Sea scrolls (in 1948), tells of the Ark's hidden location in a cave on the left side of the Jordan River valley in the Judean wilderness. 3) The late archaeologist, Ron Wyatt, claims to have seen it in a small cave

under the spot that many today claim is Golgotha, next to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem. 4) Some say the Ark is kept secret in a cave under the Temple Mount. No one will reveal it until the time is suitable due to the religious nuclear explosion that would happen should it be brought to the Temple Mount. All speculation aside, we have a record of it written in the Apocrypha, a set of books the Protestant and Jewish people don't include in the official Bible, but the Catholics do. Here's the quote:

"One finds in the records that the prophet Jeremiah ordered those who were being deported to take some of the fire, as has been mentioned, and that the prophet, after giving them the law, instructed those who were being deported not to forget the commandments of the Lord, or to be led astray in their thoughts on seeing the gold and silver statues and their adornment. And with other similar words he exhorted them that the law should not depart from their hearts. It was also in the same document that the prophet, having received an oracle, *ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance.* Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way, but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: 'The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated.'" (2 Maccabees 2:1-8).

Is this true? We don't know. Well, at least most of us don't know. Likely, someone knows and if God wants His Ark to be found and restored, have no fear. He can surely make it happen as he released the Jews and the Temple articles in Ezra 1.

Ezra 2 opens with the first list of Jewish returnees. Yes, I know lists can get boring. We've been through this before with the genealogies, but we need to read through them because there are important things, mainly names, to note. Zerubbabel and Jeshua, for example. The Nehemiah mentioned here is not the future governor and Jerusalem wall builder, and Nehemiah doesn't depart for Jerusalem until 13 years after Cyrus' decree.

Britannica.com says this about Zerubbabel: "governor of Judaea under whom the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem took place. Of Davidic origin, Zerubbabel is thought to have originally been a Babylonian Jew who returned to Jerusalem at the head of a band of Jewish exiles and became governor of Judaea under the Persians. Influenced by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, he rebuilt the Temple. As a descendant

of the House of David, Zerubbabel rekindled Jewish messianic hopes." Zerubbabel was King Jehoiachin's grandson, so God's promise to perpetuate David's royal line is intact!

Jeshua is a priest who descends from Jozadak, the last High Priest before the Temple's destruction. Therefore, with Zerubbabel and Yeshua, the royal and priestly lines are preserved.

Why the lists? Because this was the way for families to record their pedigree as genuine, full-blooded Israelites. You'll find this emphasis on the "purity of the people" in both Ezra and Nehemiah. According to the HCSB Study Bible, the people in 2:3-20 "are listed by the names of their family patriarchs, and in verses 21-35 according to locality of origin." Those localities are found explicitly around Jerusalem, as David's city is the focus.

The lists also note the returning priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants, and Solomon's designated servants because it establishes *continuity* of worship (HSCB). After all, the purpose of King Cyrus sending God's people home was to rebuild Yehovah's Temple and reestablish Temple worship.

Because the purity of the people (genealogical and ritual) is so essential, we even have lists noting those of unprovable family lines. They weren't shunned. They were kept to the side so they wouldn't violate God's purity laws of unqualified people partaking in holy offerings. Here's the amazing part – when a High Priest was qualified, he could consult the Urim and Thummim to get a sure word from God as to a person's pedigree (2:63). Part of the list includes other servants, singers, and livestock for sacrifices and assistance with Temple operations (2:64-67), plus a general accounting of personal gifts for rebuilding the Temple.

In chapter 3, the Temple offerings begin even though there is no Temple. All they need is an altar which the people construct on the foundation of the previous one (3:2-3). There are loads of Bible/Hebraic/Jewish specific things here I want to point out:

- 1) The Temple sacrifices restarted on the first day of the seventh month (Tishri 1, mid-September to mid-October). That specific day is the Feast of Trumpets and the New Moon Feast (3:6).
- 2) The priests started with the Daily (Tamid) sacrifices – a lamb presented at 9 am and 3 pm. The Tamid sacrifices are the foundational sacrifices that must begin and end the day's sacrificial service (3:3).

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- 3) They observed the Feast of Tabernacles (Tishri 15-21) (3:4).
 - 4) They observed the New Moon feasts, specially designated offerings, and the regular offerings by worshippers (3:5).

There doesn't have to be a Temple for the sacrificial services. I point that out because many Christians believe a Third Temple has to be built so the Antichrist can stop the sacrifices and proclaim himself as a god in place of Yehovah. Yes, there is a scripture about him making this proclamation IN God's temple (2 Thessalonians 2:4). So, IF a Temple must first be built, then we have nothing to worry about until either construction starts or ends. If a Temple doesn't have to be built first, and the top of the Temple Mount is regarded as the Temple precincts (in the Temple, because it was still standing in Paul's day), then the Antichrist could appear the moment someone sets up an altar on the Temple Mount and the sacrifices begin, likely with the Tamid lamb offering. Time will tell.

Back to the text. The sacrifices may have begun in the 7th month, but it isn't until six months later that the Temple's construction begins (the 2nd month of the 2nd year, 3:8). Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, Jeshua, son of Jozadak, begin the work with the rest of their team. Some of the Jews weep over the new Temple because it caused them to remember the first magnificent Temple that King Solomon built. They likely grieved over its loss, or out of joy that it was rising again, or perhaps from sadness because such a grand building was so utterly devastated because of Judah's sin. Some shouted for joy at the Temple's start (3:12-13). The sound was heard for miles!

INSIGHT

Some of the Israelites lost their family records, so they couldn't prove who they were related to and thus their right to eat at the Lord's table (i.e., the sacrifices in the Temple court). It would take Yehovah's pure revelation through the Urim and Thummim to once and for all to establish their pedigree.

We're all born estranged from God and separated from God's family because of our sin. The Gospel, the Good News, is that through Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, the price is paid for any person to return fully to God's family and for our Heavenly Father to declare, "This one is mine, and that one is mine!"

"At that time those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. The Lord took notice and listened. So a book of remembrance was written before him for those who feared the Lord and had high regard for his name. 'They will be mine,' says the Lord of Armies, 'my own possession on the day I am preparing. I will have compassion on them as a man has

compassion on his son who serves him. So you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him” (Malachi 3:16-18).

Yes, the Lord is talking about Israel’s people, who were dispersed and are returning to Him even now. But aren’t we also those who “(fear) the Lord and had high regard for his name?” Yes. Therefore, He says of us, “That one is mine!”

May 6 : Scriptures Ezra 4-6

SUMMARY

It's predictable for opposition to arise when God begins to do something significant, whether it's a God-led new job, new relationship, joining a new church, starting a new business, or anything else God begins in your life. I've seen that repeatedly in my own life. For example, my wife and I had no doubt the Lord led us to relocate from Minnesota to South Carolina three years into our marriage. Was it easy? No. We had to push through the usual difficulties of packing, moving, saying goodbye to family and friends, and traveling to our new home in Columbia, South Carolina. The trouble didn't start until shortly after we settled in. Our car spasmed into significant engine work, our savings were drained, and bills became due quickly. It was like Satan knew God brought us to our new location for a reason and tried to knock us out right away.

As I was asking the Lord about this, the thought came to me that we often pull out unwanted plants from our garden before the roots become established. Aha! Everyday troubles aside, I've repeatedly seen how bizarre and extraordinary things happen to people in their new situations, primarily if God has led them into that situation. It seems the enemy of our soul wants to "pull us up" or interfere with "putting our roots down" before we can become grounded and fruitful for the Lord in our new digs.

It happened again when my wife and I moved to Florida. Yes, we bought a house with all the convolutions involved with that. But the financial, organizational, emotional, and mental turmoil that hit us *a week before closing* was simply *insane!* Once we closed, the turbulence settled down a bit, and when I asked the Lord about it, He told us to "ride it out." Sure enough, one month later, everything cooled down. The Lord worked issues out, and now we're at peace.

This type of opposition is what the returning Jews face in Ezra chapter 4. The Lord has sovereignly released the Jews after the Medo-Persians conquered the Babylon empire. The Jews' 70-year exile was done, and *nothing* could prevent the Lord from fulfilling His promise to His people (Jeremiah 29:10). Having arrived home, the Jews set about rebuilding their beloved Temple on the foundation of the first Temple the Babylonians destroyed.

But now comes the opposition, which threatens the Jews' ability to "put their roots down" in their Promised Land. And it's no surprise because Jerusalem is the apple of God's eye (Zechariah 2:8) and the Temple Mount is where He has put His name (Deuteronomy 12:11). No wonder God's enemy, Satan, prompted Israel's enemies to try to join the work,

even though they weren't Jews but Assyrian transplants (4:2, ethnic purity issue). Also, after the Jews wave them off because the work is theirs alone, Israel's enemies get bent out of shape. They start intimidating the Jews into stopping and bribing regional officials to frustrate the Jews' plans (4:4).

The most significant attack came through the initial letter from the people who had settled in the land after the Jews were exiled. The Gentile transplants and Gentile-Israelite mix ethnicity residents write to the Persian King, Ahasuerus (aka Xerxes, the son of Darius). They accused the Jews of being a rebellious people (which they had been), and if their work continued, they would grow strong, rebel again, and threaten the Persian royal interests in the region. The accusers write a second letter to Xerxes' successor, King Artaxerxes. King Artaxerxes does his search, and behold! The accusers are right. Therefore, he commands the work to stop until he can investigate further, and the local accusers forcibly stop the Jews from continuing their Temple reconstruction. Talk about great disappointment!

But here come Yehovah's prophets to the rescue! In chapter 5, Zechariah and Haggai encourage Zerubbabel (Governor) and Jeshua (the High Priest) to get on with the work under the Lord's authority. Of course, this doesn't sit well with Israel's enemies, and they ask under whose authority the Jews resumed the work, but the Jews ignore them and just keep building. The Jews ignoring their accusers warrants another tattle-tale letter (5:6), and boy, does this one ever backfire!

It's fun and encouraging to read through the letter. The Jews simply replied, "We're just rebuilding our God's Temple that had already been here through a great Israelite king." They then rehearse the events that led to the Jews' exile and return, including the Persian king's name, who had given them permission in the first place! The beneficent King Cyrus also gave them their Temple treasures to restart Temple worship. "If you don't believe us, O current Persian king, check it out for yourself."

The mighty King Darius does just that in chapter 6. His team searches the archives, but what they were looking for was in the Ecbatana file cabinets, not the ones in Babylon. Oh, silly archivists! Sure enough, King Cyrus did permit the Jews to return to their land to rebuild the Temple. Plus, he returned their Temple treasures and granted the Jews royal financing for their project. King Darius writes, "So there, Tattenai, Shether-bozenai, and colleagues! Leave the Jews the heck alone! Furthermore, please make sure the royal finances flow for the construction and anything else they need. Oh, and by the way, if anyone interferes with this order, you're dead in the most egregious way. I, King Darius, have spoken" (6:11-12).

With that, construction resumes with Israel's enemies decreed into submission. After about twenty years of stop-and-go construction, the Jews finish the Temple on Adar 3, calculated to be March 12, 515 B.C. They dedicate the rebuilt Temple, then the Jews celebrate the Passover, rejoicing that Yehovah had moved the Persian King to help them finish their project (6:22).

Now it's time to address the elephant in the room. Did you get a little confused over the names of the Persian kings? Didn't it seem like they didn't last on the throne very long, or perhaps they were listed out of order? Without getting into historical weeds, "according to history, the Persian kings reigned in the following order: **Cyrus** (560-530 B.C.), Cambyses (530-522), Smerdis (522), **Darius I** (522-486), **Ahasuerus/Xerxes I** (486-465), **Artaxerxes I** (465-424), Darius II (423-405), and Artaxerxes II (405-358)" (apologeticspress.org/). How do we explain that Darius I was mentioned *after* Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I?

Apologeticspress.org shares the following, "So what is the answer? Why is the kingship of Darius recorded in the book of Ezra following events connected with the kingship of Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-23)—a king who is thought to have reigned after Darius? One possible solution to this difficulty is that Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes of Ezra 4:6,7-23 were respectively Cambyses (530-522) and Smerdis (522)—kings of Persia (listed above) who reigned before Darius I. Since Persian kings frequently had two or more names, it is not unfathomable to think that Cambyses and Smerdis also may have gone by the names Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes (see Wilson, 1996; see also Fausset, 1998)." It could also be that Ezra's book was written out of chronological order or later events were inserted out of place as is commonly done in ancient texts.

Regardless, it doesn't change the vital point. God helped His people complete His work despite opposition. Yes, they had to endure delays, but as long as they followed His word, they could proceed with confidence and achieve their God-given goal.

INSIGHT

One of the God-given events where it seems Satan and his crew try to pull up God's work before roots go deep is when a person gives themselves to the Lord, and Jesus makes them born-again. "Baby" Christians often go through a very tough time as they learn how to live their new life with the Lord. It takes a lot of unlearning (of the world's ways) and learning (of God's ways). This expected spiritual opposition is why it's so helpful for new Christians to join a Bible-believing, God-fearing mature congregation whose members will take them under their wings to teach and support them. Oh yeah, this is called discipleship, and it's an essential part of a person's spiritual growth as a follower of Jesus.

May 7 : Scriptures Ezra 7-10

SUMMARY

And now, the text seems to align with history. "After these events, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia" (7:1). Okay, King Artaxerxes follows Cyrus, Darius I, and Xerxes I. This milestone of Artaxerxes' reign means the following events happened around 465-424 B.C., about 50 years after the Temple's completion.

At this time, Ezra appears. He's a man of superb pedigree, being a direct descendant of the original High Priest, Aaron. He was "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given," and he was an "expert in matters of the Lord's commands and statutes for Israel" (7:6, 11). Because the Lord has given him great favor with King Artaxerxes, Ezra gathers an entourage of spiritual leaders and servants who had not returned to Jerusalem in the first wave decades earlier. It took him and his group four months to journey west (7:9). Why did he want to return to his fellow Jews? For the best reason of all, in my humble opinion – to teach God's word to his fellow Jews!

The Persian king sends Ezra and his team to check out how the Jews are doing back in their land per God's Law (7:14). How are they measuring up? Furthermore, the team is to take with them treasures the king has given to them and take up collections along the way to facilitate worship at Yehovah's Temple. They are to be liberally supplied but with limits.

Why does the king make such a generous decree? So Ezra and the rest of the Jews will pray for the king "so that wrath will not fall on the realm of the king and his sons" (7:23). Furthermore, anyone associated with helping Yehovah's worship is tax-exempt. (Sweet!) The king also empowers Ezra to appoint judges and act judicially regarding the Jews' Torah observance, including punishment for disobedience. What a remarkable thing for God to do. But then again, this proves the verse from Proverbs, "A king's heart is like channeled water in the Lord's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses" (Proverbs 21:1). The Lord indeed directed King Artaxerxes' heart!

First, Ezra assembles his team. The first returnees numbered over 40,000 men, and this group is only around 1,500. The relatively small group is one reason why Ezra later pauses to fast and pray for a safe journey. It's not like they're taking a walk down the block. This is a four-month effort.

One of the names I want to point out is Hattush (8:2), a descendant of David. Huttush is a notable person as he perpetuates David's line through and after the exile. His presence

proves God has been faithful to preserve a lineage for David's royal line at least through one man.

Ezra needs some additional hands to help with the large amount of gold and silver they were taking to Jerusalem, so he gathers his people and camps for three days, looking for extra Levites to help. Ezra manages to rustle up about 220 additional men for the expedition (8:19-20).

After fasting and praying for God's protection, Ezra sets out. It's kind of funny that Ezra explains why they fasted and prayed, "I did this because I was ashamed to ask the king for infantry and cavalry to protect us from enemies during the journey, since we had told him, 'The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his fierce anger is against all who abandon him'" (8:22). Well, if you're going to talk the talk, you'd better walk the walk. And Ezra does.

The rest of chapter 8 covers their arrival in Jerusalem, the distribution and verification of the gold and other articles, the returnees' sacrifices, and the delivery of King Artaxerxes' decree to the surrounding Gentile people so they would know they had to support the Jews and the Temple for the king's sake.

Chapter 9 deals with an extremely concerning issue to a priest and the priesthood – the purity of family bloodlines. God's word clearly says the Israelites are *not* to intermarry with the surrounding Gentiles whose idolatrous practices are detestable to Yehovah. As we've already seen, intermarriages encouraged idolatry's adoption by the Israelites, and look how that turned out! But some of the returning Israelites have done just that "so that the holy seed has become mixed with the surrounding peoples" (9:2). Worse yet, some leaders who should know better have been the first to set a deplorable example for everyone else. Ezra despairs, "I tore my tunic and robe, pulled out some of the hair from my head and beard, and sat down devastated." This guy is serious. Why is this so bad? Again, this kind of thing led Israel into idolatry and ultimate exile from their God-given land, the same exile they had just lived through and from which God had graciously just returned them. And now they've turned around and done the same thing! No wonder Ezra is "devastated." Read through Ezra's prayer slowly and thoughtfully and imagine him pouring out his heart to the Lord.

There's only one thing to do, and it isn't pretty. In chapter 10, one of the men under conviction proposes that they send off their Gentile wives and children. I can't even imagine doing that! But that was the only way of walking back the actions that brought God's wrath on them before. So, Ezra makes the accepting leaders, priests, and Levites

take an oath to follow through. As the leaders went first into sin, they are the first to make it right (10:5). After another intense night of grieving and fasting, Ezra does what he has to do.

It's a simple proclamation to the Jews in Judah and Benjamin's territory – "get your behinds to Jerusalem *now*. You have three days. Do it, or you lose all your possessions and become excommunicated from the people of Israel" (10:7-8).

It happened. All the people gather in Jerusalem, where Ezra lays down the Law. "You didn't do what the Lord commanded regarding marrying Gentile women. Now make it right." But since it's raining and it'll take so long, the people decide to let the leaders take the lead. Then the leaders will go from town to town to make sure everyone else follows through. The sad task finishes up despite minor opposition. The purge ends by the first month of Aviv (10:15). What follows is a list of those who messed up.

Curiously, the book of Ezra ends here rather suddenly. Why is that? Some believe it's because Ezra was initially joined to the book of Nehemiah. Once done reading Ezra, the reader would naturally segue into the next scroll.

INSIGHT

Why was ethnic purity so crucial to the Jews in Ezra's day? Because so much of their life with God and their civic life depended on it. God said that only priests and Levites who could prove their lineage to the first High Priest, Aaron, and Levi could come near to Him to minister. This command was God's calling, not ethnic prejudice based on irrational human centrism. When Israel entered their Promised Land, the individual allotments were divided by tribal and clan lines. And so forth.

Does the Lord still "discriminate" based on family lines? Yes. You have to be a part of His family to gain eternal life with Him and all the blessings, benefits, and responsibilities. But this is not limited to certain people on earth. *Anyone* can join, but the entry door is narrow – only through Jesus' death and resurrection on your behalf. If you can say, "That's for me, Father. I accept!" then you're in. Your family pedigree has changed from "Not of my family" to "child of God" with full access to your heavenly Father!