

hast not humbled thyself, but hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven, and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified. This is the reading of the strange inscription: Thou art weighed in the balance and art found wanting. Thy kingdom is given to the Medes and Persians." Then the exciting story stops abruptly with these words: "In that night was Belshazzar, King of the Chaldeans, slain" (Daniel v.).

So in a night the city of tyrants fell, and in the morning Cyrus was master of Babylon.

(Read the portions of Isaiah, Daniel and Psalms referred to.)

Questions for Lesson XXIII

Where were the captive Jews carried to?

What do you know of Jeremiah's letter to them?

Find out in the Psalms one of their angry songs of trouble.

Tell briefly their brave story of the fiery furnace.

Tell of "The last night of Babylon."

Lesson XXIV

THE RETURN OF THE EXILES

Parts of Ezra and Nehemiah referred to. (See end of Lesson.)

I

Cyrus.

"Babylon is fallen! Babylon is fallen!" In the captive quarters in Chaldea, in far distant Jerusalem, among the exiles in Egypt, wherever there was a Jewish village or a Jewish man or woman, over the Eastern world, the message flew along. It was received in triumph and delight. They talked of nothing else for months together. And then they began to ask themselves, "What next?"

Aye, what next? For it seemed as if the captives had but exchanged one master for another. They were still captives. Then gradually one and another of the captive nations began to talk of the kindness of the conqueror and his merciful policy to send them all home again to be his friends and servants in their own lands. Thus the other histories outside the Bible tell of the wise plans of Cyrus.

But the Jewish history sees the hand of the Lord in all these things. I have already repeatedly pointed out to you that difference between the inspired Jewish historians and others. They had the clear intuition, the vision of God. By faith they saw God's hand in all life. God's dealing with your own nation is just as close and as miraculous. It scarcely differs at all from His dealing with the Jews. But the Jewish historian saw that, and our historians very often do not. They see how political causes and national jealousies and the good or evil impulses of individuals affect history. But frequently they do not see that God stands behind all history, overruling

men's acts in accordance with His purposes. The historian or newspaper writer of our day would say that Cyrus was moved by kindness of heart, or by this or that political motive. And they might be quite right. But the inspired historian saw something further behind that. Listen:—

“Now in the first year of Cyrus, that the word of the Lord might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus that he made a proclamation through his Kingdom and put it in writing:—

THUS SAITH CYRUS KING OF PERSIA: ALL THE KINGDOMS OF THE EARTH HATH THE LORD GOD OF HEAVEN GIVEN ME . . . WHOSOEVER THERE IS AMONG YOU OF ALL HIS PEOPLE HIS GOD BE WITH HIM AND LET HIM GO UP TO JERUSALEM WHICH IS IN JUDAH, AND BUILD THE HOUSE OF JEHOVAH THE GOD OF ISRAEL WHICH IS IN JERUSALEM. AND WHOSOEVER IS LEFT IN ANY PLACE WHERE HE SOJOURNETH LET THE MEN OF HIS PLACE HELP HIM WITH SILVER AND GOLD AND GOODS AND BEASTS BESIDE THE FREE-WILL OFFERING FOR THE HOUSE OF GOD WHICH IS IN JERUSALEM (Ezra i. 1).

I wonder how Cyrus learned this about God. How did God stir up his spirit? I wonder did Daniel or some of the Jewish officials show him the prophecies with his name, and did this greatly influence him? Or did he merely think it good policy to fall in with the ideas of the different nations? I hope it was the first. I think the Bible leads us to believe that this central man of the world of that day had learned some such high thought as this that God was over him and observing his ways.

II

The Return.

This edict was issued in the year 568 B.C., the first year of Cyrus, and immediately all over the Jewish settlements went the royal heralds proclaiming freedom

to the captives. And immediately the prophets and patriots began to rouse their comrades, "Come back, let us build Jerusalem! let us restore the Temple of the Lord!"

It was a good deal disappointing. They were not at all in such a hurry to go. Some had risen to good positions in trade and in government posts. Many had grown old in Babylon, and did not care to face the risks and privations of the journey. They had probably talked as loudly as any when there was no chance of going. But now it was different.

However, there were many ready to go, strong and young and enthusiastic and full of hope. "Even all whose spirit God had stirred to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." They were led by Prince Zerubbabel, the last of the royal house of David, and with him Joshua, the High Priest. "And Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out of Jerusalem and had put in the house of his gods. And he numbered them to Sheshbazzar, Prince of Judah" (Ezra i. 1.) So they set forth.

Now try to put yourself in their place. Can you not imagine the delight of that wonderful day when the procession of 40,000 exiles started from Babylon, the young men, proud and enthusiastic, falling into the ranks, the princes and leaders praying to the Lord, the old men and women who stayed behind in Babylon sobbing as they saw the brave procession move off. "Go ye forth out of Babylon," their great prophet had said, "flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell ye, utter ye to the end of the earth; say ye, The Lord hath redeemed his servant Jacob. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be on their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isa. xlviii. 20; li. 11).

And so they did. Listen to one of the songs of the return :—

“When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion
We were like unto them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongue with singing :
Then said they among the nations,
The Lord hath done great things for them.
The Lord hath done great things for us ;
Whereof we are glad.
Turn again our captivity, O Lord,
As the streams in the south.
They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.”
(Ps. cxxvi.)

Thus they felt as they started for home.

III

“His Mercy Endureth For Ever.”

On they went day after day, feeling surely like their ancestors of old marching through the desert to the Promised Land. At last they saw the plains of Syria. Then the white hills of Hermon broke upon their sight, the first view of the dear old country. Then another and another of the well-known landmarks were pointed out by the older men who remembered them. Then at last came the morning when they mounted the last hill-slope and the broken towers and domes of the Holy City, the city of their dreams, stood out upon the far horizon. Who can tell what that moment meant to them? We read in the story of the Crusades how these warriors of Europe fell on their knees and actually wept with emotion as Jerusalem first broke upon their view. Ah! it would mean much more to the Jewish exiles. Then at last they entered the Holy City, and poor dead Jerusalem became alive with joy.

I do not doubt that after the first excitement and enthusiasm there must have been disappointment. The poor Jews who had been left behind were a dispirited little crowd. The Temple was a ruin, the city walls were

broken down. Of all the old kingdom of Israel only a little strip near Jerusalem remained to them.

But if they were disappointed it did not baulk their great purpose, the restoring the Temple of God. We have in Ezra iii. a vivid picture of the day of laying the foundations, the smoke rising from the altar, the richly-robed priests with the silver trumpets, the cymbals clashing in the hands of the sons of Asaph. And in the midst of the joyous service they sang one to another in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord, "for His mercy endureth for ever." Should not you like to search through the Psalms to find the psalms of that day? Look at the 106th, 107th, 118th. Look especially at the 136th, and hear the priests chanting the verses, and the choir responding:—

"O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good :
For His mercy endureth for ever.
 O give thanks unto the God of gods :
For His mercy endureth for ever.
 * * * * *
 Who remembered us in our low estate :
For His mercy endureth for ever.
 And hath delivered us from our adversaries :
For His mercy endureth for ever.
 O give thanks unto the God of gods :
For His mercy endureth for ever."

Thus they sang and shouted of their joy unto the Lord. But I think it is very touching to read that the old men who had seen the glory of the first Temple wept with a loud voice at this poor little beginning, "so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping." I like to think how the heart of God would be touched at the mingled rejoicing and weeping that day.

IV

Haggai and Zechariah.

But after all the excitement and enthusiasm came chill and disappointment, and some hindrances. That

is often so in life, so we must not lose heart at it. The first trouble was from the inhabitants. The inhabitants of the land came, the mixed race of Jews and Assyrians who had married with each other. "Let us help you to build the Temple," they said, "for we too seek your God." I wish they had let them, though they were stupid and ignorant and half heathen. I think it was very stiff and unkind to turn these poor Samaritans off because they were not pure Jews. I am sure our Lord would not like it. You remember how kind He was to the Samaritans? But the proud, earnest Jews had not our Lord's teaching. "Ye have nothing to do with us," they said. "We ourselves together will build unto the God of Israel."

So the Samaritans got angry and tried to interrupt the work, and sent complaints to Babylon against the Jews. This delayed the work. But worse than this was that many of the richer Jews got careless about it and began to make excuses. "This is not the time for building the Temple. The seventy years that Jeremiah prophesied of are not accomplished." It was only an excuse to keep their money to build beautiful houses for themselves.

Then arose two more prophets. Jeremiah was dead, and Ezekiel. And I suppose the great unknown prophet of the Captivity was dead too. Then came these two. You have seen the little books of Haggai and Zechariah in that bundle of prophetic writings all jumbled together at the end of the Old Testament. Now pick them out and place them just here, and you will see exactly where they fit in. Haggai was, I think, an old man who wept for the first Temple. Zechariah was of the younger generation. They were both in the little crowd that came up from Babylon.

Zechariah seems the greater prophet, and he taught great lessons of righteousness. He was an optimist, who could see beautiful visions of Jerusalem's future. But

I like Haggai best. He does not seem very clever or eloquent or deep thinking, but I enjoy the practical way in which he "goes for" these covetous Jews who were making excuses for not helping the Temple building. Look at his first sermon before leaders and people (Haggai i.): "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, this people are saying it is not the time for the Lord's house to be built. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses while this house lieth waste? . . . Thus saith the Lord, Go up to the mountain and bring wood, and build the house, and I will take pleasure in it," &c. You should read the whole sermon. It was a right good sermon, and had a right good effect. "The people did fear before the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel and the spirit of Joshua the high priest and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and did the work in the house of the Lord.

So at last, after nearly twenty years of delay from hostile Samaritans and careless Jews, the Temple was finished on the third day of the month Adar, the month of March, B.C. 516. And again there was a joyful festival service and a great Passover like the great Passover of Hezekiah long ago (p. 170), and the singing of the joyful Psalms of Haggai and Zechariah, the four Psalms which close the Psalter.

Praise ye the Lord,
 Praise God in His sanctuary;
 Praise Him in the firmament of His power.
 * * * * *
 Praise Him upon the loud cymbals,
 Praise Him on the high-sounding cymbals;
 Let everything that hath breath
 Praise the Lord.

V

Ezra.

Now comes a blank in the history for about seventy years. Remember Ezra had not yet come.

Up to this we have been studying the Book of Ezra to chapter vii. The book was written, I feel sure, by the writer of the Books of Chronicles, for you see the last words of 2 Chronicles are repeated again in the beginning of the Book of Ezra to connect the story. At any rate, at chap. vii. he skips over seventy years to tell of a second "Return from Babylon" under Ezra the Scribe, who brought a letter from the great King Artaxerxes. And at chap. viii. he lifts bodily into his history Ezra's own story of the events in Ezra's own words, "the genealogy of them which went up with *me*."

We know nothing of those seventy years. Things seem to have settled down from the great excitements and enthusiasms into the ordinary humdrum life of a large country town, buying and selling and marrying Jews with Jews, and also with Samaritans.

Suddenly Ezra comes with a second band from Babylon, and he comes, he says, very beautifully, "because of the good hand of my God come upon me." He comes with a good deal of wealth to help the poor colony, and above all with a full complete copy of the Torah or Law of Moses. They seem to have had only parts of it in Jerusalem. Probably there were less and more complete editions of it. Probably the prophets and priests and holy men amongst the exiles in Babylon had edited it and completed it by adding many ordinances fitted for their own time: I have repeatedly pointed out to you how the Old Testament historians keep telling us that there was a "Bible before the Bible," a set of older books now lost, that they had re-written the history from these older books, and that the now long lost books of "Jasher" and of the "Wars of the Lord" and the "Chronicles of God" and of "Iddo the Seer" and many others were the authorities from which they worked. Probably the Law of Moses was in the same way at various times edited and completed to bring it up to date. Whatever

Moses left could not have been otherwise than very incomplete for the needs of the nation afterwards.

Whether it was for this reason, or because the Jews in Jerusalem had become careless about the study of the Scripture, Ezra's Book of the Law seemed to him the most important thing that he had brought to Jerusalem. Yet somehow he does not seem to have succeeded in teaching it much for a long time. I sometimes think that he began badly, and so got up a hostile feeling against him.

He tells us in chap. ix. how utterly horrified he was to learn that many of the princes and priests and people had intermarried with the heathen people of the land. To him it seemed a very awful thing. And it certainly was, if the people of the land were all of the type of the filthy idolaters whom we read of in the days of the kings. But I cannot help thinking of those Samaritans who had offered to help at the Temple building seventy years before, and said that they, in their ignorance, were trying to seek God. Perhaps it was some like those they had married. And perhaps Ezra, in his great zeal for God and for the purity of the race, was a little bit narrow and harsh, like the Jews who had repulsed those Samaritans. I do not think he had a wife or children himself. At any rate, he strictly ordered in the name of God an utter separation from these wives and families.

There is a very pitiful scene in chap. x. 12. The whole congregation answered, "As thou hast said so must we do. But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand outside. So let there be an appointed time to go over the whole list of the men who have done this."

Perhaps Ezra was right. I cannot judge. But I know that good and holy men do sometimes harsh things, and I should like to hear what all the cast-off wives and children had to say, before I tried to guess whether he was right or wrong. At any rate, he does not seem to

have got on much with his teaching of the Law till another leader came about fourteen years later.

VI

Close of Old Testament Story.

The new leader, Nehemiah, tells us his own story (Neh. i.). He was an important official, a sort of house steward, in the palace at Shushan. One winter day he was visited by some men out of Judah, and they told him of the poor state of the city, with its affliction and reproach, with its broken walls and its enemies all around. So, he says, I wept and fasted and prayed to God, and on my next appearance before the king he noticed my sadness. "Why is thy countenance sad?" asked the king. I told him. "For what dost thou make request?" he asked. So I prayed to the God of Heaven, *i.e.* (lifted up my heart for a moment), and I told the king. Then follows the story of the king's consent and how he sent him off with a royal guard and gifts and letters to the chief officers to supply materials. Then the story of his arrival in Jerusalem and the building and dedication of the walls.

And then chap. viii., a wonderful scene in which Ezra appears again. It was at the Feast of Tabernacles, and "all the people gathered themselves together as one man to the broad place before the Water Gate, and they spake to Ezra the Scribe, to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which God had commanded Israel." And then we see Ezra mounting his "pulpit of wood, and unrolling the great roll of the Law in the sight of that great crowd, and when he opened it all the people stood up and Ezra blessed the Lord and His servant Moses, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up of their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord." And Nehemiah, the Tirshatha or governor, and Ezra the priest, and the Levites comforted the people

. . . and there was great gladness, and they kept the feast seven days, and day by day from the first day unto the last day he read in the book of the law of God.

And thus we leave them, the poor penitent people of God and their two great leaders praying together and studying God's Word. And thus the Old Testament story closes. How better could it close? There is much more to be told of—troubles and wars and persecutions and the grand brave fight under the Maccabees; but the Old Testament does not tell of these things. So the story closes, to open again 400 years later, "when Jesus was born in Bethelhem of Judæa in the days of Herod the King."

(Read parts of Ezra i., ii., iii., iv., v., ix., x., and parts of Neh. i., viii.)

Questions for Lesson XXIV

Did the exiles ever come back to their own land?

Who sent them back?

Find out in the Bible their triumphant song of thanksgiving.

What do you know of (1) Haggai, (2) Zechariah, (3) Ezra, (4) Nehemiah?

Tell of Nehemiah's little prayer and how he got leave from the King.

Describe the scene of the great Bible reading before the Water Gate.

The next volume of the series is

THE LIFE OF OUR LORD.