**Ezra – Nehemiah Bible Study**

**Ezra 1:1 – Ezra 6:22**

**ALL NOTES TAKEN FROM:** [**www.enterthebible.org**](http://www.enterthebible.org)

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**Ezra 1:1-11 – Cyrus’s Decree – SUMMARY**

The decree of Cyrus the Great permitted the people to return to their homes in Jerusalem, thus ending the Babylonian exile and fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy.

**ANALYSIS**

The Babylonians dealt with conquered peoples by deporting them to Babylon where they could live in relative freedom and prosperity, perhaps accounting for the meager numbers of exiles who wished to return to Jerusalem with Ezra and Nehemiah. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E., the policy of deportation as a means of dealing with conquered peoples changed. The Persians preferred that conquered peoples stay in their own lands (but pay tribute) worshiping their own gods (and praying for the Persians). This tolerant religious policy signaled the end of the exile for the people of Israel and led to Isaiah's description of Cyrus as God's "anointed" (messiah) in Isaiah 45:1, even though Cyrus was not a follower of Israel's God.

While they were in Babylon, Jeremiah had urged the exiles to accept their lot (Jeremiah 29:4-9). But he also announced that the exile would last only seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11, 12; 29:10), after which time the people would return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. These first verses of Ezra see the decree of Cyrus as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's words. Notice that Cyrus's apparently magnanimous offer is somewhat self-serving and that it is "the Lord" who "stirred up" Cyrus's spirit to make the proclamation, just as it was the Lord who "stirred up" the Assyrian and Babylonian kings who brought God's judgment upon Israel (1 Chronicles 5:26; 2 Chronicles 21:16) and who "stirred up" those exiles who returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). The majority of those people who returned at the stirring of God were members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the priests, and the Levites. But the text understands Cyrus's decree to mean that, though not all the exiles need return to Jerusalem, they all need to support the rebuilding of the temple (vv. 3-4).

The returning exiles bring with them the temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had removed when he destroyed Jerusalem (vv. 7-8). The return of these vessels serves to strengthen the continuity between pre- and postexilic Israel. The discrepancy between the list of the vessels (2,499; vv. 9-10) and the stated total of 5,400 vessels (v. 11) is due to the author's utilization of differing sources.

**Ezra 2:1-67 – Israel Transplanted – SUMMARY**

This list consists of those exiles who returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel.

**ANALYSIS**

Scholars inevitably find problems with this dreary list. The numbers are too large to convey accurately the actual host of the initial return, and the list seems misplaced and secondary in its present context. Most of the lists in Ezra-Nehemiah, however, have been constructed from other lists and serve the practical purpose of providing a running commentary on the status of the community in relation to the developing situation of reform. One scholar suggestively describes this lengthy register as "the living portions of Israel, roots and all, for transplanting." The same list, with minor discrepancies, also appears at Nehemiah 7:6-69, though with a very different theological agenda. The purpose here is to lift up the community's continuity with the past.

This tedious listing of returnees has been used to assure the restoration community that their occupation of the land is not serendipitous but based upon their ancestral roots as seen in their family pedigrees, as well as in their ancestral home as seen in their territorial situation. They have become the transplanted raw material from which God will grow Israel.

**Ezra 3:1-4:5 – Worship Restored – SUMMARY**

Chapters 1-2 established the continuity between pre-exilic Israel and those just returning from exile in terms of God's gracious activity and the physical transplanting of the people themselves. Here the theme of continuity continues with the reestablishment of worship by those who had returned with Zerubbabel.

**ANALYSIS**

The first stage in the completion of God's mission to restore the exiles to their homeland given through Cyrus, the Persian king (1:1-4), was completed in chapter 3 with the restoration of the altar and the resumption of sacrifices (3:1-6). The restoration of the altar began in "the seventh month," an auspicious time with its celebration of the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Booths. The New Year celebration would situate the community properly with respect to sacred time, and Booths would celebrate their return with reminiscences of God's gracious deliverance of their forebears from Egypt as well as a recommitment to the covenant. The Day of Atonement would not have been celebrated before the rebuilding of the temple.

The altar was restored in 538 B.C.E.. Curiously, chapter 3 does not mention that a period of eighteen years elapsed before work on the ruined temple began in 520 B.C.E. The author of Ezra is much more interested in the theological importance of these events than in the accurate historical accounting of the events we might prefer.

Haggai blames the eighteen-year delay in rebuilding the temple on the people's selfish neglect. The author of Ezra sees the problem as external and blames the delay on the opposition of the surrounding peoples thus absolving the community of the charge of neglect. This opposition will continue throughout Ezra and Nehemiah.

Main Message of Haggai – “Build the temple, Build the temple, Take the Risk, God is with you!”

**Haggai 1:1-4**  In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house. 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: 4 Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?

**Haggai 2:4-5**  4 Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, 5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

**Ezra 4:6-23 – Later Opposition – SUMMARY**

Later accusations registering complaints-about the building of the Jerusalem walls rather than the temple-in the form of letters between the opposition and the Persian throne are cited, perhaps to indicate the persistent nature of the opposition. From 4:8 until 6:18 the text is in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire.

**ANALYSIS**

Two of the opposition's letters are mentioned in passing, with no recorded royal response: one to Ahasuerus (that is, Xerxes I, 486-465 B.C.E., v. 6) and a second to Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.E., v. 7). Rehum's letter (4:11-16) and Artaxerxes' reply (4:17-22) are a different matter. Here, Rehum, speaking for the officials of the Persian satrapy of "Beyond the River," accuses the Jewish community of rebellion and sedition. This can be seen in the Jewish rebuilding of that "rebellious and wicked city," that is, Jerusalem (v. 12), which will result in loss of revenue in "tribute, custom, or toll" (v. 13). Rehum's charges conclude with an invitation for the king to search his own records for the rebellious history of this troublesome city that necessitated its destruction in the first place (vv. 14-16). The effectiveness of Rehum's attack can be seen in Artaxerxes's response that closes with a work stoppage (v. 23). Verse 24 returns us to the cessation of work on the temple during the reign of Darius. The continuing theme of opposition highlights the tentative nature of the community as well as their continuing dependence upon God.

**Ezra 5:1-6:22 – The Temple Rebuilt**

**SUMMARY**

The temple is rebuilt under the prophetic leadership of Haggai and Zechariah, who urged the people to resume construction despite the vigorous attempts of Tattenai, the governor, to block their efforts.

**ANALYSIS**

The second stage in the completion of God's mission to restore the exiles to their homeland was completed with the rebuilding of the temple.

The temple was central to Israel's spiritual life. As the sign of God's presence among the people, the temple represented the focus of their worship and the source of divine blessing. Its completion signaled the continuity with the past that the returnees so desperately needed to experience. Now that they were under Persian rule and no longer politically defined, a fundamental problem confronting the community lay in their need to define themselves in relation to those around them. The accounts of opposition from the surrounding peoples that frequently occur in these chapters testify to the seriousness of the problem. The building occurred over a long period of time as the community struggled against this opposition and the demoralizing conditions that met them upon their return.

The first sentence of Ezra 6:14 provides a cheery summary of the project's success, giving the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who threatened and cajoled the people to persist in their labors (Ezra 5), their due. More important, the second sentence defines Israel in terms of both the Persian administration and their God, maintaining that God had caused the Persian kings to decree the return and rebuilding, just as, through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, God had stirred up the people to build the temple.

**Main Message of Zechariah “Build the Temple – God is with you – don’t anger God by not listening”**

**Zechariah 1:2-4**  2 The LORD was very angry with your ancestors. 3 Therefore say to them, Thus says the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. 4 Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds." But they did not hear or heed me, says the LORD.

**Zechariah 2:10-11**  10 Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the LORD. 11 Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you.