

LESSON 5

Continuing with Ezra 1:5

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

As we study the opening verses of Ezra, we need to be on the look out for those themes that will run all throughout the book. So far we have seen two - writing and the temple.

Here in verse 5 we see a third - the continuity between the post-exile Jews and the pre-exile Jews. It was important for the returning exiles to understand their connection with the people who had occupied the land prior to the exile.

Those who returned are grouped in verse 5 under four genealogical headings: Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites.

Judah and Benjamin were the two tribes of the Southern kingdom. (The tribe of Simeon was also located in the South, but that tribe was divided and scattered and eventually absorbed into Judah. Jacob had said in Genesis 49:7 that Simeon would be divided and scattered.)

We learn elsewhere that the various returns to Jerusalem also included some Jews from the scattered tribes of the northern kingdom.

1 Chronicles 9:2-3 - Now the first to dwell again in their possessions in their cities were Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the temple servants. And some of the people of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh lived in Jerusalem:

Two of the categories in verse 5 are priests and Levites. What is the difference between a priest and a Levite?

In short, all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.

Those Levites who were not priests were assigned duties connected with the tabernacle.

Numbers 3:5-8 - And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle.”

Those Levites who were not priests assisted the Levites who were priests, they kept guard over the tabernacles, they prepared the cereal offerings, and they cared for the courts and the chambers of the sanctuary.

Back to our text, another thing that we see in verse 5 is that while God’s work requires determination and faith, it also requires planning and preparation and progress toward a specific goal.

The idea of a return to Jerusalem was wonderful, but absent planning, preparation, and goals that idea would have accomplished nothing.

What was the goal here? The immediate, realizable goal was the construction of the temple, but we know that God had additional longer term goals in mind.

There is, of course, a lesson here for us. God’s people should never just wing it. We must be a prepared people and a goal-oriented people. We have a mission to accomplish, and that mission will not be accomplished absent our planning and our preparation. **Failing to plan is planning to fail!**

We won’t meet Ezra until Chapter 7, but when we get there, here is what we will find.

Ezra 7:10 – For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Ezra prepared himself for the tasks that God wanted him to accomplish. And what was the first step in Ezra’s preparation? He opened the word of God.

We, like the exiles, need to be a prepared people!

Ezra 1:6

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold,

with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

Verse 6 seems to have in mind more than just the **Jewish** neighbors of those exiles who returned, and, if so, we see yet another parallel between the first exodus from Egypt and this second exodus from Babylon.

Those who left Egypt also took with them supplies from their **Egyptian** neighbors.

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

So, in addition to help from Cyrus and help from God's own people, God was stirring up all of those who remained behind (both Jew and non-Jew) to provide assistance to those who were returning.

God was using everyone to accomplish his plans, whether they knew it or not. And this is another parallel with the first exodus as we recall how God used Pharaoh and the Egyptians to accomplish his plans for his people.

Ezra 1:7

7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

It is very significant that verse 7 tells us that **Cyrus** brought forth the vessels.

When a king captured a nation, he would take that nation's idols and religious objects to his own capital to symbolize the victory of his gods over the gods of those he had conquered.

Nebuchadnezzar had carried the temple articles away to Babylon in 587.

2 Kings 24:12-13 - ...The king of Babylon [Nebuchadnezzar] took him [Jehoiachin] prisoner in the eighth year of his reign and carried off all the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the LORD, which Solomon king of Israel had made, as the LORD had foretold.

And when had that been foretold? Hezekiah had displayed the temple articles to Babylonian emissaries a hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar took them.

2 Kings 20:12-13 - At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick. And Hezekiah welcomed them, and he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

Before we read further, does this seem like a smart thing for Hezekiah to have done? No, and Isaiah is quick to tell him so.

2 Kings 20:14-19 - Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, 'What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?' And Hezekiah said, 'They have come from a far country, from Babylon.' He said, 'What have they seen in your house?' And Hezekiah answered, 'They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.' Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who shall be born to you, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.' Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days.'

That last verse is a classic! Who cares if I have brought calamity to the land if that calamity occurs long after I'm gone! Hezekiah should run for Congress!

Unlike Hezekiah, we need to work and plan today, not just for the people of God today, but also for the people of God tomorrow. What will this building and this property be used for 100 years from now? Part of the answer to that question depends on how we use it today.

Jeremiah describes the burning and looting of the temple in Jeremiah 52:12-23, and part of the reason for why that happened can be traced back 100 years earlier to the actions of Hezekiah. Likewise, what we do today ripples forward in time. Continuity works both ways!

Look today, for example, at once faithful congregations of the church that have gone astray. How did that happen? I suspect we could trace the large deviations back to small deviations many that

occurred many years earlier — small deviations that perhaps at the time were not viewed as all that serious.

That King Cyrus himself now returned these same objects to the Jews shows how serious he was in respecting their religion and customs. The parallel decree that we will see later in Ezra 6 specifically mentions that these objects were to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

We also saw these vessels in Daniel 5 when Belshazzar, a **Babylonian** king, and his friends were using them in a drunken feast while they praised their false gods and idols.

Now we see the vessels again, but this time being returned by a **Persian** king stirred by God to do so.

The return of these vessels is important to several of the themes we will see in this book.

First, they are important to the theme of the **temple** and its restoration. Not only was the building being restored, but the items within the building were being restored as well.

Second, the returned vessels were important to the theme of **restored worship**. Not only was the temple being rebuilt, and the items within it being replaced, but those items were being used in worship as God had originally intended, which was primarily to deal with the proper disposal of sacrificial offerings (Exodus 38:3; Numbers 4:14). And when we see that and think of the perfect sacrifice that was yet to come, these temple vessels take on even more significance.

And third, the returned vessels were important to the theme of **continuity**. The returning Jews were connected to the Jews who had been carried off. In fact, the temple vessels they now had were the very same vessels that their ancestors had used prior to the exile. We will see another reminder of this theme in the next verses.

Ezra 1:8-11

8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9 And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, 10 Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand. 11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

Mithredath the treasurer in verse 8 was probably the senior Persian financial officer in Babylon. Both the name and the title are Persian rather than Hebrew. The name is derived from “Mithras,” the Persian sun god.

Sheshbazzar in verse 8 was a Jew with a Babylonian name. Although Sheshbazzar quickly disappears from the scene, he led the first group of returnees back to Jerusalem.

The description “prince of Judah” in verse 8 has been used by some to argue that Sheshbazzar was of the royal line of David, but elsewhere in the Bible the word “prince” is used simply to denote a leader. (See 1 Chronicles 2:10, for example.)

Verse 8 shows us how carefully the temple objects were treated – the treasurer “counted them out” to Sheshbazzar.

This careful treatment by the Persians is very different their treatment by the Babylonians, who drank from the temple vessels in Daniel 5.

Who was Sheshbazzar?

The relation between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (the leader we will meet in the next chapter) is not entirely clear.

In Ezra 3:8 we read that Zerubbabel and others began the work of building the house of God, and in Haggai 1:1 Zerubbabel is called governor of Judah. Zechariah 4:9 says: “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house.”

But, Sheshbazzar is called governor in Ezra 5:14, and Ezra 5:16 says, “This Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem.”

So, both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are called governor, and both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are said to have laid the foundation of the temple.

How do we explain this?

These verses have caused some to suggest that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person, but that does not seem likely and is not required by these verses. The foundation could have been

laid by more than one person, and they could have each been governor at different times.

The most likely explanation is that Sheshbazzar was governor at the beginning and Sheshbazzar started the foundation, and then Zerubbabel became governor after Sheshbazzar died and Zerubbabel completed the foundation.

The evidence suggests that Sheshbazzar was the leader and governor when the first group of captives came. We see that here in verse 8, and we will see that again in Ezra 5:14.

Sheshbazzar disappears from the scene quickly, and Zerubbabel, who accompanied Sheshbazzar to Judah and who led in the building project, followed him as governor. We see that in Nehemiah 12:1 and Haggai 1:1.

We also saw Zerubbabel in our study of the book of Zechariah. The crucial fact about Zerubbabel from that study was that Zerubbabel was of the royal line of King David. That fact made Zerubbabel a vital link in God's plan of redemption.

And, in fact, we find Zerubbabel and his father Shealtiel in both the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1 and the genealogy of Christ in Luke 3. But, when you look at those genealogies, you will find that Shealtiel has a different father in each, and Zerubbabel has a different son in each! How do we explain that? Stay tuned! We will get to those questions in the next chapter.

What are all of those vessels in verses 9-10?

Commentaries differ on the meaning and uses of the various items listed in verses 9 and 10. Many of the words used here are Persian loan words.

As we have said, the gold dishes were likely the vessels used to collect the blood of slaughtered animals. The word translated "knives" in the KJV and "censers" in the ESV is uncertain and may have been the knife used in the ritual slaughter of the animals.

The mathematicians among us may have noticed that the numbers of items in verses 9 and 10 do not add up to the total in verse 11. The total number of the articles listed in verses 9-10 is 2499, which is less than half of the total of 5400 given in verse 11. Why the difference?

The short answer is that we don't know, but there are a few possibilities.

1. It is possible that the articles listed in verses 9-10 were those taken by Nebuchadnezzar and returned by Cyrus, while the total number in verse 11 includes the articles donated by those who remained behind (verses 4 and 6). But, as we will see in a moment, this explanation involving new vessels does not fit well with the reason these vessels are listed here in the first place.
2. A very common view is that verses 9 and 10 list only the most important or the largest items, while verse 11 gives the total of all items. A possible problem with this view is the catch-all category in verse 10 – “a thousand other vessels” – but that could mean a thousand other important vessels or large vessels. A point in favor of this view is 2 Chronicles 36:18, which speaks of “all the vessels of the house of God, great and small.”
3. For another possible explanation, if we look at verse 10 we find the following expression – “silver basons **of a second sort** four hundred and ten.” Apparently, the Hebrew word translated “second sort” here is close to the Hebrew word for 2000, which might mean that in the original version this verse recited 2410 silver basons instead of only 410 silver basons. But that would still leave us with a problem because then the list would total to 4499 instead of 5400. But, numbers are easy to transpose when copied, and if that happened here by some later copyist, then the total in verse 11 might have been 4500 instead of 5400 – and 4499 rounds up to 4500. Thus, under this theory, the original version recited 2410 silver basons, with a total of 4500 in verse 10. That is not my favorite explanation, but it is a possibility.
4. A final possibility comes from noticing all of the Persian loan words that appear in this inventory. Those Persian words may suggest that this list came from an official inventory maintained by the Persian treasurer mentioned in verse 8. If so, then perhaps the inventory was not a complete list, and the number of items handed over to the Jews was greater than the number listed on the Persian inventory.

My preference is the second explanation. The inventory covers only the largest vessels; the total count at the end includes both small and large vessels. And perhaps the fourth explanation is also correct, with the official Persian inventory ignoring the smaller vessels.

It is interesting to note one thing that did **not** accompany the exiles back to Jerusalem – the ark of the covenant.

It may have been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, although Ethiopians will tell you today that it currently resides in their cathedral in Aksum, having been stolen from Solomon by the son of the Queen of Sheba!

My **opinion** is that God took the ark back before it could be destroyed by the Babylonians. Some point to Revelation 11:19 as support for that position – “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple” (although we need to be cautious that we not lift that figurative reference out of its proper context).

Of more concern to us than the numerical problem is the question of why this list is included here at all. What was the point of including this list?

One commentary suggests that the purpose of the list is to stress that **all** of the vessels had been returned.

But there is a problem with that view. We know that not all of the vessels were returned. 2 Kings 24:13 tells us that some of the vessels were cut up into pieces by Nebuchadnezzar, presumably those that were too large to transport otherwise. Also, additional vessels would be transported to Jerusalem later, as we will see in Ezra 7:19.

I think a better view is that what we see here with this list is yet another reminder of a key theme in the entire book – the theme of continuity.

These were the **same** vessels that had been taken away long ago. These vessels, which verse 7 tells us had been brought forth out of Jerusalem, were now, as verse 11 tells us, being brought from Babylon unto Jerusalem. They were the **same** vessels – and I think that is the key point here.

Those people who now returned were connected with those who had been taken. They were connected by families, and they were connected by the items they carried back with them. The exile had not created an irreparable breach – a restoration was possible.

The mention of these vessels also provides further confirmation of the prophecies of Jeremiah, who was mentioned in verse 1. In Jeremiah 27:16, Jeremiah had told the people not to listen to the false prophets who said that the vessels of the Lord’s house shall now shortly be brought again from Babylon. Instead, in Jeremiah 27:22, Jeremiah said the vessels would remain in Babylon until the day that God visited them.

Jeremiah 27:22 - They shall be carried to Babylon and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the LORD. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.

That is what we see happening right here in Ezra 1.

That short phrase at the end of verse 11 – “when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem” – is one of the most important events in the history of the world.

It certainly would not have been seen as such at the time (perhaps not even by those who were returning), and it is certainly not seen as such by most today, but mankind is a poor judge of the momentous. We tend to amplify that which is trivial and denigrate that which is important.

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

What is more important to God – the events that take place in this building or the events that take place in the US Capital building? The discussions and decisions that take place here or the discussions and decisions that take place in the Supreme Court chambers? Intellectually, we know the answers to those question – but do we really believe it? Do we really see the Lord’s church as God sees the church?

One way to see the church as God sees the church, the eternal kingdom of Christ, is to study all that God did to bring about the kingdom of Christ, and a very good place to do that is right here in the book of Ezra.

Yes, from one perspective, all we see here is the return of a small group of exiled Jews to the ruins of their city and their temple, an event ignored by most at the time and an event that would have undoubtedly been forgotten long ago absent its appearance in the Bible.

But from from God’s perspective, what we see here in Ezra 1 is one of the most important and momentous events in all of recorded history. What we see here is an event that was vital to God’s plan to bless the world through Christ and to establish the kingdom of Christ in this world. The great powers of the day were important only for how God was using them to further his plans to fulfill his promise to Abraham made long before.

Ezra 2

One of the books in my library is entitled, “How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible.” It might seem

sacrilegious to some to suggest that parts of the Bible are boring, but most would likely agree that Ezra 2 is not one of the most exciting chapters of the Bible.

But, as one commentator noted, as uninviting as this chapter may seem, it is a monument to God's care and to Israel's vitality.

If this chapter or any other chapter seems boring to us, then we just haven't studied it enough. We need to look more deeply into God's word, and when we do, we will find that there are great and marvelous lessons to be learned from every verse in Bible.

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

We have already seen that continuity is a major theme in Ezra, and continuity is a major reason for the presence of this list.

Ezra and his readers were very concerned about the continuity between themselves and the Jews who lived in Judah prior to the exile. They needed to know that God's covenants and promises still applied to them, and they needed to be secure in their own position in the plan of God.

We need to keep in mind that most of these returning exiles had never lived anywhere other than in Babylon. They had not been born when their parents and grandparents were carried off 70 years earlier, and they had never lived in Jerusalem. They needed to know that they were connected to those who had lived here before the exile.

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

Another possible reason for the list was to legitimize land rights after the return from exile.

Yes – the Jews had left their homeland. Yes – others had moved in while they were gone. Yes – the Jews wanted their land back when they returned. Yes – those who had moved in did not want to give up their land. And, yes – history has a way of repeating itself!

But there is a crucial difference between the return of the Jews to their homeland under Ezra and the return of the Jews to their homeland under Harry Truman – the former was part of God's plan to bring Jesus into this world, while the latter was not.

#ezra-esther