

Ezra 3:1-13

The Altar Rebuilt and the Foundation Laid

The timeline for Ezra and Nehemiah is confusing:

See <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/77786/reason-there-is-an-80-year-gap-between-cyrus-decree-to-release-jews-from-babylon>

The prophet Jeremiah twice had said the exile would last 70 years:

- **Jeremiah 25:11, 12** - "And this whole land will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. But when seventy years are complete, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their guilt, declares the LORD, and I will make it an everlasting desolation."

- **Jeremiah 29:10** - "For this is what the LORD says: "When Babylon's seventy years are complete, I will attend to you and confirm My promise to restore you to this place."

The 70 years of captivity began in 605-6 BC when Nebuchadnezzar captured many of the nobility in the first Judean campaign (not later when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586-7 B.C.). It ended when the Jews had organized their expedition and actually left Babylon in 536 B.C.

There were 3 returns from Babylon to Israel, taking place over a period of almost 100 years.

- The 1st return from exile was led by the governor Zerubbabel (Ezra chapters 1-6; in 537-6 B.C. The rebuilding of the Temple was the key objective of this group of returnees. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered at the end of this time period.

- The 2nd return was under Ezra 80 years later (Ezra Chapters 7-10) in 457 B.C. The purpose of this return was to bring reforms; they needed to return to their covenant obligations.

- The 3rd return was about 13 years that, led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C. Nehemiah's primary purpose was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and, as in Ezra's time, to lead the people back to obedience to God.

In addition, Daniel's 70 weeks of years or 483 years (Daniel 9:24) until the Messiah would come began with the third return, by the decree of Artaxerxes in 457 B.C. and ended sometime around 26 A.D.

In this chapter, Zarubbabel is going to start rebuilding the Temple, but first things first:

Restoring the Brazen Altar

Ezra 3:1-2 - "And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God."

"the people gathered themselves together as one man". - There was unanimity and agreement among everyone.

Ezra 3:3 - "And they set the altar upon his bases; for [despite the] fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening."

To begin any of the priestly ministries and service, the process would have been to first sprinkle the priests with the waters of cleansing made with the retained Ashes of the Red Heifer. Then the priests could sacrifice the sin and trespass offerings for themselves and later for the people. Then whole burnt offerings would be offered.

"They set the altar on its bases" -

The Brazen Altar

The bronze (or brazen or brass) Altar stood outdoors, in the Court of the Priests, between the Temple and the Court of the Women.

According to Alfred Edersheim's book 'The Temple', the base of the Altar was made of unhewn stones taken from virgin soil, untouched by any tool of iron.

- **Exodus 20:25** - "And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it." (Also **Deuteronomy 27:5-6**)

Noting that the Torah uses the word "sword" for tool, Rashi and Ramban follow the Sages (Mekhilta) in explaining that metal, and swords in particular, are used as weapons to shorten life while the altar is designated to extend life.

More probably though, the use of only unhewn stones emphasizes that spiritually no man-made works can take away sin or please God. God doesn't need our help.

This Altar - at least the upper part where the fire burned and a grate held the sacrifices - was originally covered in bronze or brass (**Exodus 27:1-8; 38:1-7**), which the Babylonians had removed. The inner stone structure of the Altar remained, although the unhewn stones were probably scattered among the ruins. This was all rebuilt, and the fire pan was again covered in bronze and placed back in its original position.

The Altar was about thirty feet square and fifteen feet high with a ramp that led up to it

(2 Chronicles 4:1).

Brass/ Judgment

Brass is used because in the scriptures brass represents God's judgment. Brass also has the quality of something unyielding and hard.

- **Deuteronomy 25:23** - "...heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron."

When the people complained in the wilderness, God sent fiery serpents among them as judgment. Moses signified this judgment when he "made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." (**Numbers 21:9**). The serpent depicted in brass and impaled on a pole represented the cross on which Christ was crucified, taking God's judgment on Himself.

- **John 3:14-15** - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

- **Galatians 3:13** - "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:"

The brass serpent impaled on a pole = the brass altar = the cross

The human race is sold under sin and deserving of death.

- **Romans 3:23-24** - " "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

We are separated from God because of our sin. The Altar is the way humans can satisfy the justice of God. But sacrifice of animals was only a picture or shadow of what Christ completed on the cross.

The Altar of the Cross

The New Testament "altar" of the cross was an unfinished, rough-hewn beam of wood.

The story of the Binding of Isaac -depicts him carrying wood to Mount Moriah. Just before he is to be sacrificed by Abraham, God provides a substitute of a ram caught in the thicket.

As in the story of Isaac, the ram sacrificed is meant to be a stand-in for the offerer.

Abraham had been told by God to sacrifice his son. Isaac had accepted his own death. At the last minute God intervened and provided a ram caught in a nearby thorn bush.

- **Genesis 22:13** - "Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son."

The rabbis explained that the ram was named Isaac and was in fact Isaac himself.

They knew there was something mysterious about this.

- **2 Corinthians 5:18** - "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation"

The word "reconciled" is "katallassō" in Greek - from a root that means "to change, to exchange one thing for another, to transform"

We exchange our life for His. We identify with the sacrifice, reckoning that we die with Him, but then receive the resurrection life of Jesus.

The Altar is where all that happens, in type. The Temple sacrifices, which were constantly ongoing, pictured this transaction.

There were continual morning and evening sacrifices. There were special offerings on certain feast days like Passover.

The two mandatory offerings in the Torah were the Sin Offering and the Trespass Offering. Voluntary offerings were the Whole Burnt Offering, the Meal or Drink Offering, and the Peace Offering, which are collectively called 'Wave Offerings' and were said to be a "sweet savor before the Lord."

But all these merely covered over the sins or trespasses, until the Messiah would come and fulfill the type through His ultimate sacrifice.

Christ's death on the cross was what all the Old Testament sacrifices were pointing to.

- **John 5:39** - "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."

- **Galatians 3:22-24** -- "But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

Just as the priests needed to be cleansed by the ashes of the Red Heifer, so do we.

- **Hebrews 9:13-14** - "For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge

your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

Christ's sacrifice needed to happen only once.

- **Hebrews 9:25-26** - "Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

Only Christ's sacrifice could bring permanent forgiveness.

- **Hebrews 10:1-4** - "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."

The cross is the fulfillment of what the brazen Altar typified.

- **Hebrews 13:10-14** - "We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come."

- **2 Corinthians 5:21** - "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

- **Romans 12:1** - "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

Because of the cross, God looks at us and only see's His Son - obedient and sinless. We have "put on" the righteousness of Christ.

Pagan Romans and Greeks considered the early Christians to be atheists because they had no visible temples or altars, idols or sacrifices. His kingdom is not of this world, it is within.

The Feast of Tabernacles

The people had settled in what was left of the cities that they occupied before the exile. Now only a few weeks after arriving, they gathered "as one man" in Jerusalem to

celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

They couldn't observe Yom Kippur properly without the Temple and the Holy of Holies. But they could celebrate Tabernacles.

Ezra 3:4-5 - "They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD."

There is a story we read at Hanukkah about Nehemiah recovering the sacred fire, supposedly to relight the fire in the Altar. (2 Maccabees 1) But if Nehemiah is meant, then that would have happened many decades after this event.

Temple Foundation Laid

Ezra 3:6-7 - "From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia."

Ezra 3:8 - "Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD."

The priests and Levites playing trumpets and cymbals sang Psalm 118 as the workmen finished the first step in restoring the Temple - laying the foundation.

Ezra 3:10-11 - "And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid."

It was a time of joy mixed with sadness. There was still a desolate scene despite this first step. Those few "ancient men" among them who had seen the Temple before it was destroyed remembered its former glory and the idolatry and rebellion of the people that had caused its demise.

Ezra 3:12-13 - "But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid

before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off."

Jesus Christ the Chief Cornerstone

The foundation stone was the cornerstone, the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It's the point that supports the rest of the building.

There are many different allusions to building the Temple in the Old and New Testaments.

- **Hebrews 11:10** - Abraham "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

- **Psalm 118:22** -- "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone."

- **1 Corinthians 3:10-11** - "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

- **Ephesians 2:19-23** - "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

- **Matthew 16:15-18** - "He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The 12 apostles of Christ who are the 12 foundations of the wall of the heavenly city of God, New Jerusalem - **Revelation 21:14**.

The foundation is "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" - **Jude vs. 3**. This has to be earnestly contended for.

- **Isiah 28:16** - "Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." or 'be ashamed' as when quoted in **Romans 10:11**

Sources:

See <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/77786/reason-there-is-an-80-year-gap-between-cyrus-decree-to-release-jews-from-ba>

<https://jaymack.net/aq-rebuilding-the-bronze-altar-and-the-festival-of-sukkot-ezra-3-1-6/>

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