

Lesson 2: Ezra 1 – 2:20

The first six chapters of Ezra describe the first return from exile and the reconstruction of the temple. The greater part of this book tells the story of the pioneers who returned from exile a whole lifetime before that of the author. Ezra does not make an appearance until Chapter 7, which occurs about 80 years after the events in the first chapter and about 60 years after the completion of the temple in Chapter 6. The events in the book of Esther occur between Chapters 6 and 7 in the book of Ezra.

We cannot overstate the importance of this return of God's people from exile. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had explained the reason behind their punishment and exile and both had urged the people to repent, warning them of what would happen if they failed to do so. But both had also prophesied a message of hope—the promise of a return to their homeland. These prophecies of hope kept Israel's faith alive during the years of exile.

Although many Jews in Babylon were comfortable there and did not want to return to Judah, many others prayed for and desired to return. They wanted to worship God as they once had—in their own temple and according to their own law. It is the story of these people that we find in the book of Ezra. This book tells us about a *second* exodus from captivity—one of the most important events in the history of God's plan of redemption.

Ezra 1

Verse 1

<p>1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:</p>
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At this point, many commentaries begin to tell us about Ezra's "theological interpretation of events." That is, they tell us how Ezra and the Jews interpreted the events around them in terms of their theology. The underlying thought behind such comments is usually that, while Ezra may have viewed the events that way, the events actually had another explanation. For example, while verse 1 says that God caused Cyrus to make this proclamation, that was just how Ezra saw it, but in reality Cyrus was acting on his own. This view, of

course, must be rejected. If God's word tells us that God caused Cyrus to issue this proclamation, then that is not just how Ezra viewed what happened – that is what happened.

And to those who argue otherwise, I would pose a question. Why did Cyrus issue such a decree? In fact, as we know, he issued other such decrees for other captive peoples. Why? What caused him to take an approach to captives so different from what had come before? Or should we ask who caused him to do so? Ezra 1:1 answers that question. And is that really so hard to believe? Remember that God referred to Cyrus by name long before he was born!

What we see here is the providence of God working on behalf of his people – and that is a central theme of Ezra. God preserved the covenant people during the exile, and God fulfilled his promise and brought his people back to their homeland—and he did these things using the rulers and nations of the world as tools. “Behind this opening verse lies the affirmation that all the might of the ancient world was in subjection to God, and put at the disposal of his people for their salvation.”

Verse 1 makes it very clear that what Cyrus did was not just a coincidence. Instead, God caused Cyrus to act in a way that fulfilled specific promises. Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10) had foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years and then God would fulfill his gracious promise to bring them back to this place.

The Hebrew word translated “stirred up” in verse 1 is a crucial link to the numerous prophecies in the Bible about this event. It is the same Hebrew word that we find in Jeremiah 51 and Isaiah 41 & 45.

- (Jeremiah 51:1) Thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will **stir up** the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon.”
- (Jeremiah 51:11) “Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has **stirred up** the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple.”
- (Isaiah 41:2) Who **stirred up** one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

- (Isaiah 41:25) I **stirred up** one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.
- (Isaiah 45:13) "I have **stirred him up** in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward," says the LORD of hosts.

And here are the most remarkable prophecies of all:

- (Isaiah 44:28) Who says of **Cyrus**, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'
- (Isaiah 45:1) Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

You will not find more detailed prophecies anywhere else in the Bible. God called Cyrus by name before he was born and foretold exactly what he would do – build my city and set my exiles free! And that is exactly what he did!

As we mentioned, Jeremiah foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. What were the beginning and ending points for that 70 year period?

- Let's start with what they are *not*. If we start the captivity with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and end it with the first return in 538, then we have a period of only 50 years, which cannot possibly be right.
- If instead we take the same starting point but take the end of captivity as the year when the temple was completed (515), then we have a period of 73 years.
- Another possibility is that the period begins with Babylon's defeat of Assyria in 610 and ends with the first return in 538, which again gives a period of 73 years. (Some argue that Jeremiah 29:10 refers to the period of Babylonian rule, which would support a starting point of 610 BC.)

- Finally, if we start with the first captives (which included Daniel) in 605 and end with the first return in 538, then we get a period of 68 years. This final option seems most likely to me.

Should we be concerned that we don't have an option that gives us *exactly* 70 years? Not at all.

- First, they all round to 70 years, and we know many of the numbers in these books are rounded.
- Second, what does *exactly* 70 years mean anyway? Down to the month, to the day, to the second? Would 70 years 364 days be a fulfillment, while 70 years 365 days would not? There would be no end to such a requirement.
- Third, God may have shortened the 70 year period to 68 years in his mercy. If so, it would not be the last time—(Matthew 24:22) “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”
- Fourth, dating these events is not an exact science. We could easily be off by a few years on some of them.

As an aside, the famous prophecy of *70 weeks* in Daniel 9 is discussed at length on our website, along with what relation, if any, those 70 *figurative* weeks have to these *70 literal* years.

The proclamation in verse 1 was given in the first year of Cyrus, which the context confirms must be the first year of his reign over the Jews in Babylon, which most date in the spring of 538 following his defeat of Babylon in the fall of 539. This famous edict of Cyrus in verses 2-4 also appears in Ezra 6:3-5 and 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

The final phrase “to put it in writing” in verse 1 is significant. The word translated “writing” refers to writings or inscriptions that were intended for the public eye. This edict was not just announced orally, but was also displayed publicly in writing. It is not hard to imagine the Jewish captives crowding around to read it! Also, the fact that it was in writing will turn out to be crucial to the later events in this book.

Verses 2-4

2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

The first thing we notice about this decree is the apparent piety of Cyrus. It sounds as if he is a true believer in the God of Israel, but was he? It is very unlikely – although it is certainly possible, particularly if he was shown the prophecies of Isaiah giving his name long before he was born. Josephus tells us that Cyrus was shown those prophecies and that he was eager to fulfill them. Some historians cast doubt on that notion, but doesn't it seem very likely that the Jews would have *rushed* to show the new king his own name recorded in their Scriptures—and tell him what God said he would do?

Another explanation for Cyrus' apparent piety is that the Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation. In other such decrees we know that Cyrus used the language of the people who were involved, likely as a diplomatic courtesy. He likely commissioned native scribes to compose the decrees. Also, we sometimes forget that other ancient peoples were *not* monotheists, and, as a polytheist, Cyrus would be glad to have any and all gods on his side. (See the similar decree on the famous Cyrus Cylinder discovered in 1879 and shown on the handout for today's lesson.)

Later we will discuss the Aramaic version of the decree found in Ezra 6:3-5. It is often said to be the same decree found here, but there are some differences. The most likely explanation for the differences is that we have two decrees, with the one here being the royal proclamation announced throughout the kingdom and the one in Ezra 6 being a message to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for building the temple.

The "let him go up" in verse 3 should be understood as permission or encouragement but not as a command. The Jews were not being ejected from the country; they were free to decide. And for most it was likely not an easy decision but rather one that would result in hardship and suffering, beginning with the 4 month journey it would

take for the return. But it was easier because they had a purpose: “to rebuild the house of the Lord.”

Some commentators note that, to a Jew, the word “survivor” in verse 4 would have immediately brought to mind the word “remnant,” which we saw throughout the writings of Isaiah.

Others, however, note that the word “survivor” in verse 4 is a little ambiguous. One commentary suggests that the Hebrew word is better understood as “those who remained” rather than those who returned to Judah. Thus, verse 4 would then be an encouragement to those that remain to provide assistance to those who were about to return. Verse 4 provides additional evidence that the returning Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation because it is not clear why Cyrus would make such a suggestion absent encouragement.

Verse 5

5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

Verse 5 tells us that those who returned were those “whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.” The Hebrew word used here is the same that was used in verse 1 to describe how God stirred up Cyrus to issue his proclamation. God was accomplishing his plan of redemption using his own people and using foreign rulers.

Once again we see the goal of the return – to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. And we see here something we will see throughout the book, a parallel between this exodus from Babylon and the original exodus out of Egypt. A large part of the book of Exodus (Chapters 25-40) is concerned with the construction of the tabernacle and the establishment of worship. Ezra is largely concerned with the restoration of those same things.

A central message of the Bible is that men must worship God in the manner that God has prescribed. We see that in Genesis; we see that in Exodus; we see that in Ezra; we see that in the prophets; and we see that in the New Testament. When men forget that message, a restoration is required – and we saw such a restoration in recent centuries as some left the denominations to restore proper worship and restore the church. We will see many parallels in our studies between these two restorations.

In verse 5 we see yet another theme that will appear again and again throughout this book – the continuity between the post-exile community and the pre-exile community. It was important for the people to understand their connection with those who had occupied the land prior to the exile. Those who returned are grouped under four genealogical headings: Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites. We learn elsewhere in the Bible that the various returns to Jerusalem also included some from the ten so-called lost tribes of the Northern Kingdom (1 Chronicles 9:3 and 2 Chronicles 11:16).

Another theme we see in verse 5 is that while God's work requires decision and faith, it also requires planning and preparation and demands a specific goal. The idea of a return to Jerusalem was wonderful, but absent planning, preparation, and goals it would have accomplished nothing. Here the immediate, realizable goal was the construction of the temple. There is, of course, a lesson there for us. God's people should never just wing it. We must be a prepared people and a goal-oriented people. We have a mission to accomplish, and that mission will not be accomplished absent our planning and preparation. *Failing to plan is planning to fail!* As our society becomes increasingly casual, I fear that attitude is making its way into the church. The people of God must never be casual when it comes to our mission. We are engaged in a serious business, and we must take it seriously, and we must let the world know that we take it seriously. If not, how can we ever expect them to take it seriously?

Verse 6

6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered.
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Verse 6 seems to have in mind more than just the Jewish neighbors of those who returned, and, if so, we see yet another parallel between the first and second exodus. Those who left Egypt also took with them supplies from their neighbors.

- (Exodus 3:21-22) And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, 22 but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.

- (Exodus 11:2) Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry.
- (Psalm 105:37) Then he brought out Israel with silver and gold, and there was none among his tribes who stumbled.

So, in addition to Cyrus and God's own people, God was stirring up those who remained to provide assistance to those who were returning. God was using everyone to accomplish his plans, whether they knew it or not. And this is another parallel with the first exodus as we recall how God used Pharaoh and the Egyptians to accomplish his plans.

Verse 7

7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

It is significant that verse 7 tells us that Cyrus brought out the vessels. When a king captured a nation, he would take that nation's idols and cult objects to his own capital to symbolize the victory of his gods over the gods of those he had conquered. Nebuchadnezzar had carried the temple articles away to Babylon in 587. (2 Kings 24:12-13) That Cyrus returned these objects to the Jews shows how serious he was in respecting their religion and customs. The decree in Ezra 6 specifically mentions that these objects were to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

Verses 8-11

8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. 9 And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 10 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 11 all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Both the name "Mithredath" and his title "the treasurer" are Persian words; the name refers to Mithras the sun god. Sheshbazzar was a Jew with a Babylonian name, likely referring to the Babylonian sun god, Shamash. Although Sheshbazzar quickly disappeared from the scene, he led the first group of returnees back to Jerusalem.

Verse 8 shows us how carefully the temple objects were treated – the treasurer “counted them out” to Sheshbazzar. This is quite unlike their treatment by the Babylonians—you will recall that Belshazzar had the audacity to drink from the temple vessels in Daniel 5:23.

Some early commentaries argue that Sheshbazzar (the leader here) is really the same person as Zerubbabel (the leader in the next chapter). They argue that Sheshbazzar was the Chaldean or court name for Zerubbabel. Although that is a possibility, I lean toward the view that we have two people rather than one. What then happened to Sheshbazzar? We can't say for sure, but he may simply have died soon after the return.

Commentaries differ on the meaning and uses of the various items listed in verses 9 and 10. The gold dishes may have been the vessels used to collect the blood of slaughtered animals. The word translated “censers” in the ESV is uncertain and may have been the knife used in the ritual slaughter of the animals.

The mathematicians among us may have noticed that the numbers of items in verses 9 and 10 do not add up to the total in verse 11. It is likely that verses 9 and 10 just list the most important items, whereas verse 11 gives the total of all items.

Yet again in these verses we see the theme of continuity. Those who returned were connected with those who had been taken. They were connected by families, and they were connected by the items they carried back with them.

We should pause here and ask the same question that Indiana Jones once asked—what happened to the ark of the covenant? Most believe it was likely destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Ethiopians, however, say that the Queen of Sheba's son stole the ark from Solomon, and they claim it rests today in their cathedral at Aksum. My opinion is that God took it back before it could be destroyed by the Babylonians. Some point to Revelation 11:19 as support for that position—“Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple” (although, of course, that is figurative).

That short phrase at the end of verse 11—“when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem”—is one of the most important events in the history of the world. It certainly would not have been seen as such at the time (perhaps not even by those who were returning), but men are poor judges of the momentous. We tend to amplify that which is trivial and denigrate that which is

important. We must always strive to see things as God sees them, and, when we do, we will see that the great news events of our own day are not that great at all. The truly momentous events are taking place right here among us as we work in the kingdom of Christ.

Ezra 2

One of the books in my library is entitled, “How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible.” It might seem sacrilegious to some to suggest that parts of the Bible are boring, but most would likely agree that Ezra 2 is not one of the most exciting chapters of the Bible. But, as one commentator noted, as uninviting as this chapter may seem, it is a monument to God’s care and to Israel’s vitality. If this chapter or any other chapter seems boring to us, then we just haven’t studied it enough. We need to look more deeply into God’s word, and when we do, we will find that there are great and marvelous lessons to be learned from every verse in Bible.

Why was this chapter with its lengthy list of names included? What value did it have for its initial readers? What value does it have for us?

We have already seen that continuity is a major theme in Ezra, and continuity is a major reason for the presence of this list. Ezra and his readers were very concerned about the continuity between themselves and the Jews who lived in Judah prior to the exile. They needed to know that God’s covenants and promises still applied to them, and they needed to be secure in their own position in the plan of God.

It was also important that they preserve their purity as a people, and that is another theme that we will see in this book.

Another possible reason for the list was to legitimize land rights after the return from exile. Yes—the Jews had left their homeland. Yes—others had moved in while they were gone. Yes—the Jews wanted their land back when they returned. And, yes—history has a way of repeating itself! But there is a crucial difference between the return of the Jews to their homeland under Ezra and the return of the Jews to their homeland under Harry Truman – the former was part of God’s plan to bring Jesus into this world, whereas the latter was not.

Some of the names are listed by ancestral families while others are listed by geographical location. Why the difference? Some suggest that the latter were the poorer people who did not have land in their name. Others suggest that the former group were those who could

trace their lineage back to a known Jewish ancestor, while the others could only identify their former city—which is supported by the observation that these geographical locations appear to be places where the families lived prior to rather than after the exile.

Significantly there are no references to towns in the Negev south of Judah. The Edomites had moved into that area after Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem. (See Obadiah.)

I think we can see one more reason this list is included in Ezra 2 by looking at Mark 14. In Mark 14:9, Jesus, speaking about the woman with the alabaster flask, said, “truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” Although Mark did not give us her name, she is being honored here today 2000 years later for the act of kindness and love that she demonstrated. Ezra 2 is filled with such people. Why did they leave their homes to return to a place of suffering and hardship? Because they loved God and longed to worship him as he desired to be worshipped. And for that they are honored by God. And when you read their names and descriptions, think about their example.

“To God each individual and family is significant. Thus the group of returnees is not simply lumped together, but valuable space in Scripture is given to otherwise unknown families and individuals. The group of exiles was not large, but it was vital to God’s plan. ... [They are] the heroes of this drama. Through them God’s purposes in Israel were continued.”

It is through this group and their descendants that we have the Scriptures, which they carefully preserved, and it is through this group and their descendants that Jesus came into this world. Even though they were practically unnoticed in the world at that time, they were the center of God’s plan of redemption.

The church today often suffers from a “minority complex.” We sometimes feel as if we are of little significance in our modern world. But we need to see ourselves as God sees us – we are the center of his attention. We are the means by which he is fulfilling his plan in this world. We should remember that God’s people have been a majority in this world only two times: just after creation and just after the flood.

Verses 1-2a

1 Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. 2a They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

The word “province” in verse 1 probably refers to Judah rather than to Babylon. Also, this list likely includes different groups that returned from Babylon at different times. That would help explain why Zerubbabel is listed here while Sheshbazzar is the leader in Chapter 1. We do not know what happened to Sheshbazzar or how soon Zerubbabel became the governor (Haggai 1:1).

That each returned to his own town emphasizes the continuity with the pre-exile community. The returning exiles were claiming their territorial inheritance and reaffirming their roots in and rights to the land.

Several of the leaders’ names in verse 2 are familiar. Jeshua was the high priest, and is referred to as Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah. (According to Haggai 1:1 he was the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, which would make him the grandson of Seraiah, the high priest before the exile in 2 Kings 25:18.)

Jeshua, the High Priest, and Zerubbabel, the grandson of a king, play a major role in the prophecies of Zechariah. So close was their partnership, that Zechariah used it as a foretaste of the perfect regime that was to come, when priesthood and royalty would be perfectly united in Jesus Christ—the man whose names is the Branch. And as the book of Hebrews tells us, that combination in a single person could happen only under a new covenant because kings came from the tribe of Judah while priests came from the tribe of Levi. So, to those today who believe that the old covenant was never intended to pass away, I would ask them to read Zechariah. Either the old covenant passed away or Zechariah’s prophecies failed – those are our only options.

The Nehemiah listed in verse 2 is not the Nehemiah who returned in 445 BC, and the Mordecai listed here is almost certainly not the Mordecai from the book of Esther. Seraiah was also the name of Ezra’s father (7:1), and Bigvai is a Persian name that also occurs in the Elephantine Papyri as the governor of Judah following Nehemiah.

But, again, considering the time and place, the most likely explanation is that we have different people with the same names.

There is a similar list of names in Nehemiah 7:7, but that list contains one additional name, Nahamani, which some suggest may have been lost in the process of copying. I tend to agree with that suggestion because with that additional name we have yet another indication of the continuity between the exiles and the pre-exile community in that with the addition of that name, the list includes 12 leaders.

Verses 2b-20

2b The number of the men of the people of Israel: 3 the sons of Parosh, 2,172. 4 The sons of Shephatiah, 372. 5 The sons of Arah, 775. 6 The sons of Pahath-moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812. 7 The sons of Elam, 1,254. 8 The sons of Zattu, 945. 9 The sons of Zaccai, 760. 10 The sons of Bani, 642. 11 The sons of Bebai, 623. 12 The sons of Azgad, 1,222. 13 The sons of Adonikam, 666. 14 The sons of Bigvai, 2,056. 15 The sons of Adin, 454. 16 The sons of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, 98. 17 The sons of Bezai, 323. 18 The sons of Jorah, 112. 19 The sons of Hashum, 223. 20 The sons of Gibbar, 95.

Verses 3-20 are the names of the clans that returned. The end of verse 2 describes them as the men of the people of Israel. The Bible usually reserves “Israel” for the entire nation of twelve tribes or for the Northern Kingdom that fell to Assyria. Why is “Israel” used here? It is used here as another indication that this group was the heir to God’s covenants to the nation as a whole.

“In a political world in which Israel as a power is no more than a memory, God is awakening something infinitely more significant, because it is spiritual.”

The names in this list are nearly identical to those in Nehemiah 7, but there is more variation in the numbers between the two lists. One commentator suggests this may be due to what he describes as “the notorious difficulty in copying Hebrew numbers.” Vertical strokes were used for units, horizontal strokes were used for tens, and the initial letter in the Hebrew word *meah* was used for hundreds. Single strokes could easily be overlooked or miscopied.

Several of these clan names occur elsewhere. Eleven of the names are also found in Ezra 8 among those who accompanied Ezra to Jerusalem. Fourteen are listed in Nehemiah 10 as signing the agreement of separation.

Since “Pahath-moab” in verse 6 literally means “governor of Moab,” he may have been a governor in Moab prior to the exile. (Compare 1 Chronicles 4:22.)