

LESSON 6

Last week we started looking at Ezra 2, even though we haven't reached the first verse yet.

When we get to the text of Ezra 2, what we will find for the most part are a lot of hard to pronounce names and a bunch of numbers. As we said last week, some might view Ezra 2 as boring, but I hope that we will see it differently.

When we start looking at the names in this chapter, one thing we will notice is that some of the names are listed by ancestral families while others are listed by geographical location. Why the difference?

Here is where we are starting to see some of the difficulties that arose when people are transported away from their homes for 70 years. One of those difficulties is that memories are sometimes short, and especially when those who returned were the children or grandchildren of those who had left.

Most likely, those in Ezra 2 identified by their ancestors were those who could trace their lineage back to a known Jewish ancestor. They either remembered who that ancestor had been, or they were taught his name by their parents and grandparents. By contrast, those who could identify only their former city did so because that is all they now knew.

So why do we have this strange list in Ezra 2?

We already know one reason - continuity, which is one of the major themes of the book. This list is here, at least in part, to show the continuity between those Jews who were now returning and those Jews who had been carried off 70 years ago.

But is that it? Does this list of strange names have any lessons for us today?

I think we can discover a lesson for us today from this strange list in Ezra 2 by looking at Mark 14.

In Mark 14:9, Jesus, speaking about the woman with the alabaster flask, said, "truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

And, although Mark did not give us her name, that woman is being honored here today 2000 years later for her act of kindness and love to Jesus. Ezra 2 is filled with such people, most of whom are also

nameless.

Why did they leave their homes to return to a place of suffering and hardship where most of them had never personally lived?

Why? Because they loved God and longed to worship God as he desired to be worshipped. Because they had faith in God, and they knew God would protect them and guide them. Because they believed the prophets of God and had faith in the plan of God and the providence of God.

And for that they are honored by God in Ezra 2.

And as we read Ezra 2, let's think about their example. Perhaps we should write Ezra 2 in the margin of our Bible next to the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11.

“To God each individual and family is significant. Thus the group of returnees is not simply lumped together, but valuable space in Scripture is given to otherwise unknown families and individuals. The group of exiles was not large, but it was vital to God's plan. ... [They are] the heroes of this drama. Through them God's purposes in Israel were continued.”

It is through this small group and their descendants that we still have the Old Testament Scriptures, which they carefully preserved, and it is through this group and their descendants that Jesus later came into this world.

Even though they were unknown and unnoticed by the world, they were at the heart of God's plan of redemption.

I fear that the church today often suffers from an inferiority complex. We sometimes feel as if we are of little significance in our modern world.

But we need to see ourselves as God sees us – we are the very center of God's attention. We are the primary means by which God is fulfilling his plans in this world.

Yes, we are a small group, as these exiles were a small group, but we should remember that God's people have been a majority in this world only two times: just after creation and just after the flood.

All throughout the Bible we see God using things that are small to topple things that are big. In Daniel 2, it is a small stone that hits the feet of that giant statue representing the kingdoms of this world,

toppling it. We are that small stone. We are that faithful remnant today. Ezra 2 shows us that faithful remnant 2500 years ago.

This chapter is about those who returned. What can we say about those who decided to stay behind in Babylon?

Certainly there are some bad reasons for having stayed behind – personal comfort, lack of faith, apathy. But there are also some understandable reasons to have stayed behind – health, family, planning to return later.

In fact, one of the great heroes of faith in the Bible, Daniel, stayed behind in Babylon. Yes, he was in his eighties, but remember that Daniel came out of that lions' den in his eighties!

Also, the families of Ezra and Nehemiah must have stayed behind as well, along with many other families who returned to Jerusalem in the later returns, including the return we will see in Ezra 7.

My point is that we should not automatically be critical of those who chose to stay behind. If some had not remained behind, then how could the work of Nehemiah ever have occurred?

We each serve God in different ways in his kingdom – and we shouldn't look down on someone just because he or she is not doing what we are doing.

1 Corinthians 12:14-18 - For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

We each have an important role to play in God's kingdom, but we don't each have the same role to play. I think that is another lesson we find here in Ezra 2.

And with that, let's begin!

Ezra 2:1-2a

Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city; 2 Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah.

The key phrase in these verses is the phrase “came again” in verse 1.

This was not a new people going to a new place. This was an old people going to an old place.

That each returned to his own town emphasizes the continuity with the pre-exile group. The returning exiles were claiming their territorial inheritance and reaffirming their roots in and their rights to the land.

The word “province” in verse 1 probably refers to Judah rather than to Babylon.

A big question in the commentaries about Chapter 2 is whether it is describing the first return or some later return.

Verse 63 mentions the governor by title, but does not tell us who the governor was at this time. If we look at our two choices from last week, what we find is that Sheshbazzar is not mentioned by name in this chapter, but Zerubbabel is mentioned in verse 2.

This has caused some to suggest that Chapter 2 is describing a later return than the one we saw in Chapter 1.

Haggai tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua were in Jerusalem by the second year of Darius (520 BC). And so some suggest that Ezra 1 is describing the first return in 538 BC, and Ezra 2 is describing a later return that occurred some time before 520 BC.

I don't think that is right, and I don't think the text requires us to see a different return in Ezra 2.

I think the better view is to see Ezra 2 as a description of the first return that occurred in 538 BC. Why?

First, we have already seen how important dates are to the author of Ezra, and it would seem odd to suddenly be discussing a later return without any temporal marker in the text.

Second, Ezra 3:1 begins with a temporal marker to the seventh month, which is without any context if it does not refer back to the first year of Cyrus' reign mentioned in Chapter 1.

And third, Ezra 3:8 refers to the second year of their coming, which would seem to suggest that Chapter 2 is describing the first return.

As we focus in on the leaders' names in verse 2, we immediately notice that several of the names are familiar.

Jeshua was the high priest, and he is referred to as Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah. We had a great deal to say about him in our study of Zechariah.

According to Haggai 1:1, he was the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, which would make him the grandson of Seraiah, the high priest before the exile in 2 Kings 25:18.

The name Jeshua means "salvation" and is the Old Testament equivalent of the name Jesus.

We also see Zerubbabel in verse 2. In our study of Zechariah, we looked at both Jeshua, the High Priest, and also Zerubbabel, the grandson of king Jehoiachin.

So close was their partnership, that God through Zechariah used it as a foretaste of the perfect regime that was to come, when priesthood and royalty would be perfectly united in Jesus.

And, as the book of Hebrews tells us, that combination of royalty and priesthood in a single person could happen only under a new covenant because kings came from the tribe of Judah while priests came from the tribe of Levi.

The combined royal priesthood of Jesus is a golden thread that runs all throughout the Bible, from the beginning to the end, and each time we see it, it is a reminder that the Old Law was never intended to be permanent.

Zerubbabel's role in God's plan was particularly important.

It was vital that a lineal descendant of King David return to Jerusalem so that one day the King of Kings could occupy the throne of David – which is what Jesus did in the first century.

Luke 1:32-33 - He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Let's take a quick side-trip on this point. In Acts 1, prior to the ascension of Jesus, his apostles ask him a question.

Acts 1:6 - So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

What we often hear about that verse is that the apostles were apparently still expecting an earthly physical kingdom, and so once again Jesus had to correct their misunderstanding. But is that right? I don't think so.

First, Acts 1:6 says nothing about an earthly kingdom or physical kingdom, and second, Jesus in response never tells them they have a misunderstanding, but only that they should leave the timing to God.

And there is another problem with what I will call the usual explanation - it seems to ignore what had happened to the apostles between the resurrection and the ascension here in Acts 1. Look first at the third verse of Acts 1.

Acts 1:3 - He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

The apostles asked their question in verse 6 after listening to Jesus speak about the kingdom for 40 days! I don't know about you, but that makes me think that they may have known exactly what they were asking in verse 6!

If they had really asked about a physical kingdom in Acts 1:6 after 40 days of teaching about the kingdom, I think Jesus might have asked them in verse 7 if they had been listening to a single word he said! But Jesus did not ask them that.

And also consider some things we learn in Luke.

Luke 24:27 - And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24:45 - Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

I don't think the apostles were mistaken in any way with their question in Acts 1:6. Instead, they were simply asking about a question about something Jesus had just taught them, and they wanted to know **when** it would happen.

If that is correct, then what does their question in Acts 1:6 mean? "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Don't we know the answer to that now? Didn't Jesus, in fact, restore the kingdom to Israel when he sat down on the throne of King David and became the first person to do that since King Zedekiah? And isn't that exactly what Peter said happened in Acts 2?

Acts 2:29-30 - Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

And remember the prophecy of Amos:

Amos 9:11 - In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.

And we also see that same prophecy later in the book of Acts.

Acts 15:15-17 - And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

God restored the kingdom to Israel in Acts 2 when God once again placed a king on the throne of David.

We know from other Bible books that Zerubbabel was of the house of David, and the royal link between David and Jesus. But why is that all important connection not mentioned anywhere in Ezra

or Nehemiah? The prophets speak about it, but not Ezra or Nehemiah. Why?

I think it was because the purpose of this return was to restore the temple and proper worship – but it was not to restore the Davidic kingdom. That part of the restoration would come much later when Jesus would occupy the throne of David.

If the question in Acts 1:6 had been asked in Ezra's day, the answer would have been no. But when that question was asked in Acts 1, the answer was yes in the very next chapter.

And, getting back to Ezra 2, Zerubbabel, the godly grandson of the wicked King Jehoiachin, was a key part of God's plan to restore the kingdom to Israel.

Why? Because, although Zerubbabel was never a king, Zerubbabel had royal lineage back to David.

With that background, we would expect to find Zerubbabel in the genealogy of Christ. Do we? Yes. In fact, we find his name in both genealogies.

Luke traces the genealogy from King David through his son Nathan, while Matthew traces the genealogy through Solomon. But the two lines cross in Zerubbabel and his father, Shealtiel.

Matthew 1:12-13 - And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud.

Luke 3:27 - the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri.

To say that those two verses raise some questions is the understatement of the day!

What's the problem?

First, as we just read, Zerubbabel's son in Matthew is different from his son in Luke.

Second, Shealtiel's father in Matthew is different from his father in Luke.

Third, Matthew goes back through Solomon, while Luke going back through Nathan, so how do we have the same pair of names in both genealogies?

Fourth, if you count back from Jesus to Zerubbabel, you get 11 generations in Matthew and 20 generations in Luke.

So what is going on?

One possible explanation is that they are different father and son pairs. Yes, the names are the same between Matthew and Luke, but that is about where the similarity ends, so maybe that is what is happening here — two different father-son pairs in each genealogies having the same names.

I don't know about you, but that explanation is not entirely satisfactory. Zerubbabel is such an important figure, and his father in each list is the same. That really makes me want to think that we have only one Zerubbabel in these two genealogies, and it is the same Zerubbabel we find in Ezra.

But can I believe that with all of these differences? I think the answer is yes, but it does take some explanation.

As for the fourth problem — 11 generations back to Zerubbabel in Matthew versus 20 generations in Luke — we know there are some gaps in Matthew's genealogy. How do we know that for sure?

First, we know there are some gaps because we can identify them. Matthew 1:11 says that Josiah was the father of Jechoniah, but we know that he was in fact his grandfather. Matthew leaves out Jehoiakim. (The word "father" can mean simply an ancestor, as it does in Matthew 1:11.)

But second, we know there are some gaps for the simple reason that Matthew provides only nine names to cover the around five hundred years between Zerubbabel and Jesus, while Luke gives us eighteen names for the same time period.

But what about the other problems - different fathers and different sons?

How do we explain the different fathers of Shealtiel – Neri in Luke and Jechonias in Matthew?

The most likely explanation is that Shealtiel was the product of a levirate marriage. What is that?

The word "levirate" does not come from the name Levi, but rather from the Latin word "levir" meaning a husband's brother.

A levirate marriage occurred when a man died childless. Rather than have that man's line come to an

end, his brother would father a child with his widow, and that child would then legally be the heir of the man who had died childless. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)

In this case, Neri would have died childless, and his brother, Jechonias (who was King Jehoiachin) would have fathered a child with Neri's widow. In that case, either Neri or Jechonias could be referred to as the father of Shealtiel — one being his actual father, and the other being his legal father.

But that does not entirely solve the problem for us. If Neri and Jehoiachin were brothers, then why don't they have the same father? Matthew 1:11 tells us that Josiah was the father (actually, grandfather) of Jehoiachin, and Luke 3:28 tells us that Melchi was the father of Neri.

The answer is simple – if this theory is correct, then Neri and Jehoiachin must have been half-brothers with the same mother but different fathers.

That would also explain how Zerubbabel could appear in both genealogies of Christ even though one traces down through Nathan and the other traces down through Solomon.

Do we see a levirate marriage anywhere else in the Bible other than with Shealtiel? Yes – we see it with his son, Zerubbabel!

1 Chronicles 3:19 says that Zerubbabel's father was Pedaiah, but Ezra 3:2 says that Zerubbabel's father was Shealtiel (as do Matthew and Luke). Again, the most likely explanation was a levirate marriage.

Should it surprise us to see so many levirate marriages in the royal line? Not really, for two reasons.

First, in a royal line, you would expect siblings to have a higher death rate than normal, and, second, in a royal line, you would expect an increased concern with maintaining family lines. Putting those two things together suggests that one might expect to see more levirate marriages in a royal line than elsewhere.

Another possible explanation for having two fathers is adoption. This is likewise something that one might expect to see more of than usual in royal families. A king whose brother had died (perhaps with a little help from the king!) might be interested in keeping a close eye on his royal nephews. We will see an example of adoption in the book of Esther.

Esther 2:7 - "And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had

neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.”

Finally, what about the son of Zerubbabel? In Luke, his son is Rhesa, while in Matthew his son is Abiud. And 1 Chronicles 3:19-20 lists seven sons of Zerubbabel, none of which is either Rhesa or Abiud.

How do we explain that?

The short answer is that there are many potential explanations for the different names we find between Zerubbabel and Jesus in the two genealogies, and we can't look at all of them here.

We might ask why we have two genealogies in the first place? Some suggest that both genealogies give the genealogy through Joseph with Matthew providing the legal heirship of Jesus to the throne of David by naming the successive heirs of the kingdom from David to Jesus, while Luke gives Jesus' actual descent from David. Other say that Matthew gives Jesus' descent through Joseph, while Luke gives Jesus' descent through Mary.

I favor that second view, which would quickly explain why we have two different sons of Zerubbabel in the two genealogies. As for why the sons of Zerubbabel in Matthew and Luke don't match the names in 1 Chronicles, either different names are used for the same people, or the list in 1 Chronicles was not exhaustive.

We need to pause and consider one more question about this issue before we move on. Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) was such an evil king that Jeremiah 22:30 said:

“Thus saith the LORD, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah.”

And yet right there in Matthew 1:12 we find King Jehoiachin listed among the ancestors of Jesus. How is that explained?

First, I think the phrase “in his days” in Jeremiah 22:30 is important – the focus of that verse was on the lifetime of Jehoiachin. He would not live to see any of his seed ruling from the throne of David – and we know that he did not.

Second, we should compare Jeremiah 22:30 with Jeremiah 36:30.

“Therefore thus saith the LORD of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost.”

That verse was written about Jehoiachin's father even though we know that Jehoiachin did sit on David's throne for about three months! Yes, he sat on the throne, but he was a powerless puppet king.

Again, the point of Jeremiah 36:30 is that Jehoiakim would not have a son who would “sit enthroned” where the Hebrew word used there denotes some degree of permanence and security. We see a similar pronouncement about Jehoiachin in Jeremiah 22:30.

Third, even if Jeremiah 22:30 was a curse on Jehoiachin and all his future descendants (as some suggest), that curse seems to have been lifted.

Jeremiah 22:24 says:

“As I live, saith the LORD, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were the signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck thee thence.”

And yet in Haggai 2:23 we read:

“In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts.”

The ring came off, but the ring was put back on.

Back to Ezra 2

I said in an earlier lesson that Ezra does not refer to Nehemiah anywhere in his book, and yet right here in verse 2 we find Nehemiah. Should I correct what I said earlier? No.

Our timeline lets us know that the Nehemiah listed in verse 2 is not the Nehemiah who returned many years later in 445 BC, and the Mordecai listed here is not the Mordecai from the book of Esther.

Seraiah was also the name of Ezra's father (7:1), and Bigvai is a Persian name that also occurs in the Elephantine Papyri as the governor of Judah following Nehemiah. But, again, our timeline lets us know that we just have different people with the same names.

#ezra-esther