



## CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

# Persian I

AFTER NEBUCHADNEZZAR had invaded Judah, destroyed the Temple, and taken the upper-class Jews into Babylonian exile (597/586 BCE), he settled the captives on land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Here they increased in number, prospered economically, and worshiped in what became their synagogues.

In 561 BCE Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Evil-Merodoch, released the captive king, Jehoiachin, from incarceration and welcomed him into table fellowship. Under these circumstances Jehoiachin encouraged the incumbent chief priest, Jehozadak, together with the priests and scribes, to embark on the task of editing the authoritative texts of the emerging Bible. One of their first steps was to attach Deuteronomy to the Tetrateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers) to form the Pentateuch. This change shifted the focus of biblical religion from history to law. It was thought that obedience to the five books of the Pentateuch provided a fivefold means for the Chosen People to prevail and to ultimately reach the divine throne.

Then, in 539 BCE, the Achaemenid king, Cyrus the Great of Persia (559-530 BCE), defeated the Babylonian king, Nabonidus, conquered his kingdom, and assumed the rule of Babylon. Although a follower of Zarathustra and of Zoroastrianism, Cyrus took a benign approach to the diverse religions within his empire and soon authorized the Jews to return from exile, to re-establish their Temple in Jerusalem with governmental support, and to follow their ancestral laws. The first return took place in 538 BCE under Sheshbazzar, son of

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Jehoiachin. The second return was authorized in 520 BCE under Zerubbabel and his son, Meshullam, along with Joshua, the high priest.

Cyrus' acceptance and support of Judaism so impressed the Jews that he was regarded as their Messiah ("anointed one") (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:1). In this role Cyrus was freely granted political rulership over Judah and the Jews. It was under these circumstances that Zerubbabel and Meshullam withdrew (or were removed) from their Davidic kingships, so that sole political authority was ceded to the Achaemenid kings. Furthermore, the Jews adopted the Aramaic language as their *lingua franca*. They also accepted the Persian calendar and the Persian concept of linear time — past, present and future.

Meanwhile, the construction of the Second Temple was begun in Jerusalem and completed about 515 BCE. This Temple edifice was much more modest than that of the First Temple. Moreover, the Temple services were not fully restored for over another 50 years. It was not until Hanani had visited Jerusalem and returned to Babylon to tell his brother, Nehemiah — the king's cupbearer — about the dismal situation in Jerusalem and Judah that steps were taken toward restoration. Nehemiah received permission from Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE) to return to Judah as governor. There he took immediate steps to rebuild the city walls, to repopulate Jerusalem, and to install a library of biblical scrolls. When Ezra, the Zadokite priest and scribe, was invited to join Nehemiah, he and about 40,000 Jewish exiles returned to Judah.

Ezra and Nehemiah's joint mission was to reunite the Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods, to restore the covenantal obedience of the Jews, and thus to regain the divine blessing upon the Chosen People. To assure obedience to the Mosaic covenant, Ezra and Nehemiah closed the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath. They further required full obedience to all 613

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biblical commandments. Also, to assure the traditional, matrilineal descent of the Jews, Ezra and Nehemiah terminated all foreign marriages and excluded all foreign wives and children.

It was in this setting that Jesus lived and ministered over four centuries later. Jesus was born into a Jewish family. He accepted the Persian calendar and linear time. He spoke Aramaic. He worshipped in the Temple and attended the synagogue services.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord [Isaiah 61:1, 2]. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. — Luke 4:16-21.

## Endnote

1. See “The Second Temple: Persian Period,” *Outlook* (January 2002); “The Divine Presence,” *Outlook* (January/February 2003); “Origins of Human Destiny,” *Outlook* (September/October 2003); “The Second Temple: Reformation Period” *Outlook* (November/December 2003); “We Will All Be Changed,” *Outlook* (May/June 2004); “The Mythology of Evil,” *Outlook* (November/December 2004).

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