

EZRA

Lesson 4, Chapter 2

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are commonly referred to as the story of the restoration of Judah (or Israel) that comes at the end of their 70 year Babylonian exile. But restoration in what sense? Typically it is meant as the restoration of the Temple and the re-establishment of Judah as the Jewish national homeland. From a purely historical standpoint, this is true. However we also need to see this restoration from a wider spiritual view. The restoration we witness in these 2 books is mainly about reinstating the Mosaic Law, complete with the benefits of atoning sacrifices, which can only be accomplished with the presence of an operable and properly functioning Temple and Priesthood.

When we look back to the book of Exodus we see that Israel only became a set apart nation at Mt. Sinai when God first gave Moses the Law. Prior to that time they were a large and growing extended family with Jacob (also called Israel) as their patriarch. Until they were given a constitution and a set of rules to live by (the Law of Moses), they were not a nation of people capable of being governed. What made them a nation, and then a nation set-apart from all other nations, was that their constitution and set of rules was divine.

Thus while the Jews dispersed about the Babylonian and then Persian Empires remained ethnically and racially connected and fully identifiable as Jews, without the re-establishment of their Temple and the observance of the Laws of Moses, and without residing in the land that God had set apart for them, they could not be a nation of God.

As we open Ezra chapter 2, the Babylonian Empire has been recently conquered and taken over by the Media-Persian Empire under their king, Cyrus the Great. Cyrus, a gentile of course, was nonetheless directly used by Yehoveh as the vehicle to punish Babylon for their inherent wickedness of worshipping a false-god system as well as for being too harsh (in God's view) on His Jewish people. But Cyrus would also be the means to release the Jewish people from their captivity in order to go back to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem, reconstruct the Temple, and reconstitute the Priesthood.

We should not think, however, that Cyrus's intent was for Judah to become an independent Jewish state with their own sovereign king as it had been 70 years earlier. Rather Judah was to remain as a district or a province within the Persian Empire; Cyrus would continue to be their king. It's only that Cyrus was an enlightened ruler who would install a Jewish governor in Judah, and allow the Jews to worship their God in the way they chose, and even encourage as many Jews who wanted to go, to migrate back to Judah and repopulate it. So we need to step back and get the bigger picture: from the time that Nebuchadnezzar first conquered Judah (around 606 B.C.), right on through the time of Yeshua and beyond, Judah was never again an independent nation. Although it was Ezra's dream, and no doubt the dream of most Jews down through the ages, that a fully independent State of Israel like it was in David's and Solomon's time would again arise, it would not happen until 1948 in the modern era. And

naturally, just as those 4 gentile world kingdoms that Daniel predicted would prevent Israel from being sovereign and independent, so would other empires and regional powers that followed them. And today, nations throughout this planet are doing what they can to undo the miracle of the God of Israel that only a few years ago re-established a sovereign Jewish state on the very land that God gave to Abraham. What we know with certainty in our time is that even though Israel is going to suffer greatly and at some point become utterly decimated, they will never again be exiled from their land. We also know that the coming Kingdom of God on earth is going to be governed by God Himself in the form of Jesus Christ, who will sit on His throne in Jerusalem, with the coming 3rd Temple as His throne room.

One final comment before we read Ezra chapter 2. This is going to be a long list of names; names of people and names of places. It is going to feel tedious, and in fact is one of those chapters that is regularly skipped over for that reason. However, because you have studied the Torah and the OT books that come before Ezra, this is going to have much more meaning to you than to those who haven't. So hang in there and you'll find that there is more here than a casual reading of these precious words might reveal.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 2 all

What has been described here is the first wave of Jews to return to Judah. And when I say first wave I don't necessarily mean that these were the first or only Jews to go back with this group. It is generally thought today by Bible historians that the names listed didn't go as one big group in one long procession that arrived back in Judah simultaneously. Rather this list is comprised of folks who came back in various stages from around 538 B.C. to perhaps 521 B.C. Thus this list is a composite list that was compiled by the editor of Ezra from other records and documents. In fact this same list appears in other places in the Bible such as in Nehemiah 7. It also appears in the Greek version of Ezra called Esdras. That said there are some minor differences among these various accounts in the list of names and places, and in the listing of numbers of people and items taken with them. Further, most of the numbers don't add up to the sum totals that are given. However if we assume that it is the sum totals of people and items that are correct, and that it is the list of individual people and items that has been corrupted by inadvertent copyist errors in ancient times, then we can begin by saying that something around 50,000 Jews returned to Judah from their homes in the Persian Empire in this first wave. And this means that at least 95% of all living Jews in the 6th century B.C. elected NOT to go back to their homeland.

Thus those who returned had strong reasons to go. After all, the province of Judah (especially the holy city of Jerusalem) still lay in ruins. And there was political opposition from those in surrounding areas to rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple (and we'll discuss that in detail in later chapters). Some of those reasons to return no doubt were spiritually driven but others were more practical and had much to do with a hope of reclaiming land, fields and orchards that their families had owned at one time. We must remember that depending on which wave of Jewish deportees exiled from Judah to Babylon that one was a part of, no Jewish family had been separated from their land holdings longer than 70 years, and others as short as 50 years. So just as we see today that Jews are still recovering property and seeking reparations resulting from their mass imprisonment by the Nazis in WWII, 50 – 70 years is not enough time

for families to become fully disconnected from, or forget about, what at one time was theirs.

So this is why we see mention at the end of verse 1 that of these Jewish returnees some returned to Jerusalem (mostly to deal with rebuilding the Temple) and others returned to Judah “each to his own city” (to reclaim land holdings). Then we get a listing of leading men who headed up this first wave of returning Jews. We get a similar list in Nehemiah chapter 7 and while mostly the same, there are differences. We won’t delve deeply into those discrepancies because what we can conclude from it would involve way too much speculation. I’ll just sum it up by saying that while in our Ezra listing we find the names **Seraiah, Reeliah, Mispah, and Rehum** in the Nehemiah 7 list we find instead **Azariah, Raamaiah, Misperet, and Nehum**. Plus in Nehemiah a name is added that doesn’t appear in Ezra: **Nahamani**. Some of this can be explained away as simply spelling variations and some as very likely the result of different ways the names were pronounced in ancient times. However not everything works out so easily. Some differences may be due to who, exactly, was considered important enough to list as the leaders, and some might be due to copy errors in the ancient Hebrew texts. Nonetheless, the lists are essentially the same.

There are however, a couple of names I want us to look at because they will provide some continuity as we study Ezra and Nehemiah, and also as we incorporate the prophets of that era, mainly **Haggai and Zephaniah**. The first name listed (indicating his preeminence) is **Zerubbabel**. We discussed last time that this name has caused some problems because in chapter 1 it seems as though the highest ranked leader of the return was a fellow named **Sheshbazzar**. And then with the beginning of chapter two the leader is called **Zerubbabel**. For the longest time scholars thought that this was the same person, who went by two different names: his Babylonian name and his Hebrew name (this was a common practice). However extensive study and new discoveries makes that unlikely and more likely is that these were two different but related people. As we discovered in our last lesson, 1Chronicles 3 gives us a listing of David’s royal descendants and in that list is a man named **Shenazzar** who is the uncle of **Zerubbabel**. Almost certainly **Shenazzar** is an alternate spelling for **Sheshbazzar**. And this is all the more likely because back in chapter 1 this **Sheshbazzar** is said to be a prince or chief (a **nasi**) of Judah. This means **Sheshbazzar** had to be royalty of Judah and the only legitimate royalty of Judah was King David’s line. Thus for reasons not recorded, **Sheshbazzar** turned over leadership to his nephew **Zerubbabel**. Maybe it was due to death, or maybe **Sheshbazzar** was too frail or elderly to make the 4 month journey and so the younger **Zerubbabel** was selected. We don’t know.

I want to remind you one more time about names of persons and places in the Bible: they can be confusing and challenging because they vary and yet still be entirely accurate. And there are three primary reasons for these variations: 1) they are the same name, but in different languages, 2) sometimes the same place changes names over time, and 3) words can be pronounced differently depending on one’s location. For example: once while traveling cross country I stopped in a well known city in Kentucky to get gasoline, and as I talked to the station attendant I asked him how to get back onto the Interstate highway. He told me to take Luvul Street to another street and make a turn. I drove around for a half hour and could never find Luvul Street. Finally I got frustrated and pulled over and asked another local where Luvul Street was and he said, “You’re on it”. And there on the street sign it said Louisville. Aha!

Louisville is pronounced Luvul by the locals. And depending on who you talk to, this place is also called Looyville. Now, imagine that you are a recorder of history and you are supposed to write down the name of this place in a history book, but you must do so in a foreign language. And especially a language that uses an entirely different alphabet. Here is the same place that is pronounced IN THE SAME LANGUAGE in at least 3 different ways. And essentially all writing has the goal of using written characters to capture and tell us the sound of a spoken word. And there is no way that you could write down the spoken words Louisville, Looyville, and Luvul using the same spelling.

Let me give you another example that even involves variant spellings and pronunciations that employ the same language, just enunciated differently in different locations. The word schedule is pronounced shedyool in England, while pronounced skedual in the USA. If we stuck to using our common alphabet correctly to capture the sound of that word, in England it would be spelled **s-h-e-d-y-o-o-l**. In the USA it would likely be spelled **s-k-e-d-u-a-l**. And if that happened, a few hundred years from now language experts would argue whether these two spellings were the same word or if they meant two different things. The only way to know is to delve deeply into each culture to ferret out exactly what people meant by these words and how they sounded when spoken. This is what we regularly encounter in the Bible.

So, until proven otherwise, I'm going forward saying that **Shenazzar** IS **Sheshbazzar** and this person is **Zerubbable's** uncle.

The next name in the list is one that is familiar to Hebrew Roots and Messianic folks: **Yeshua**. The usual Western Christian pronunciation of this word is Jesus. The **Yeshua** we find here is not, of course, Jesus of Nazareth. But this **Yeshua** of the Ezra list is an important figure. He is a priest, and in fact will be the first High Priest of the rebuilt Temple and restored Priesthood. Since **Yeshua** is such an important name to Believers, gentile or Jew, I just want to remind you that it is exactly the same name as Joshua. The only real difference is that **Yeshua** is a contraction of the more formal name **Yehoshua**, which is an alternate Hebrew spelling for Joshua. So for all practical purposes, **Yeshua, Yahshua, Yehoshua**, and Joshua are all the same name.

This **Yeshua** was the son of **Yosedek**, and grandson of **Seraiah**. **Seraiah** was the last High Priest of Israel (of Judah, really) to preside before the Temple was destroyed, and he was put to death by Nebuchadnezzar. It is fascinating to me that a fellow named **Yeshua** (which means God saves) would be the High Priest of the restoration of God's Temple, land, people, and of the Law of Moses as the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile. And that our **Yeshua**, the Messiah, will be the High Priest of the final restoration of God's Temple, land, people and of the Law of Moses as we enter the Millennium. This is a God-pattern and prophecy, not merely a happy coincidence.

Verse 2 ends with the words: "The number of men from the people of Israel" and then a listing of names under that category commences. There's more to this statement than what it might seem. First of all notice that lists we find in chapter 2 are broken into categories. The first category consists of those names from verse 2, the especially important leaders. Beginning in verse 3 is a listing of laypeople. Verse 36 starts the list of priests (**cohanim**). Verse 40 is the

list of Levites. Next in verse 41 are the singers; verse 42 begins the gatekeepers; verse 45 is a long list of Temple servants, called in Hebrew ***Nethinim***. After that we have a group that begins in verse 55 labeled as ***Shlomo's*** (Solomon's) servants. We'll talk about the remaining two categories later.

Here's the thing to notice: The 3 major group headings are the Israelites, the Priests, and the Levites. We have to go all the way back to Leviticus and Numbers to recall that the Lord separated the tribe of Levi away from Israel. Levi would no longer be counted as among their brothers (the other tribes of Israel) as being part of Israel. There are several verses that address this issue but this is one that sums it up well:

Numbers 18:20 CJB²⁰ ADONAI said to Aharon, "You are not to have any inheritance or portion in their land; I am your portion and inheritance among the people of Isra'el.

So this section of Ezra is recognizing that the tribe of Levi is NOT a part of Israel, and that Levi itself is divided into two groups: Priests and non-priests. But wait: why does this refer to Israel and then give a series of names and places that are actually associated with Judah? Shouldn't this be speaking of the laypeople of Judah and not referring to these laypeople as Israel? After all, this passage is about an exodus of Judah-ites (Jews) back to Judah. Two centuries earlier the 10 northern tribes of Israel (called Ephraim-Israel) had been removed from their land and scattered throughout the Asian Continent by the Assyrians, and they simply became absorbed into countless gentile nations where they went.

So there are a number of opinions about the appearance of the word "Israel" here, and how it is that we ought to take it. I think it is actually fairly straightforward and not so challenging to understand, but there are several elements involved. First, the Torah describes a time out in the wilderness when the tribes of Israel were divided by God into two groups: the laypeople, called Israel, and the priestly group called the Levites. So the editor of Ezra is recalling this divine division of Israel and uses it as his rationale for establishing the several categories of people that are named in Ezra 2.

Second is that because the 10 northern tribes (Israel) had been scattered and dispersed for so long, and their Hebrew identity had become greatly diluted and in some cases forgotten, the Jews of Judah began to think of themselves as the only surviving remnant of all Israel. So they thought of themselves to be representative of all Israel, all 12 tribes, and not just of the 2 tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Third, it is true that a handful of folks from the 10 northern tribes had migrated to Judah between the time of the Assyrian exile of the 10 northern tribes (about 722 B.C.) and the Babylonian exile of Judah (starting about 606 B.C.). However there is no evidence that those who had migrated into Judah had kept their former tribal identities; rather they had mostly assimilated and become Judah-ites. What ever few might not have assimilated seems to be an insignificantly small number.

And as we're going to eventually learn in Ezra chapter 8, once the Temple was rebuilt and the Priesthood was ready to again function, a series of sacrifices to dedicate the Temple and the

Priesthood took place. And everything about the dedication ceremony revolved around the number 12 (which is symbolic of the 12 tribes). For instance 12 priests were chosen, the ceremonial procession began on the 12th day of the month, and 12 bulls were sacrificed. And verse 35 of chapter 8 specifically states that the 12 bulls were to represent “all Israel”.

Thus the Tradition began with the return from the Babylonian exile that the Jews considered themselves as all Israel. Notice I said “tradition”, because this well meaning thought to see themselves as “all Israel” was a fiction. They were NOT “all Israel”, and in fact Ezekiel speaks of a day when the 10 tribes of Ephraim-Israel would eventually join with Judah to re-form “all Israel”. Ezekiel spoke this prophecy around the time Nebuchadnezzar was conquering Judah. And, it is likely that the Jews were assuming that this prophecy that was spoken about 70 years earlier was referring to the return to Judah from their Babylonian exile. Yet when we read Ezekiel 37, the last few verses make it clear that it could not possibly be so. Ezekiel is directly linked to why it is that the editor of Ezra probably chose to call the returning Jews “Israel” instead of Judah, so we’re going to stop and read Ezekiel 37 in its entirety. We’ve read it before in earlier lessons, but because it is also pertinent to us now and in the immediate future, it’s worth looking to it again.

READ EZEKIEL 37 all

So there you have it. There will be a time when the tribes of Ephraim-Israel will be rejoined with the tribes of Judah and they will go back to the Mountains of Israel and reconstruct a sovereign nation. And if you or I were among the pious and zealous Jews returning home to Judah from Babylon and Persia, and if we only wished to concern ourselves with the first 21 verses of Ezekiel 37 and ignore the last 7 verses of the chapter, then it is easy to see why they would assume that this prophecy was pointing to their return home from their Babylonian exile. But when we do read those final 7 verses it is made clear that what they will re-establish is a permanent sovereign nation and a descendant of David will rule over them.....forever. The problem is that they would NEVER again (until 1948 of our current era) be sovereign, and they would NOT be under a Davidic king, and they would NOT remain in the land forever. Rather, not long after Christ’s death the Temple would once again be destroyed and Jerusalem decimated (this time by the Romans), the Jews would not have their own king, and the Jews would once again be exiled. So the events of Ezekiel 37 could not possibly have referred to the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile.

And as a result of what we read today in the 2nd chapter of Ezra the Jews of the modern State of Israel have continued in this 2500 year-old Jewish tradition that they ARE the 12 tribes of Israel. However some are starting to face up to this fantasy as the 10 so-called Lost Tribes have only recently re-emerged from their hiding places in Asia, and are insisting that they have the right to go home to Israel; not as Judah (as Jews) but rather as “Ephraim-Israelites”. And through some newly modified laws of Israel, and some rethinking on the part of some of the chief Rabbis of Israel, the realization is slowly settling in that the Jews do NOT represent all 12 tribes, but only 2 of them. The other 10 tribes are starting to trickle home as Ephraim-Israelites, joining with the their Jewish brothers (as illustrated by the two sticks prophecy) and so the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 is finally underway but it is happening not in the 6th century B.C. as those Jewish returnees from Babylon thought, but instead in the 21st Century

A.D. before our very eyes! We are the eyewitnesses to the fulfilling of Ezekiel 37.

This is a great lesson for all Believers, Jew or gentile. The Jews of old thought they saw prophecy partially fulfilled and thought, “close enough”, and thus jumped to some conclusions that have proved false. As we read the prophecies of the Latter Days and the End Times, we need to realize that it will ALL come true, not just part of it. And it will be full and complete, not just partial. And exactly how it looks when it happens is difficult to impossible for us to know right now. We just have to maintain faith that it WILL happen and be on the lookout for it TO happen.

Let's now spend just a short time deciphering these several lists of names that form Ezra chapter 2. First, the names presented come in two forms: family names and place names. Thus from verses 3 – 20 we have a list of clan or family names who are going back to Judah. From verses 21 – 35 rather than have the names of people, we have the names of cities and towns that certain exiles originally came from, and are on their way back to, where they believe they still have land holdings to reclaim as their own . And it is important to note that all of these place names (cities and towns) lie within the territory of Judah, and not to the former territory of the 10 northern tribes.

Let me also address something that I've heard some Hebrew Roots folks and Jews claim; it is that many of these names listed are names associated clans of the 10 northern tribes of Ephraim-Israel (thus possibly indicating that many of the 10 lost tribes were among this group). This claim has no validity. In my research of excellent ancient language experts and the top tier of modern Bible scholars, there is no way to differentiate whether those names are associated with Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, Dan, Reuben or any other specific tribe.

The list of **cohanim** (priests) starting at verse 36 is short; only 4 family names. And that would make sense because there were only ever a handful of priestly families, and so their numbers were comparatively small. This list can be directly connected to the list of priestly families in 1Chronicles 24.

After the priests are listed the Levites, Singers and Gatekeepers are listed. It is rather surprising that the number of Levite Temple workers is so few as compared to the number of priests. One would expect the number of Levite Temple workers to be a factor of 3 or 4 times higher than the number of Priests whom the Levites served. We can only speculate that since the Levites were the blue collar workers who held menial jobs, and who were essentially servants to the higher class Priests, there weren't many Levites in Persia and Babylon that were eager to return. In fact later on in chapter 8 we'll find Ezra complaining that he could only muster 38 of them to come and serve.

Most scholars and Rabbis believe the Singers were also Levites. The Gatekeepers' jobs were to keep the Temple and the treasury safe and secure. There was a sizeable number of Gatekeepers who returned (139), likely because the job carried some prestige and didn't involve very much arduous labor. All of the Levites were listed by family name and not the Levitical city that their family had come from.

Then we come to verse 43 and a class of workers called the Temple servants or the ***Nethinim***. These appear to be the lowliest class of Temple workers. This class was subordinate to both the Priests and the common Levite Temple workers. The ***Nethinim*** were the servants of the servants, so to speak. There is some controversy about just who these folks are, and very likely they were originally a mixture of foreigners who were captured in war and assigned to the worst possible Temple duties that no Levite wanted, along with Gibeonites (people from Benjamin) who were at one time punished almost to extinction, and then some amount of hereditary Levites.

We've got a few more categories to go, which we'll look at next week. And we'll also get well into chapter 3 as the Jews arrive back in Judah and begin to settle in and start the task of rebuilding the Temple.