

Ezra 2:1-70

The Journey So Far

Let's pause and look back for minute and review where we've been.

We started our journey through the Bible in September 2016 on Rosh Hashanah.

After we completed the 3 1/2-year cycle of readings of the five books of the Torah, we continued, reading the biblical books that deal with the further history of Israel.

The Jews had been released from slavery in Egypt around 1,450 B.C. as God sent plagues and worked miracles through Moses and Aaron. The Children of Israel miraculously crossed the Red Sea and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years until this old unfaithful generation had all died.

We started reading the Book of Joshua in June 2020.

We've followed the Jews as they crossed the Jordan River and entered the land promised to Abraham centuries before, driving out the Canaanites and settling the land of Israel. We saw how God raised up judges to guide them. like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Later God sent prophets like Samuel and Nathan to act as a spiritual check on the power of kings like Saul, David and Solomon. The country split into two kingdoms when Solomon died, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This brought a stream of bad kings and increasing idolatry to both kingdoms.

Idolatry was condemned by courageous prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. They also promised hope that if the people repented of their sins and turned back to God, they would inherit the shining hope of a coming Messiah.

God punished his people for their unbelief by bringing the Assyrian army to defeat the northern kingdom of Israel and take them away in captivity. Later a similar fate came upon Judah when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 587 B.C. and led most of the people away into exile in Babylon.

The Prophets Jeremiah and Daniel both predicted that after 70 years in captivity, the Jews would return to their land and rebuild the Temple. And also, according to Daniel, after a further 483 years, the promised Messiah would come to redeem God's people.

We're now reading about the first group of people to return to the land to rebuild the Temple, led by Ezra; Zerubbabel, a man who was of the royal line of Judah and appointed by Persian King Cyrus to be governor of Judea; and finally the High Priest Joshua.

These last books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as selections from the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, will complete our trip through the Old Testament scriptures.

Roll Call of the Returnees

We don't need to read all the names listed in this chapter. But we'll focus on some of them.

Ezra 2:1-2 - "Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city; Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah.

'The number of the men of the people of Israel:'"

The Leaders

Zerubbabel was the appointed governor over the province of Judah. He was also a descendent of the last reigning Judean king, the lineal descendant of the royal house, the heir to the throne of David. Zerubbabel is also listed in the genealogy of Jesus (**Luke 3:27**).

We know from a similar list in the Book of Nehemiah that there were actually 12 men listed as companions of Zerubbabel. They would symbolically represent all the 12 tribes of Israel.

(The Nehemiah and Mordecai in the list are not the more famous people we know from the Book of Nehemiah and the Book of Esther. These were common Jewish names).

As pointed out previously, Zerubbabel is probably the same person mentioned in **Ezra 1:8** as Sheshbazzar. **Ezra 5:16** says that Sheshbazzar laid the foundation of the temple; **Ezra 3:8** seems to attribute that work to Zerubbabel.

Jeshua (or Joshua) - listed as a companion of Zerubbabel - was the High Priest.

Families Returning

"the children of..."

This list names the heads of families, with the numbers of the men in those families, without listing women and children.

The extended family or clan was the building block of Jewish communities. So instead of lumping all these returnees together, they are noted by each family group.

One of the characteristics of God is his care for the "solitary ones."

A lamb separated from the flock would almost certainly die. So God is described as

protecting those who were figuratively "desolate" by giving them a place, a "household" or a family to provide a sense of belonging.

- **Psalm 68:5-6** - "A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.

Opposition and Temptation from the Samaritans

One of the problems that these Jews encountered after returning from the exile was intermarriage with the surrounding people like the Samaritans.

The Samaritans, who remained a hated population even into Jesus' time, had a complex history.

When Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and took most of the people into exile, the king of the Assyrians then brought in people from Babylon, Kutha, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim to settle in Samaria - what is now the West Bank area of Israel. Later, after the Babylonians took away the upper classes of Judah into captivity, these foreign peoples intermarried with the Jews who remained in the land.

This "mixed multitude" followed elements of Judaism mixed with random idolatrous practices. When the new group of returnees led by Zerubbabel arrived, the two groups mingled and some began to intermarry and import idolatry into the community that Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra and Nehemiah were trying to build.

We will see in Ezra chapters 9 and 10 that the Jewish leaders valued pure and faithful loyalty to God more than preserving the institution of marriage, because eventually they required Israelite men to divorce their foreign wives who had harbored idolatry and false gods.

That sounds harsh, but Jesus went even further.

While Jesus affirmed marriage, blessed children and pictured His relationship with His church as that of the Bride and the Bridegroom, he redefined the family for his disciples.

- **Luke 14:26** - "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

- **Mark 3:32-35** - "And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother."

i.e. our society's idea of "family values" took a backseat to spiritual loyalty and faith in

God.

Basically, radical Christianity isn't focused on fixing our marriage or family problems. It is focused on going to the cross and accepting our death and living in His resurrection life.

Priests and Levites

It was vital that members of the priesthood and of the tribe of Levi return to the land because only they could serve in the Temple that would be rebuilt.

But only four of the twenty-four courses or divisions of the priesthood established by King David in **1 Chronicles 24:3** are listed here. Most of the priests stayed behind in Babylon. The total number of Levites was actually less than the number of priests that returned. This means that a remarkably small percentage of the Levites returned from Babylon.

Two other groups are marked out among the returnees.

The Nethinim (**Ezra 2:58**) seem to be the Gibeonites who were made special servants of the Levites and the priests at the Temple (Joshua 9). Having saved their lives by a lie, were made "drawers of water" in the Temple and helpers to the Levites as a punishment.

The "children of Solomon's servants" were descendants of foreign servants, royal guards or other specialists or craftsmen who had been incorporated into the commonwealth of Israel as proselytes to the faith.

Spiritually, they represent us, Gentiles who have been grafted in to Israel.

Genealogy Problems (Ezra 2:59-63)

A group of children of priests are forbidden to eat the priesthood's portion of sacrifices because there was a problem verifying their genealogy as descended from Aaron.

- **Ezra 2:63** - "And the Tirshatha (governor) said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim."

The Urim and the Thummim (the "lights and perfections") were mysterious stones that lit up in response to questions from the High Priest.

They were one of the five things the Talmud says were missing from the Temple.

"And these are: The Ark of the Covenant, and the Ark cover upon it, and the cherubs that were on the Ark cover; fire; and the Divine Presence; and the Divine Spirit; and the Urim VeTummim." (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 21b)

Total Returnees (Ezra 2:64-67)

The approximate total of the returned exiles was probably somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000. This was only a small percentage of those who had been exiled and their descendants; the great majority stayed behind in Babylon.

During the 70 years of exile and deprived of the Temple, the exiles laid great stress on the observation of the Sabbath, on the laws of purity, and on prayer and fasting. It has often been suggested that the development of synagogues began in Mesopotamia during the Exile.

Josephus wrote, "many remained in Babylon, being unwilling to leave their possessions." (Antiquities XI, 8)

But, in the Babylonian Talmud it is said that "only the chaff returned, while the wheat remained behind."

Offerings to Rebuild

Ezra 2:68-69 - "And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place: They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments."

"when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem" they saw only a ruined shell of a building. Their response was an outpouring of funds to use for the rebuilding project, recalling the people's response to build the Tabernacle:

- **Exodus 35:21** - "And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the LORD'S offering to the work of the tabernacle of the congregation, and for all his service, and for the holy garments."

God had "stirred up" the heart of Cyrus to let the exiles go home. Now the returnees had also had their hearts stirred to go on the journey, and to give to have funds to begin the rebuilding.

The point to note here is, that they didn't need to "psyche themselves up" or be berated by their leaders into doing something. This was the Spirit of God who stirred their hearts and gave them the willingness.

- **Philippians 2:13** - "For it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure."

People Back in the Land

Ezra 2:70 - "So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities."

This marked the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. After 70 years, the exile was over.

- **Jeremiah 25:11** - "And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years."