

EZRA

Lesson 1, Introduction Part 1

The beginning of our introduction to the Book of Ezra (which is heavily intertwined with the Book of Nehemiah) will take us on a bit different path than you're accustomed to. There's a couple of major points that I would like to make today that has much to do with our personal and communal walk with Yeshua in relation to the state of the world as it stands in our time; and these points flow very naturally from what we will learn in Ezra and Nehemiah over the next several months.

Upon the significant events of these 2 books, a new era is dawning for Israel; or shall we say a new era is dawning for the Jewish people. They had been removed from their homeland of Judah and deprived of the Temple and its services and all the vital spiritual and physical benefits and blessings that come from it, for about 100 years. This removal, usually called the Babylonian Exile, was a God-ordained and God-orchestrated judgment against His chosen people of Judah for their infidelity against Him; yet the judgment was, as typical, carried out by human beingsgentile human beings.

But with the passing of time we now prepare to follow the pious and zealous Ezra as he leads a contingent of enthusiastic Yehoveh worshippers back to Jerusalem from their long stay in a foreign land, with the righteous goal of rebuilding the Temple, re-establishing the operation and authority of the Levite Priesthood, and thus re-instituting the Torah based religion as it appears in the Laws of Moses. This group represented a small fraction (perhaps 5%) of Jews who lived in the Persian Empire. Why so relatively few? The remainder had adapted to their new homes and felt no need to migrate to a place (Judah) they had never even seen, or to remake and recapture a Torah and Temple based Hebrew religion that most had never known.

Ezra and Nehemiah are different from others of the Old Testament books; they deal quite heavily with the politics of the day. The problem this presents to modern readers is that while we will watch as each of several national and political groups appear and disrupt the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and try to use their influence to bring about their own agendas, nothing in the Bible explains very much about who these groups are and why they think and behave as they do. We will work to flesh that out.

Ezra and Nehemiah are technically quite difficult to study partly because some sections are written in Hebrew and others in Aramaic. And the difficulty is also because the time of history they cover is challenging to sort out, so there is much speculation because what Ezra and Nehemiah are reported to have said and done doesn't always match with the viewpoints of non-biblical documents from about that same time period. So we have much untangling of the historical timeline to do as we go along to get the best sense of these valuable books.

However before we get into all that, I think it is best to first take some time to pause and reflect and to paint a picture of the spiritual condition and the circumstances of the Jewish people and the Middle East in general at the time of Ezra. We will quickly find that many of their concerns are similar to concerns we have today in the 21st century A.D. and it could be instructional as to how modern day Believers might approach the practice of our faith in such a rapidly changing and imperfect world; a world that is also vastly different from the world of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C..

I mentioned that the Jews had been driven out of their homeland and taken captive some 90-100 years or so earlier than Ezra's day. However not all of that time were they held as captives or barred from returning to Judah; they were set free by King Cyrus after 70 years in Babylon as Persia rose to power. During all that time away the Jewish people experienced enormous social upheavals and changes in their culture and significant alterations in the ways that they worshipped the God of Israel. And most of those changes were due to circumstances and resultant limitations that from an earthly and political standpoint were beyond their control; and that included the matter of just how observance of their Jewish religion could reasonably continue and in what form.

In Biblical time 100 years doesn't seem very long. We're more used to thinking in terms of thousands of years. But from an every day human perspective 100 years is a long time and perhaps 5 generations of people lived during that century. Let me try to illustrate just how long a time 100 years is. Looking back 100 years from the year we are currently in, 2014, the Ottoman Empire ruled by Muslims was still widespread and powerful. WWI was still a few years away. The Panama Canal was not yet completed. Most homes in America did not have electricity. The Titanic sank with catastrophic loss of life and the famed Boxer rebellion against European influence occurred in China. Those of us living today of course have no personal attachment to any of those events (and certainly nothing we could call a "memory" of it). It is hard to feel any sense of cause and effect from those times upon our lives, and even harder to understand what life and society was like then.

As a result of having been gone from Judah for 100 years, the majority of Jewish people who were alive in Ezra's day naturally had no personal attachment to the land of Judah, any more than I feel an attachment to the Germany my grandmother on my mother's side came to America from as a child. I'm an American born in America; not a German born in America. And so from their perspective the Jews born in Persia were Persian Jews, not Judean Jews who happened to live in Persia. And then there is the complication that my father's side of the family is a different story as that heritage goes back to the Mayflower. So how do I explain how many generations removed from Europe I am? The 3 from my mother's side or the 20 or so from my father's side? Either way, I am not a European and do not perceive myself as a transplanted European. But from another perspective I am also a Christian, and my matriarchal grandmother was a Christian, and her mother was a Christian, and yet our religious practices must be worlds apart. We even practice them in different languages. These same sorts of complications from inter-marriage were present within the Jewish population of the Media-Persian Empire in Ezra's day.

We discussed at length to end the Book of Esther (that in part overlaps with Ezra and

Nehemiah's time) that even the term Jew had a substantially different meaning at the time Ezra was mustering as many Jews as he could to move to Jerusalem on a righteous mission to rebuild the Holy Temple. A century earlier when Judah was overrun by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, a Jew was a Judahite in the sense that a Jew was a citizen of the Kingdom of Judah. Most citizens of Judah at that time could also claim that they were members of the Tribe of Judah and descended from the tribe's namesake and his father, Jacob. But many thousands of other full citizens of Judah were from the tribe of Benjamin. So a Judahite (a Jew) in the days leading up to their being conquered by Babylon was akin to our calling ourselves Americans or Britons or Spaniards; it is mostly about what nation we belong to. While there can be some amount of ethnicity involved, it is more about a chosen allegiance to a land and a government.

Fast forward 100 years to the time of Ezra. The Hebrew term that English Bible versions usually translate as Jew was still **Yehudi**, and it more literally means Judahite. And yet this term had now evolved to more indicate some ill defined combination of religious belief, ethnicity, and for some a family heritage that could be traced back to the former Kingdom of Judah. For instance in the book of Esther we find that many people from various non-Jewish ethnic groups throughout the Persian Empire elected to become **Yehudi**, Jews, because a Jewess was now their Queen and her Jewish stepfather Mordechai had become 2nd in command over the Persian Empire. But obviously these "new Jews" had no ties whatsoever to the Kingdom of Judah. They shared no common Hebrew heritage with those Jews who had a blood relationship with Jacob and his son Judah. So their newly declared Jewishness must have had to do with a political affiliation and an allegiance loosely based on religion; it was probably mostly about whose god they decided to worship (in this case it was the God of the Jews).

And we discussed how the worship of the Jews in Babylon and now Persia by definition had to look very different from when they lived as natural-born citizens within their own sovereign Hebrew Kingdom of Judah. The major reason for this difference being that the center of all Hebrew worship since Moses had been the House of Yehoveh: the Tabernacle and then the Temple. But the Temple lay in ruins. The Priesthood (as an organization) had been disbanded and delegitimized. Yet the Jews of the Diaspora (the Jews who lived in Babylon and then Persia) didn't want to give up worship of Yehoveh so they improvised and adapted. They appointed their own new religious leaders, many (perhaps most) of whom were not Levites. They found ways around their inability to sacrifice to atone for sin (at least they did in their own minds). And they eventually founded places to assemble and worship that in time were called synagogues.

Whatever it might have looked like that the Jews practiced as their religion in the Persian Empire it bore little or no resemblance to that of their great grandfathers who had brought their sheep and goat sacrifices to the Altar at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and this because it was now impossible to do. And while it was not called so at that time, this new form of Hebrew religion would create so many new elements and practices that eventually it got its own name: Judaism.

So here is a question for us all: should we find as objectionable what these Jews did up in

Babylon and Persia by abandoning the ways of the Torah and establishing their own houses of worship and appointing new leaders and devising new ways? Should we look down upon the 95% who had every opportunity and freedom to migrate to the Holy Land, Judah, and to return to the true Biblical religion, who chose (of their own free will) not to because they were satisfied with their new religious ways and with their living conditions in Persia? Well, to help us address that question let's look at the strangely parallel path that Christianity took to get to where it is today.

To begin it is important to understand that Christianity is NOT the religion that Yeshua invented when He lived and walked this earth. Christ was NOT the first Christian! Christianity is, by definition, the form of a new religion that gentiles invented, in which Christ is its center. Rather, the religion of Jesus the Jew was a Temple and Torah centered religion (as God ordained); and yet in the New Testament we find Him regularly visiting synagogues and teaching in them (the most outward symbol of a manmade Judaism) as much we find Him visiting and teaching at the Temple (the most outward symbol of God-ordained Hebrew-ism). But consider this as well: at no time did the rebuilt Temple EVER possess the Ark of the Covenant. It went missing from the time of the Temple's destruction around 600 B.C. and has never been found since (although there are a few who have made unsubstantiated claims that they have located the Ark). The Temple in Yeshua's day did NOT have the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. And yet Yeshua never condemned the Temple as a useless or incomplete Temple even though He had little use for the illegitimate Priesthood. Should this knowledge give us pause or even shake us up a bit? Yes, it should; but only to notice that Yeshua was as much a product of His environment and subject to the realities of His time, as were the Diaspora Jews in Babylon and Persia, and as are the Jews today, and as are Believers today. So did Jesus come to create a new religion perhaps because of the inadequacies of Judaism and because of an incomplete Temple or a corrupted Priesthood? Interestingly Yeshua distinctly said that He didn't come to abolish the Prophets and the Law and to create a new or replacement religion; rather His purpose was merely to fulfill the Law (as it existed) and to bring about the predictions of the Prophets. He would follow the Laws of Moses perfectly. He was what the Prophets pointed to and what the Law embodied: the perfect Heavenly ideal on earth. Yet, at the same time, Yeshua was also a Jew who lived a Jewish life in the Jewish Holy Land commensurate with the Jewish society as it existed with all of its flaws and warts.

But in time, after His death on the cross and upon the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., what with no Temple or Priesthood as the focal points for the Jewish religion of any the several sects it had divided into (including those of the Way, the stream of Jewish religion that Yeshua fostered), gentiles now had an opening to take the Way and move it out of its birthplace: the Holy Land. Thus we find some of the major Jewish centers of the Diaspora in Antioch, Damascus, Corinth, and Rome (all gentile cities in gentile nations) become the major hubs of Jesus worship. The number of gentiles who flocked to the truth of the Gospel soon overwhelmed the number of Jews who did as well and now gentiles were in control. These gentiles called themselves Christ-ians. With this new circumstance of such a staggering numbers advantage, popular gentile religious leaders took control of these assemblies that were at one time Jewish synagogues, and the Jewish influence began to dry up. Soon houses of worship for these gentile Christians were differentiated from houses of worship for Jews and these new places were called churches.

Now that the Jews had been pushed out of control of Yeshua worship, and now that the centers of this kind of worship were located in gentile nations, circumstances changed yet again. In the 4th century A.D. the Torah-ordained 7th day Shabbat was abolished and 1st day worship, Sunday worship, called The Lord's Day was established. The 1st day was also to be a day of rest, something that already existed in the Roman Empire at least for non-slaves. The 7 Biblical Feasts of Leviticus were abolished by the Church and almost immediately a celebration of Christ's resurrection was created based on other contemporary resurrection myths of Tammuz and his consort Ishtar the fertility goddess. It was natural; these pagan resurrection myths were long established and accepted among the Romans; they were popular, woven into society, and it was easy enough for Christianity to simply transfer Jesus to those celebrations because it didn't cause disruption. Coupled with the goal to sever any ties to Jewishness, it made perfect sense to church leadership and it worked.

Over the centuries, everywhere it spread, Christianity has adapted to its environment. These adaptations were significantly diverse enough that it eventually caused fracturing of the religion into what we now label as denominations. And here we are in the 21st Century with a Christianity that has almost no connection at all with Israel or the real Jewish Jesus and His Galilean Jewish disciples who started the whole thing. And the truth is that like the 95% of Diaspora Jewish society in Ezra's day and in Esther's day, most Christians go merrily along not really seeing the relevance of the ancient Biblical origins of our faith, because what we practice now is all we have known and we're generally satisfied with it. We don't have a memory of something else; so we don't have a longing to challenge our settled doctrines or examine our taken-for-granted holy observances.

And yet in our day, just as it was for Ezra's time, something is afoot. Something about our faith seems to be incomplete or well off the mark, and many worshippers suddenly yearn to recover our faith roots and the truest possible Biblical religion. This is so much like the situation of the Jews of Babylon and Persia that, to me, it is eerie. The Jews living in Ezra's day weren't the ones who left Judah and the Temple behind; they had been born in the Babylonian and then Persian Empires under circumstances not of their own making. Even if they had some knowledge of the religion of their forefathers, it didn't matter because they were practicing a form of it that worked for their current location, situation, and environment. It seemed to fulfill their spiritual needs.

And yet with Ezra as their spiritual leader, a tiny minority of these same Persian Jews thought it right to leave the comfort of what they had known all their lives, to turn their backs on their homes and the religious practices that their friends and brother Jews found perfectly acceptable and worthy, in order to try to rediscover the religion of the Bible and to re-establish it in their lives. And what we find is that their venture was largely unwelcome, it was fiercely fought against and sabotaged, and it took many years to accomplish what could have been done in months. And, as we'll see in the coming weeks, Ezra and his cohorts just couldn't understand why their fellow Jews would knowingly want to continue practicing something that was but an inferior band aid placed over a problem not of their own making (exile and the lack of a Temple for worship, instruction and atonement); but that problem had been rectified some years earlier.

I hope you see where this is leading us. For 1500 years Christianity has, in general, taken a pathway that has led further and further away from the true Biblical religion and towards a means to deal with our circumstances as they were and as they are, whatever it form it takes. And now, in our time, there are those few who want to return to our Biblical faith roots. It is certainly not the first time this has happened; in fact those who arrived on the Mayflower came to North America with that intent. And they came as outcasts from institutional Christianity in Europe. And today those of the Hebrew Roots movement and the Messianic movement and some folks of other denominations are facing the same pressures. I don't think it is too strong at all to compare ourselves with the Ezra movement of almost 2500 years ago. In fact, this is the reason I took us on this historical venture to begin our Ezra introduction: the parallels are unmistakable and so there is much we can gain by following what happened with Ezra's and Nehemiah's efforts. We can probably assume that what happened with them is a reasonable expectation of what we can expect will happen with us.

Ezra and Nehemiah and their followers represented a tiny minority of Jews. Their desire and actions to re-establish the Temple and Priesthood weren't welcomed by all. Many other Jews saw them as misguided trouble makers. Divisive. A threat. Others were bewildered why Ezra and his followers couldn't merely accept the Judaism that had been created since it seemed perfectly fine as-is. And as is the way of humanity, if the 5% differ with the 95%, then who is deemed to be right? Obviously it must be the majority and the 5% are oddballs, misfits, and rebels who need to be reeled in and reformed or thrown out completely.

Just as obviously, the Bible holds up Ezra and Nehemiah as doing God's will and upholding God's principles. Naturally those two are applauded by the Lord and disparaged by men. It was no different when Yeshua came and made His first disciples. Those thousands of Jews who followed Him were seen as misguided rebels, traitors to the institutional Judaism of the day. And they paid a price. Many were shunned by their communities and their families. So much so that Yeshua had to remind His flock that:

^{CJB} Matthew 10:37 *Whoever loves his father or mother more than he loves me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than he loves me is not worthy of me.*

And while Matthew puts this instruction and principle in a positive sense (love) we see that this same thought is expressed in the negative sense in Luke 14:26.

^{CJB} Luke 14:26 *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid.*

Thus we see yet another Biblical example that love and hate are anything but emotions that involve intense like or dislike; rather in the Bible love means to actively accept and hate means to actively reject. Ezra and Nehemiah did not have an intense dislike for their fellow Jews of the Persian Empire who chose to remain behind with this new largely manmade doctrinal-

based religion of Judaism; but they DID reject some or most of those beliefs. And as most Messianics and Hebrew Roots folks have learned, rejecting some traditional Christian doctrines and beliefs can be interpreted by family and friends as personally rejecting them. It is painful, it is agonizing, it can disrupt our lives and yet Christ said it was to be expected. And without equivocation He told us what our choice ought to be when faced with it.

Then had the Diaspora Jews of Ezra's day, the 95%, actually abandoned God? Not really. Had they abandoned His Biblical ways and replaced it with something else that satisfied them? Yes, mostly. Were they harboring an evil intent when they did this? I don't think so. Was it arrogant and know-it-all for Ezra and Nehemiah to break away and try to re-establish the Temple and the Priesthood, and to re-institute the Torah commandments as their religion? No. Would they get it right and recreate the perfect and ideal Torah and Temple based Biblical worship? No to that as well. And that's because it wasn't humanly possible given the circumstances.

Hebrew Roots and Messianic Believers, that is the same dilemma that we face. And as right as we are to go against the tide, and to work to re-establish a true Bible-based religion that incorporates the Torah of God as well as the New Testament of Yeshua, don't ever think that we'll get it completely right or that we possess all the truth. We, like Ezra, are desiring to go back and recover something that we'll never be able to fully restore until Messiah comes. And that's because the circumstances we live under no matter where we reside on this planet are stacked against us, and this world (as it is) cannot accommodate the perfect heavenly ideal of the Bible based religion that God gave us so long ago. So we'll have to do the best we can, and recover the most we can, and do so without apology.....but with the greatest love towards our brothers and sisters in the Lord who are not with us on this journey, and with the greatest courage and willingness to suffer the slings and arrows that will be hurled at us. God gave Ezra and Nehemiah the desire, vision and spirit to take on the seeming impossible; and He will give it to us as well if we will stay faithful to our purpose and not succumb to our occasional fears and discomfort. But we must also never think that this desire we have to recover the true Biblical faith, to love Israel, to support and woo the Jewish people to their own Messiah, is because we have each, somehow, conjured it up from within us. For His own good reasons, and having nothing to do with our merit or worthiness, God has miraculously put this desire and spirit into us. Our only job is to say "yes", and to move forward under His direction. The outcome is not ours to decide.

This now leads us to the next very real issue that faces Ezra and Nehemiah, and faces Hebrew Roots and Messianic Believers: can we do all of God's Torah if we but exercise enough faith and move forward with iron wills? The Rabbis say no to this. And much of Christianity says no to this. In fact much of Christianity says that either the Law is abolished or (in a variation of that same thought), say that since there are some Torah laws that cannot be followed, then that means we have no obligation to follow any of them. And the usual logic for that thought process comes primarily from a passage from the Book of James.

^{CJB} **James 2:10** *For a person who keeps the whole Torah, yet stumbles at one point, has become guilty of breaking them all.*

Thus the mainstream conclusion is that since we can't possibly keep about one-third of the Torah commandments because they require a Priesthood and a Temple (which don't exist) then we can set-aside all the rest of the Torah as well. In fact the Rabbis generally agree with this and that is the reason for the creation of Halakah: Rabbinical Law. Rabbis will tell you honestly that they do not operate under the Torah of Moses, they operate under Halakah.

Yet Yeshua warned us against that line of thought. In Matthew 5:19 He said this:

^{CJB} **Matthew 5:19** *So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.*

First notice that Christ does NOT say that a determination to NOT do the Law prohibits one from the Kingdom of God. Essentially He is describing two categories of Believers: those who DO the Law (God sees them as the greatest) and those who do NOT do the Law, and God's sees those as the least. So, Believers, you don't lose your salvation if you decide not to follow the Law. But you do gain the status of the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. The reality is that no one in Christ's day could obey all the Law, either, for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that there was no Ark of the Covenant. The Holy of Holies was empty. Therefore the Temple couldn't be cleansed on Yom Kippur, because the best the High Priest could do was to enter and sprinkle blood on the floor where the Ark should have been sitting. Was it his fault that there was no Ark? No. It had gone missing since Nebuchadnezzar had taken the Temple 600 years earlier. So what did the High Priest do? The best he could. The Jews weren't allowed by the Romans to enforce the penalties of the Law for idolatry or adultery, which was death. So what did the Jews do? The best they could: they shunned those who were guilty.

I'm asked nearly daily: since it is self-evident that we can't obey all the Laws of the Torah due to circumstances, are we obligated to follow any? And if we are, which ones? Some of the laws are so enmeshed in a Hebrew/Middle Eastern society that they are near to impossible (if not absolutely impossible) to observe. And since breaking one Torah law is like breaking them all, says James, then most Christians and Christian leadership say, why bother to try to obey any? Isn't that just legalism and vanity?

Let me begin to answer that by straightening out a misconception about what James said concerning keeping the whole Torah but by breaking one point of it we break it all. It is merely the other side of the coin of the statement that:

Romans 3:23 CJB

²³ *(for) all have sinned and come short of earning God's praise.*

The Romans statement is certainly true and is pivotal in understanding our need for a Messiah. However it in no way implies that all sins are the same, or that all have sinned equally. Thus James says that you can say you are fully Torah observant, but in reality if you break one commandment, any commandment, no matter how minor, and if you're depending on scrupulous Torah observance to save you, then logic says you will fall short. Of course neither

he nor Yeshua ever drew the conclusion that as result of this truth that we just throw away the Torah and do whatever we want.

Even going back to Mt.Sinai and the day and hour the Law was given to Moses, some of the Law couldn't be kept due to circumstances. How could they give firstfruits offerings if there were no firstfruits? How could they offer sanctuary to man slayers in Cities of Refuge if they had no cities? How could they leave harvest for the poor if there was no harvest? Why **couldn't** they do those things along with several more, at that time? Circumstances beyond their control. So does that mean that since one Torah law could not be precisely followed that the whole Law became invalid? Which in turn means that probably at no time in Israel's history did circumstances allow them to do every last commandment precisely as commanded. So does that mean, then, that NEVER in the history of Israel was the Law of Moses in force? Of course not; because from the instant God gave Moses the Law, the Israelites were punished when they broke one law or another. So in God's eyes the Law certainly was in force. Besides the entire point of needing a Messiah is to pay for our trespasses against the Law. These trespasses are called sins.

So what did the most pious of Israel do when laws either could not be obeyed, or they couldn't be obeyed precisely as ordained? They did the best they could. And doing the best you can does NOT mean doing only what you **want** to do. It means doing all that reasonably can be done. And that begins with understanding the principle behind each law and commandment so that when we can't carry out a commandment in letter, we can in spirit and principle.

Can we, today, fully obey the laws to observe the 7 Biblical Feasts? Not in letter; but we certainly can in spirit and in principle. Can we take adulterers and idolaters in Western Society and stone them to death for their crime? No because that is murder in our modern societal system (even if it should not be), but we can reject the act as wrong and stay far clear of unrepentant adulterers and idolaters. Can we bring firstfruits of our field harvest or our herds and flocks to the Lord at the Temple? No; almost none of us have fields and flocks. But we can take the firstfruits of our incomes to our place of worship and give them for use in supporting the institution, furthering the cause of Christ, and comforting Israel. It's the best we can do.

Such was the situation for Ezra and Nehemiah both as they began the recovery operation of Temple and Priesthood as well as when the job was completed. Such was the same situation for Jews before Christ and after He died and was resurrected. And such is our situation today. And it is in this light that we need to frame what we shall soon read and study in Ezra. Perfection was always the goal, but it was never going to happen. In fact Christ said this in His Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:48 CJB

⁴⁸ Therefore, be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Ezra and Nehemiah were too spirit filled and wise not to know before they ever began that they would never achieve perfection in their endeavors. But they would die trying for perfection,

which is what we should all strive for as redeemed people. The results of our efforts are in God's hands and our failures are already paid for by Our Savior.

We must always do the best we can. And as Believers the best we can is to obey as much of the Law, as guided by the Holy Spirit, within the circumstances of the society in which God has placed us. We have a choice: take Ezra's path, or take the path of those Jews who opposed him.

We'll continue with our introduction to Ezra next time.