

EZRA

Lesson 5, Chapters 2 and 3

We will continue in Ezra chapter 2 to begin our lesson today. What we've seen thus far in the Book of Ezra is what we can call "the preliminaries". Chapter 1 begins by recording the official end of the Babylonian exile, and it ends by means of Media-Persia, led by King Cyrus, defeating Babylon and absorbing their empire. One of Cyrus's first acts was to order the liberation of the Jews, which included an encouragement for those Jews who wanted to, to migrate back to their Jewish homeland, Judah. The Jews were also given permission to rebuild their Holy Temple, and this would be funded partially by voluntary donations from Persian Jews and non-Jewish Persians (gentiles), and the remainder by the Persian government treasury. Let me pause to define the term Persian Jews. One year earlier, these same Jews would have been called Babylonian Jews. The only reason they're now called Persian Jews is that with the Persian conquest of Babylon, the Jews are now subservient to a Persian King (instead of a Babylonian King); and, the name of the empire they are now part of has also changed from Babylon to Persia. All of this happened almost overnight and without them relocating. And I tell you this because it does sound odd to say that the Jews came home to Judah from Persia, and yet this return ended what is called the Babylonian (not Persian) exile.

The next thing we heard of in Chapter 1 is summed up well in verse 5:

Ezra 1:5 CJB

⁵ The heads of fathers' clans in Y'hudah and Binyamin, along with the cohanim, the L'vi'im, and indeed all whose spirit God had stirred, set out to go up and rebuild the house of ADONAI in Yerushalayim.

The key words are: "All whose spirit God had stirred", because as we found out in Chapter 2, it was only a small fraction of the exiled Jewish population who decided to pack up and return to Judah, something less than 5%; the remainder seemed unmotivated to want to move. Sometimes when we're reading the Bible it is easy to forget that what we're reading about is usually ordinary people who find themselves living-out extra-ordinary circumstances. So the Priests, especially, had both a spiritual motivation and a personal motivation to return and rebuild the Temple because in Babylon (now Persia) they had been relegated to the dust bin. Their status as exiles in a foreign land meant a loss of function and therefore status as God's Priests. So it is easy to imagine why they were thrilled to once again become relevant.

The Levites were less anxious to return, unless their clans had been hereditarily assigned the more prestigious tasks such as being musicians, singers, or gatekeepers. Those who were simply Temple custodians and servants to the Priests had little motivation to leave their homes in Persia and revert to their rather lowly positions.

Those called "the heads of their father's clans" are referring to the several chiefs of the

hereditary tribes of Judah and Benjamin. They would have had the greatest economic motivation to go back to Judah because they held the largest amount of land, vineyards, fields, and orchards, and certainly intended to reclaim it as quickly as possible.

Chapter 2 then tells us who the heads of the clans were, and who the political leaders were, as well as the breakdown of the categories of Jews who returned. And since those who were returning were generally doing so as a spiritual impulse caused by God, the categories used to describe them reflect the divine rationale we find in the Torah to categorize all Israel: Israel (the laypeople), the Priests (those who are from the line of Aaron and were God-authorized to perform the Temple ritual functions), and the Levites (those who were the Temple workers and who worked for the Priests to do important tasks, but none that involved ritual).

The Levite category was further broken down in Chapter 2 according to occupations, mainly the singers and the gatekeepers. It is interesting to note that in verse 41, under the occupation of singers, there is only one family name listed: Asaf. And if that name sounds familiar to you it is because he is credited with writing 12 of the Psalms we find in our Bibles (the songs of Asaf). It's important to remember that many of the Psalms were written as songs, to be sung with music. Thus from this we now learn that the reason we find some Psalms written as songs by Asaf is that he was head of the clan who were the Temple singers.

Lastly we discussed the category of Levites presented starting in verse 43 of Chapter 2, and these folks are called **Nethinim**: Temple workers. They were a mixed breed of foreigners, Gibeonites, and Levites and they were assigned the lowliest Temple duties such as chopping wood, drawing and carrying water, cleaning up the massive amounts of blood and gore that accompanied the high number of daily sacrifices, and others of the unsavory (but necessary) tasks.

Let's pause and re-read a short section of Chapter 2 to finish up this chapter today and then we'll move into Chapter 3.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 2:55 – end

First notice that in verse 58 we're told that lumped together the total number of Temple workers (Nethinim) and of Solomon's servants totaled 392. Whether 392 is the correct number is unlikely; but the important point is that the Nethinim and Solomon's servants were considered equally lowly, and probably accomplished more or less the same functions. It's only that the descendants of Solomon's servants has to do with a time before the Temple was built when King David seems to have appointed his own priests and workers to do cultic work. And when Solomon completed the Temple, these workers continued in their tasks, as did their descendants down to the time that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple. These workers were not Levites, so whatever they did it was so lowly that they were seen as lay-servants to the Levites, who themselves were servants to the Priests. Thus apparently the Priesthood didn't feel that they were breaking God's commandment that instructed that only members of the Tribe of Levi could do work around the Temple.

Next in verse 59 is a list of common Jews (or at least those who claimed Jewish heritage), but

there were no records or any kind of concrete proof to link them to an Israelite clan. Thus while they were allowed to migrate to Judah, since they had no proof of Jewish identity they held a different status than the others. Although it doesn't specifically say so, they wouldn't have been entitled to claim any land or dwelling place as their own. So their motivation to traveling back to Judah is unclear. Indeed it may have been no more than a spiritually based impetus that they could neither understand nor resist. Of all the reasons to go to Judah, I can't think of a better one!

Then in verse 61 we find a listing of those claiming to be descendants of Priests (and therefore theoretically eligible to serve as Priests), however like that previous list of laypeople, they have been unable to prove their priestly family linkage. Thus unless and until such proof could be provided, while they were allowed to accompany this first wave of Jewish returnees, they were not allowed to serve in function whatsoever as priests. Either both groups of these who were unable to prove their ancestry had their records destroyed or lost during as a result of the exile, or they were fakers, and the answer to this was as unknown to the returning Jews as it is to us.

In fact a fellow designated the **Tirshita** barred those who claimed, but could not prove, their priestly status from eating the especially holy food. In the Torah in Leviticus chapters 2 and 7 instructions are given that only Priests could eat of certain sacrificial portions given at the altar, and even then usually it had to be eaten inside the Temple precinct. Those portions are designated as "especially holy". Thus in order that this vital commandment not accidentally be broken, this **Tirshita** fellow ordered that this dubious group couldn't participate until their status was positively determined. And interestingly it says that the means of proof would be the outcome of the indication by the Urim and Thummim stones. But that couldn't occur until a High Priest performed the Urim and Thummim ritual. As a side note: if this instruction was scrupulously followed by the High Priest, then it is highly unlikely that the Urim and Thummim were ever used to determine the status of these men who were currently in limbo. And that was because of the lack of the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. We'll get into an interesting discussion about Ezra's rebuilt Temple and the Ark of the Covenant in a later lesson.

Tirshita is a Persian word (a title) and it approximately means "governor". So this was a title held by a governor of a province or district of the Persian Empire. We can't be sure who this person is, however he was probably a Jew as this was how Cyrus usually operated (he preferred to assign a **Tirshita** who was of the same people over whom he would govern). So it is most likely that this governor was **Zerubbabel** or perhaps his uncle **Sheshbazzar**.

Finally in verse 64 we get the sum total of all who returned, of every category, even those with questionable Jewish ancestry: 42,360. Since this is not a round number, we are left to assume that this is a precise count. In addition to this number of Jews are listed 7, 337 slaves (also likely a precise count). These slaves would have been gentiles, as the Torah does not allow Jews to own other Jews as slaves. The mention of 200 male and female singers IS a round number (so it is an approximation), and these are not the same as the Levite singers descended from Asaf, from back in verse 43. Rather these would have been gentile and possibly Jewish musicians retained by the wealthier Jews for their own entertainment (after all, they didn't yet have iPods and CDs).

Then in verse 66 are listed the beast-of-burden animals that they used for the trip back home, and they consisted of over 8,000 animals including donkeys, horses, mules and camels. This was a long way to travel, and it was probably around a 4 month journey. We know from later chapters that many elderly returned and they would have to ride to survive the journey. The wealthy and the tribal chiefs and their families also would have ridden because of their aristocratic status.

And to end the chapter we're told that when they arrived back in Jerusalem these "heads of their father's clans" made voluntary offerings to support the rebuilding project. These were wealthy men and so they gave a sizeable amount of gold and silver but also apparently paid to have the specially prescribed tunics needed by the priesthood.

Verse 70 makes it clear that everyone didn't live in Jerusalem; rather they went back to the towns and villages they were from, no doubt to take back their lands and homes. I say "take back" because as we progress through Ezra and Nehemiah we're going to see a nasty tension build between the returnees and the few Jews who managed to avoid the exile and remained in Judah, as well as some racially mixed Jews who had intermarried with gentiles, and even some opportunistic foreigners who had moved into the mostly emptied Land of Judah. And of course, those 3 groups of people took over the exiles' former lands and fields and homes and weren't at all sympathetic or amenable to giving them back to their original owners when they suddenly showed up after 50 – 70 years.

It's not that Persian Law, and Torah Law, weren't on the side of the returning Jews. It's that these returning Jews were about to take away the livelihoods and homes of those who had moved in and lived there for at least 3 generations (a dicey situation to be sure). These groups of people didn't see themselves as caretakers of someone else's property; they saw themselves as the new residents of the land.

Let's open our Bibles to Chapter 3 and see what happens next.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 3 all

Some time has passed, a few months probably, and the supreme reason for most of these zealous Jews to come home is about to commence. The Temple has not been rebuilt yet, but the altar has been sufficiently repaired to be operable for sacrificing.

When verse 1 says the 7th month arrived, it means the 7th month of the current religious calendar year, not that it's been 7 months since they arrived back in Jerusalem. The 7th month is the month of Tishri, the September-October time frame. Once again we see that the editor refers to these returning Jews as "the people of Israel", and that they gathered together in Jerusalem. As we discussed last week, this notion that the returning Babylonian exiles represent all Israel, all 12 tribes, is but a pleasant fiction that the Jews adopted. But it quickly turned from an expression, to a tradition, to finally an incontrovertible fact despite an entirely different historical and Scriptural reality. Today most of the Jewish community still sees themselves as the representative remnant of "all Israel", and it has severely muddied the waters as the legendary 10 Lost Tribes of Israel have reappeared and many want to migrate to

Israel from their locations throughout Asia. However these 10 tribes of course recognize that they are not Jews, they are not tribally associated with Judah. So they don't want to migrate to Israel as Jewish returnees, but rather as whom they really are: Ephraim-Israel returnees.

After getting settled in, the returnees soon met together to celebrate in Jerusalem. The Hebrew words to describe the gathering in Jerusalem are ***ke-ish echad***, and the KJV translates it the most literally as "as one man". That is, they met together as one man. The CJB however uses a dynamic translation to try to give us the sense of what "as one man" means, and says "in one accord"; and that is a good modern sense of the meaning. It doesn't mean every last man and woman came, or that there was some divine and miraculous melding of body and mind among those who showed up. It means that those who gathered together were unified in purpose and spirit. This fits very well with the thought process that appears later in the Bible, in the New Testament, when in Ephesians 2:15 we read that through His death on the cross, Christ has removed the middle wall of partition between Jew and gentile and created "one new man". And the idea here is not that Jews become gentiles, or gentiles become Jews, or that there is some miraculous melding of human flesh; rather it is that through faith in Messiah Jew and gentile come together in purpose and in spirit, just as is the sense of it here in Ezra 3.

Then in verse 2 we see that the person named Yeshua that was listed among the returnees in Chapter 2 has assumed his hereditary role as the High Priest, and along with the lesser priests and Zerubbabel their community leader (and perhaps their official Persian appointed governor) organized to begin the reconstruction NOT of the Temple, but ONLY of the altar. This was so they could restart the all-important Levitical sacrificial system that was fundamental to proper Torah observance. This group of Jews fully understood that without sacrifice, Torah observance for the ultimate goal of harmony with God was not achievable. And this was because without sacrifice, atonement and cleansing from their sins was impossible. The stench of un-atoned-for guilt had been polluting the Jewish exiles for between 50 and 70 years and they were anxious to have this burden lifted.

And yet, as good and proper and right minded as this effort of the returning exiles was, it once again points out a serious ideological schism between the Jews who returned and those who elected to remain in the Persian Empire. And it also tells us that the foundations of Judaism had already been laid in Babylon and Persia, and it gave most Jews a false sense of harmony with the Lord. The bulk of Diaspora Jews (apparently around 95% of them) felt it reasonable to find ways around Torah observance such as not being able to sacrifice, and to not have a Priesthood to instruct and lead them, because if those Jews who had remained behind actually believed that they were living in a sinful condition up in Babylon and Persia, and were walking around in a state of guilt and condemnation, all would have done what this group of 50,000 did: return to Judah as quickly as possible and get the sacrificial fires burning once again. The Lord did not give the Hebrews a series of options for atonement. There was but one God prescribed means: blood sacrifices of animals on the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. That these Jews of Babylon and Persia invented a different way, and stuck with it even when they no longer had barriers to returning to Judah and to Torah observance, is a sad indictment of humankind's preference for our ways over God's ways.

I'm sorry to say that we can probably apply this same condition and false sense of security

and harmony with God to many segments of the modern Church who have found ways around following God's Word because of a preference for easier and more comfortable doctrines and traditions. Even the wicked Replacement Theology doctrine that says that God is done with Israel and would never let them back into the Promised Land, and so the Church has replaced them, continues rolling along even though Israel has returned to the land, set up a vibrant Jewish State and proved this doctrine to be false. Why the stubborn refusal to recognize the obvious and reverse course? Because so many Believers prefer manmade doctrines to God's truth. I urge all of us to continue on a path of working to peel away the dead skin of centuries of traditions and dubious doctrines so that we might reunite the Old Testament with the New, and recognize that God's laws have not become extinct, and that as Believers in Christ we are indeed one new man, but that does not end our obligations towards the Lord. And these obligations begin with obedience to Him and to His Word. Yes, indeed that does make us similar to the 5% of the zealous Babylonian exiles who returned and would meet opposition (even from their brethren) all along the way to an attempted restoration of the true Bible religion. They paid a price for their dedication and so shall we.

They reconstructed the Temple altar on the same altar foundation that Solomon first laid. No doubt this would have involved some amount of demolition and remodeling of whatever remained of the existing altar; and regardless of its dilapidated condition this restoration would have caused resentment among some of the inhabitants who had remained in the land as well as among some of the elder Jews who returned and knew of the altar as it was originally. In fact in verse 3 we immediately hear in these returned exiles of a "fear of the people" of the surrounding countries. Actually what the Hebrew says is "fear of the ***ammim ha-eretz***"; fear of the people of the lands. In other words, while this phrase contains some ambiguity it is obviously referring to others than those Jews who returned from the exile. Those others are probably not people from "other countries" (why would they care about rebuilding the altar?) Rather they are people from the villages and cities surrounding Jerusalem who were inhabited by a mixture of Judahites who hadn't been exiled and foreigners who had moved in after the exile.

Why would the exiled Jews fear those people? For one reason only: these locals made threats and made it clear that they did NOT want reconstruction activity of any kind to occur. Even so the altar was quickly rebuilt and burnt offerings (of various kinds) began as well as the burnt offerings of the morning and the evening. This is referring to the daily offerings, the ***tamid*** offerings. Further later chapters will confirm that they refrained from rebuilding the Temple for a few years, no doubt due to too much opposition.

Next, in verse 4, they celebrated Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. One wonders exactly what parts of the observance they were able to keep; but we are made aware that they at least offered the Torah-prescribed animal sacrifices on their newly reconstructed altar, and in addition they offered up the daily (***tamid***) sacrifices. The 7th month of the Hebrew religious calendar involves more than only the Feast of Sukkot, which begins on the 15th day. The first day of the 7th month is the Feast of ***Yom Teruah*** (Feast of Trumpets) that is better known today as ***Rosh HaShannah*** (Jewish New Year). And then 10 days later is the incomparable ***Yom Kippur***, the Day of Atonement. Although there is a slight hint that they might have, we don't specifically hear of them celebrating those first two feasts of the month and instead begin

with **Sukkot**. While I'm not sure of the reason why they might have skipped **Rosh Hashanah** (and they may well have celebrated it) no doubt **Yom Kippur** wasn't celebrated because the central issue of Yom Kippur involved the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies. And since the Temple was not yet rebuilt, there was no Holy of Holies to enter.

Even so we're told they celebrated **Rosh Hodesh** (the new month) and observed other ritual sacrifices as well. In other words, they did what they determined was the best they could do under the circumstances. They weren't able to do **all** of the ritual requirements, but what the parts they did do met the Biblical requirement. And I think that this is a good pattern for Messianic and Hebrew Roots folks (and hopefully more and more mainstream churches as well) to follow. We are in somewhat the same position as these newly returned Jews from Babylon; for them as for us there is currently no Temple and thus there are many elements of the Law of Moses that can't be observed no matter how much our hearts yearn to do so. So the absence of a Temple limits the extent of what part of the Torah Law we can reasonably follow, including the celebration of the 7 Biblical Feasts. Notice that even though not every Torah prescribed ritual element was available for them to perform, these Priests and the Jews they officiated over still did as much of the Law as could be done. And in a light versus heavy, (a Kal V'homer) situation like this, on balance I see their decision and approach as infinitely better than merely disregarding the parts of the Law that can be reasonably observed (because it can't be done perfectly or completely) rather than choosing to do nothing or to adopt something else entirely.

This verse ends with an important piece of information that may help us to understand the challenging timing of these several events: the foundation for the Temple was not yet laid when they celebrated Sukkot. One of the issues with dealing with Ezra and Nehemiah is the timing of events because there seem to be discrepancies. In the search for solutions to solve these seeming discrepancies a number of reliable and astute scholars agree on a solution that I think strikes the chord of truth. They believe that at this point in Ezra 3 there is a break in the author's narrative. In other words, verses 1 through 6 of Chapter 3 represents a unit of thought that ends with the notice that the Temple foundations hadn't been laid. And upon verse 7 a new unit begins. But to see this solution we have to disregard chapter and verse markings, and where paragraphs begin and end. Let me explain. We've discussed chapter and verse designations before, and the thing to remember is that these are entirely artificial and arbitrary designations. Scholars first divided the Biblical books into chapters sometime during the 1200's A.D., (the original writings are not divided into chapters) and then in the 1500's A.D. chapters were further divided into verses. So while these chapter and verse divisions don't change or harm the Scriptural texts, at times they can give a modern reader the wrong impression. In the Western world we are to always understand that a chapter marks some kind of a change. There's no standard definition of where or why to create a chapter break. However a change of characters or location or plot or a lapse in time is among some of the rationale authors use to insert chapter breaks.

Paragraphs operate similarly. They denote a change of some sort, perhaps a more minor one than a new chapter indicates. Thus when we see that verse 6 ends and 7 begins, and that they are connected and reside within the same paragraph, our natural assumption is that the same action and time and place are continuing from one verse to the next. And that indeed is the

impression that the modern editor of your particular Bible version intends to leave with you.

However here in Ezra chapter 3, more and more it appears that the paragraph break is in the wrong place. Rather than occurring after verse 7, it should occur after verse 6, and so verse 7 represents a change; in this case it represents a leap ahead in time and the beginning of a new situation. So what does all this mean for our understanding of this passage? It is that up to and during the Sukkot festival, we are told that the Temple foundation was not laid yet; in fact there was no building going on. Even more, this must have occurred in the 2nd year of King Cyrus (perhaps a year after Cyrus gave the order for the Jews to return) and so the Jews had only very recently arrived back in Jerusalem and therefore only had time to reconstruct the altar sufficiently for a proper sacrifice. Reconstructing the Temple would take years of planning and work, but they were in a big rush to begin sacrificing and having festivals, and their goal was to get the altar readied in time for Sukkot. This is good logical thinking, and it reflects their desire to begin doing the most important Torah observances first: sacrificing on the altar.

Verse 7, then, probably jumps ahead about 17 or 18 years to the time of King Darius. Let me repeat that: there is a time jump in between verses 6 and 7. After the death of King Cyrus his son Cambyses ruled but only for about 8 years, and then a strange imposter named Bardiya ruled for a few weeks, and then King Darius was crowned. Verse 7 likely takes place early in the reign of Darius. And verse 7 explains that the returning Jews paid to have building materials (logs and wood paneling) brought from the forests of Lebanon and delivered by boat to the sea port of Jaffa or in Hebrew, **Yafa**. From there the lumber would be transported over land to Jerusalem. Here's the thing: you don't pay for and order building materials until you've first created the design because you don't know what you need. Logs and paneling were fabulously expensive and luxurious. The forests from which they were harvested were carefully guarded and considered a treasured resource available only to the wealthiest. And even though these Jews had some money from a number of sources, we'll find in the end that they only managed to build a rather modest new Temple to replace Solomon's opulent one (the one now laying in a heap), and it greatly disappointed many folks. So it's not like the Jewish builders had an unlimited budget. They didn't have a king's treasury available to start buying logs and paneling and stock piling them.

Bottom line: substantial time had to pass from the time they arrived back in Jerusalem, to when they could organize to plan the new Temple, then to order the materials, and then to transport them from Lebanon to Jerusalem. Years would pass. So if my suggested timeline is correct, it was about 17 or 18 years from the time the Jews arrived back in Jerusalem until the Temple reconstruction began in earnest.

We'll continue with this chapter next week.