

EZRA

Lesson 2, Introduction Cont.

The first half of our introduction to Ezra began last week, and we took the time to look at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah from the distant view and discussed how there are aspects of the story of the return to Judah of many of the Jewish exiles that are startlingly parallel to circumstances present within the modern Church of the 21st century. The distant view gives us a big picture, but also often an overly simplistic or overly general one, and so today we'll begin to add a few nuances as we zoom in a bit.

To review: we saw that the number of Jews to travel from the Persian Empire back to Judah was relatively small. The first group to return was under Zerubbabel and it was no more than 50,000 souls, and while that is not a small number it is only a fraction of the perhaps 2 million or more Jews who were living in the Persian Empire at that time.

Why do I think it was that many who elected to stay put? If we go back to a census that King David ordered in the 900's B.C. (it is recorded in 2nd Samuel 24), the Hebrew males capable of bearing arms that lived in Judah numbered 500,000. If we conservatively assume that there were 3 times as many more women, children, and elderly than this ½ million figure of only men, then we arrive at 2 million Jews who populated Judah more than 300 years before Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Kingdom of Judah. There is no reason to believe that there would be fewer than that living in Ezra's day, and every reason to believe that normal population growth occurred, as neither Babylon nor Persia committed mass slaughter or genocide upon the Jews.

Therefore in the opening part 1 of our Ezra Introduction I said that conservatively only around 5% of the exiled Jews voluntarily returned to Judah; and very likely 5% is much too large of a fraction. So 95% or more of all living Jews freely chose to remain behind and continue residing in the many Persian provinces that formed the Media-Persian Empire, and they lived there as Persians (or better, as Persian Jews) and not as transplanted Judahites (which they weren't). It is this large Jewish population living in foreign lands that today are known as the Diaspora (dispersed) Jews.

Why didn't more return when they were given the liberty to do so? For most, Persia was home and they knew nothing of Judah except as their historical homeland. They had never visited the Temple that was little more than a pile of rubble since Nebuchadnezzar had it destroyed in 586 B.C. Further these exiled Jews had created an alternative form of worship and atonement, and had organized new houses of congregating and appointed a new religious leadership. This alternative form of their religion was the beginning of Judaism; a religion that had many attributes that were born from the Torah and Temple based Biblical religion that heeded the Law of Moses, but it was not the same because neither the Torah nor the Temple were any longer involved. Therefore this new way consisted of many manmade substitutes and new practices that were unknown in the Hebrew Bible, but these did serve to give the exiled Jews a

sense of continuing connection to their religious heritage and to their God. In other words, they were satisfied that their spiritual needs were being met and that Yehoveh must be looking on in approval.

With that as a backdrop we ended last time asking the rhetorical question of whether the exiles should have developed all of these new religious practices despite their circumstances, and when given the opportunity shouldn't they all have returned to Judah? And we addressed this by drawing an appropriate parallel between the Jews' reaction to their situation and circumstances up in Babylon and then Persia, with the development of Christianity from its inception to the present day. And we saw that essentially Christianity has drifted far from its original Biblical faith roots (that originally were 100% Israelite faith roots) just as the Jews of Babylon and Persia drifted away from their original Torah and Temple based faith roots, and that in both cases this drifting mostly had to do with a response to circumstances and adapting to changing political environments.

So at the few times that a remnant of Christianity decided that the adaptations and concessions to political realities had gone so far as to essentially gut our faith of its truest spiritual and historical essence, and some Believers tried to remove several dubious manmade traditions and instead return to a purer expression of a Biblical faith, they were met with strong opposition. Those who came to the New World on the Mayflower were just such Believers who had been ostracized from the institutional Christianity of Europe for their zealousness. Thus we also find Ezra and Nehemiah and the relatively few Jews who followed them back to Jerusalem to reinstitute the Torah and Temple based worship of Yehoveh were met with strong opposition, derision, and the vast majority of Jews who were satisfied with their Judaism wanted no part of it. In our time this zealousness to restore a purer expression of our faith has erupted within the so-called Messianic and Hebrew Roots movements. And along with a handful of other folks within various Christian denominations we, like our forefathers, have set sail on an uncertain journey to recover and restore our faith, and of course we are considered by the majority of our Christian brothers and sisters as either traitors to our traditional Christianity (heretics), or simply wrong minded and divisive.

And so just as I ended last week's service, I want to begin this week's by encouraging you that if Ezra and Nehemiah and the few thousand of their supporters had not been willing to swim upstream and brave the opposing current, the stage could never have been set for the advent of Jesus Christ, our Messiah. Or better, it would have fallen to another group and set of leaders who were willing to give up everything to follow the Lord. Both the rebuilding of the Temple and the Priesthood, and the reinstatement of the Laws of Moses were prophetic prerequisites for Christ's coming. And so it is the same today that many Believers shall seek a restoration of a purer Bible driven faith that involves embracing the reborn nation of Israel, the return of Ephraim and Judah to their Promised Land, and obedience to God's commandments as prophetic prerequisites to Christ's return.

Will we achieve these things completely and perfectly? No. Because neither we nor the circumstances are perfect enough to allow it. And so it was for Ezra and Nehemiah. But we must do our best and not look back.

Now let's pivot and take a look at the Book of Ezra (and by default to the Book of Nehemiah) from a few other aspects, beginning with who wrote it and when it was written. The issue is complex and there are no easy answers. First, the Book of Ezra in your Bible is not the only Ezra in existence; there is also the Apocalyptic Book of Ezra that originated from an ancient Greek version of Ezra. Much like happened with the Book of Esther, we find that the Greek version has some additions to it that might be due to an attempt to both fill in some missing pieces (as far as the editor was concerned) or to make it more appealing and appropriate to a culturally Greek audience. This Greek version adds to the Hebrew Ezra version some passages from 2Chronicles 35 and 36, as well as some extra unique passages that were inserted at what most Protestant Bibles would say is Ezra chapter 4.

In the Western Church this Greek version is called Esdras (which is really just Greek for Ezra) and is considered as one of the 15 books of the Apocrypha; while in the Eastern Church both the Hebrew Ezra AND the Greek Ezra are in their Bibles and both are seen equally as inspired Holy Scripture.

This tells us something important; we discover that once the Jews were exiled from Judah, and living outside the Holy Land and assimilating into new cultures, the heretofore protected gates to the formation of the Bible as written strictly by Hebrews were flung open to foreign cultures and we see that influence particularly in the Books of Daniel, Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Daniel for instance, had large portions written in Aramaic (the language of the Babylonian Chaldeans) as well as Hebrew. Esther had sections written in Aramaic and Hebrew, but many Greek additions also found their way in. And with Ezra and Nehemiah we also find sections written in Aramaic (Chaldean), and Hebrew, and then sections of Greek added. So this makes matters quite difficult to sort out which of the passages we can reasonably assert are "original" and which are later additions.

The Ezra that we find in the Old Testaments of Protestant Bibles is usually taken from the Hebrew Bible, but not always. The Ezra we find in the CJB is from the Hebrew Bible and there are no Greek additions, so in general that is what we'll draw from for our study.

But that's not the end of the complications. Originally it seems that Ezra and Nehemiah were considered a unity; it's only later that they were divided into two books. This does not do harm to the texts, but it does tell us that these were originally written in such a way as they were meant to be used together as one continuing saga (not two perspectives or traditions on the same incident). But then comes the matter of who wrote Ezra. The traditional answer is that it was Ezra himself. There are a number of views on this and we certainly won't get bogged down in such a debate. However there are 4 primary approaches that most scholars will choose from.

First is the position that Ezra not only authored the Book of Ezra, but also the Book of Nehemiah and even 1st and 2nd Chronicles. This is the view that the Babylonian Talmud puts forth in a section called Baba Bathra and this view is accepted by many respected Christian scholars including William F. Albright and C. C. Torrey.

The second position is that Ezra wrote the Book of Ezra and Nehemiah wrote the Book of

Nehemiah. However, we find in both of these books that they switch back and forth from the narrator speaking in the first person (I, me, we) to the third person (them, they, him, her) and so it makes for the near certainty that while Ezra and Nehemiah may have been the primary authors, some number of other unnamed editors were also involved.

And the third position is that the Chronicler (that is, the anonymous writer of the books of 1st and 2nd Chronicles) was the editor of both Ezra and Nehemiah. This view is the most accepted one today by conservative and critical scholars alike. And what this essentially concludes is that the so-called Chronicler was the final editor who used the memoirs written by Ezra and Nehemiah (those parts of the documents that say I, me, we), and then added more information from other sources (for instance from some decrees written by certain Kings and officials involved in the Ezra and Nehemiah stories), and also added or clarified the genealogies that we see written in those books as well as including a handful of other ideas that he thought were important to communicate regarding the story. In other words, like many books of the Bible, there was more than one hand at work, and often it involved an inspired editor who used various authoritative documents and records to put together an accurate account. For those today who would then question whether we can trust these Old Testament accounts that were created this way, I remind you that this is exactly how the New Testament Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke were created (and there is no controversy over this in Christianity). And John the Revelator wrote his Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, drawing from several Old Testament books including, but not limited to, Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel. In other words, most of the books of the Bible were created partially by eye witnesses and partially by editors who pieced together various accounts, traditions and items of information to create a coherent end product.

As one who has written a few books, I can attest that this collaboration of author and editor is the norm today just as it has always been. An author determines a storyline and writes the original manuscript, and then an editor goes over it, checks assertions versus facts and alerts the author if there is a conflict or error, suggests some changes to better the flow or get the intended message across more completely, or is assigned to add the contents of other records and documents to bolster the author's claims and content.

I tend to adopt this 3rd view that Ezra, Nehemiah and the Chronicler all had a hand in these books as we find them in our Bibles (Western Protestant Bibles) today. It fits the facts. A 4th view that is not worth entertaining makes Ezra and Nehemiah out to be so corrupted as to be worthless; or that these are outright fakes or forgeries. This reasoning comes essentially from the same text critical liberal scholars who assert that the Book of Daniel is also a fraud.

So as to when these books were written, that has much to do with when the actual activities depicted in Ezra and Nehemiah occurred. And naturally, there are different views of that as well. So let's peel back the onion just a bit more and consider when the events of these two books likely took place. And the first thing we have to decide is whether the texts are correct or not, because they give us dates. They are not calendar dates as we'd prefer to see them, but they are dates given in the customary way it was done in that era; in relation to the reigns of kings.

We're told that it was in the 1st year of the Persian King Cyrus who freed the Jews and encouraged them to return to Judah and rebuild their Temple. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. and it was either that same year or the more accepted 538 B.C. that we find the first group of Jews heading back to Jerusalem on a mission to rebuild the Temple. They were led by a fellow named either **Zerubbabel** or **Sheshbazzar**. There is even the distinct possibility that these were two different people; in fact modern scholars are nearly unanimous that **Sheshbazzar** was a mysterious fellow that no one knows anything about, who was soon succeeded by **Zerubbabel**. The Jewish historians, however, insist that as was common in Babylon, most Jews had two names: a Babylonian name and a Hebrew name. Therefore **Sheshbazzar** was this first leader's Babylonian name meaning "Sin protects the father" (Sin was the moon god). **Zerubbabel** then was his Hebrew name meaning "the seed of Babylon". We'll deal a little more with that issue when we get there in Ezra chapter 1.

When the Jewish exiles arrived in Jerusalem they immediately faced severe opposition by the Samaritans (or better, Samaritans, the residents of the political district called Samaria that was on Judah's northern border). In time the Jewish returnees began to rebuild the Temple but were stopped by mounting political pressures coming from several directions. The work sat idle for several years but was finally completed. Later Ezra was commissioned by Artaxerxes, King of the Persian Empire, to take over Temple operations, so Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with another delegation of Jewish returnees in 458 B.C. So we see that it was 80 years between the very first group to go back, and the Ezra group to arrive in Jerusalem. However no doubt there were individuals and families who went there on their own, and some who returned discouraged to Persia, during that 80 year time period.

I said at the outset of today's lesson that we'd start to add some nuances and the first thing we need to square away is that history is messy. The exact dates of most things we read about in our history books or the Bible such as the conquering of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 723 B.C. or the conquering of Judah in 586 B.C. are usually the culminating events of a long drawn out series of events. Thus as we study the return of the Jews to Judah, it was a choppy, on-then-off-then-on-again venture with various groups going, some leaders then going back to Persia, and then going back to Judah a 2nd time. So we find that the very first group of Jews who followed **Sheshbazzar** or **Zerubbabel** back to Judah went almost immediately upon the end of their Babylonian captivity. And this group consisted of around 50,000 people, a goodly portion that lived through Nebuchadnezzar's attack of Judah and through the humiliation of being deported to Babylon. Yet we must also understand that even though the date of 586 B.C. is given as the usual date for when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, that's not really true. His first march into Judah took place a few years prior to 600 B.C. and then through a series of attacks and threats, he deported several waves of Jews to Babylon over the next 15 or more years until in 586 B.C. he had had enough of the rebellions and destroyed the city walls of Jerusalem and laid waste the Holy Temple.

So, the Jews who were living in Babylon in 538 B.C. when the call came to return to Judah were a mixed bunch of Jewish folks who had been in Babylon anywhere from 50 to 70 years and many more who had been born in Babylon. So indeed of this first group, some were former residents of Judah but who were now very old, and most no doubt had at least 2 and probably 3 generations of family born in Babylon. If they were ever going to go back it had to

be now or they would soon be too old to survive the rugged journey.

One other point of interest in order to give us a feel as to how this all fits into the biblical timeline: this first group went home well BEFORE the story of Esther took place; in fact probably some 50 – 60 years earlier. So get the picture: the context of the story of Esther was that the Jews were free and several thousand of the zealous had already long ago gone home, because Judah still felt like home to them. In fact, by Esther's time the Temple was rebuilt and functioning. Yet by Esther's day, no former residents of Judah were still living. Mordechai, Esther's step father, was one of the majority of Jews who chose to stay in Persia. He had been born in either Babylon or Persia, and never knew Judah as his home. So we need to grasp that whatever form of their Hebrew religion they were practicing, it was not the Torah and Temple based religion, it was something else. So we have to be careful not to miscalculate and give to Esther or Mordechai some kind of deep religious conviction and spirituality. Mordechai was there because he preferred to be in Persia rather than in Judah. Were they still faithful to the God of Israel? Yes, very much so. But it was in their own way.

And then we also need to realize that when Ezra led his contingent of Jews to Judah in 458 B.C., it was only a few years following the events depicted in the story of Esther. No doubt she and possibly Mordechai were still living. Esther's husband King Xerxes had died very recently, and now his son Artaxerxes was king. There is no reason to believe that Esther wasn't still royalty, even if she might not have been an influential queen. Did she ever return to Judah? It doesn't appear that she did. It's not hard to imagine that she had no interest in going to a place she knew nothing of, Judah; a place that was still largely a shambles. Judah belonged to her great grandparents; but as of now it was just a minor Persian province, one of 127 provinces or districts, and not a prosperous one.

As we study Ezra we'll learn that the Temple was completed in 516 or 515 B.C., some 57 or 58 years before his arrival to Judah. Ezra's goal would be to straighten out what he saw as improper Temple services, and to re-institute the Law of Moses as the law of the land that applied to commoners and priests. But the all important defensive walls around the city of Jerusalem were still not rebuilt and this is what Nehemiah would come to accomplish. The importance of the city walls being reconstructed cannot be overstated. Jerusalem was vulnerable to attack and people didn't feel safe without those walls. Until those walls were rebuilt, Jerusalem (and thus Judah) would not grow and thrive again. However, not all would see it that way. Judah's neighbors, other districts of the Persian Empire, saw rebuilt walls as a threat. It might enable Jerusalem to once again become strong and ultimately allow them to rebel.

However there are some date discrepancies and a few noted scholars say that the Temple was not completed until 350 B.C., because Ezra didn't come until much later than tradition tells us and the Bible tells us. Rather they say he didn't come to Judah until 398 B.C. and this is because the Bible contains a severe scribal error. Our Bibles say that it was under King Artaxerxes (Xerxes' son) that Ezra went to Judah; but this group of scholars says, no, it was Artaxerxes the 2nd. And there were 2 more Persian kings who reigned in between Artaxerxes and Artaxerxes the 2nd. Under this view Nehemiah came to Jerusalem **before** Ezra arrived (even though the plain reading of the text says otherwise), and almost all of this assumption

has to do with the mention of a certain person's name in the Book of Ezra chapter 10: Yochanon **son** of Eliashav. But in Nehemiah Yochanon is called the **grandson** of Eliashav. And an ancient document found in Elephantine, Egypt (a place with a large Jewish community) says that there was a High Priest in Judah named Yochanon around 400 B.C... And that this must be the same Yochanon that we read about in Ezra and Nehemiah so that drastically alters the timeline of Ezra and Nehemiah. As you can imagine, I don't give this much credence as there were many Yochanons in Judah as it was such a common name, and High Priests, kings, governors, and others tended to pass along a favored family names to the next generation.

So; we're going to go with the earlier more traditional dates as written in the Bible texts as opposed to taking obscure names out of context and using them to try to recreate a whole new timeline (something that scholars seeking to make a splash sometimes try to do). So our timeline is that the first wave of Jewish returnees to Judah was in 538 B.C. (about 50 years after the destruction of the Temple), the Temple reconstruction was completed in 515 B.C., then Ezra went with his group (much smaller than the 1st group) in 458 B.C., and then Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C. as the governor of Judah. So from the 1st group of exiles to return to Judah to when Nehemiah showed up, almost a century passed (a very long time).

It is always important when studying the Bible (OT or NT) to understand not only the life and political context within the Holy Land, but also outside of it because this context had everything to do with why certain decisions were made, why certain wars and battles were fought, why certain kings and governors were appointed, and even why certain prophets prophesied as they did. In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were front and center and spoke directly to the reestablishment of the Temple and the Law of Moses in Judah, and we will (at the appropriate time) read much of what they wrote because from these we get a far more spiritual viewpoint than the mostly historical and political viewpoints of Ezra and Nehemiah. That said, there is the theme of a reactivated covenant relationship between God and His people woven throughout especially the personal memoir portions of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Even though it was Haggai and Zechariah who prophesied during the Ezra/Nehemiah era, it was the prophet Jeremiah who was the greatest influence on understanding the importance of the covenants of Abraham and Moses as the point of binding together Yehoveh and Israel. Jeremiah is thought to have died in the same year that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple (586 B.C.), something that Jeremiah had prophesied and it resulted in his imprisonment for a time. Nevertheless, the exile had begun more than 15 years earlier with the first waves of Jewish deportees to Babylon so Jeremiah can rightly be included as one of the prophets of the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah's understanding of the covenant relationship (especially the Abrahamic Covenant) centered on the nature of that covenant as a divine promise. Thus despite their circumstances as captives of Babylon, this gave expectation to a release in time, and thus an assurance that the Jews would survive and return to their homeland.

Because the Jews had such difficult circumstances while in exile in Babylon that it led to their essentially establishing a new version of the Hebrew religion (one that would evolve into

Judaism), it became obvious to folks like Ezra that this problem had to be remedied. Ezra was among the few who recognized that living the redeemed life according to the terms of the covenant God made with Israel was the key ingredient to the prophecies of a glorious Kingdom of God being established worldwide, with Israel and the Israelites at the center of it. The Diaspora Jews certainly maintained a stated allegiance to the God of Israel, but they were in no wise living up to the terms of the covenant, even though they obviously felt that their newly invented worship practices and observances ought to suffice. Ezra knew otherwise and passionately urged his fellow Jews to return and take up the true Torah and Temple based religion once again.

Thus it would not be until many years AFTER the Temple was rebuilt that Ezra entered the picture. His goal therefore was to complete the Temple only in the sense of completing or perfecting its services. He came with the authority to reform the Priesthood such that it scrupulously followed the Priestly Code contained in the Laws of Moses. Remember: as we discussed in the first half of our introduction to Ezra last week, those who returned to Judah consciously and subconsciously took their “Judaism” born in Babylon back with them, and it became woven into the behavior and observances of both the lay Jews and the Priesthood. The greatest proof of this is in the fact that the synagogue system was eventually brought to Israel to work alongside the Temple; nothing of the sort that was envisioned in the Torah.

To complete our introduction, let’s get a lay of the land. Judah was a district or a province that was part of a larger political district called a satrapy. We’ll speak of this more as we journey through Ezra, but I want to prepare you for it now so that it isn’t confusing (and it really isn’t). The Persian Empire consisted of 20 satraps, each of which was sub-divided into provinces or districts. The King ruled over the empire, a governor ruled over each satrap, and an administrator ruled over each district. The USA and most Western nations are organized the same. In the USA we have a President over all the States. Each State has a governor and he has a certain level of autonomy. Each State is divided into smaller governing districts usually called counties, and there is some kind of county administrator. Even further there can be islands of smaller yet governing districts called cities, and these have mayors. The Persian Empire operated essentially the same way.

Judah was the equivalent of a county with its own administrator, and it was located within a “state” ruled by a governor. Fairly recently it has been discovered that the name of this state was “Beyond the River”. Yes, in many places in the Bible we’ll run across a mention of someplace beyond the river, and this has always been thought to refer to a direction and a general area. Now we know that most of the time Beyond the River is actually the formal name of a governing district, a state, which lay to the west and south of the Euphrates River. Beyond the River was large state that was divided into a number of “counties” and some of these will be mentioned by name in Ezra and in Nehemiah. The most prominent mention will be of Judah and Samaria. I need you to trust me that this short geography lesson, and the more in depth one that we’ll get as we begin our study in earnest next week, is vital to understanding not only what will happen within the book we’re currently in but henceforth all the way through the New Testament.

Next week, we’ll open up Ezra chapter 1.