

Lesson 7

Last week we ended with 2:40-42, and we discussed how the extremely small number of Levites among the returnees is very strong evidence *against* the common modernist view that the law was actually written or rewritten during this time, as opposed to during the time of Moses. Let's look next at the other categories:

Verse 41 mentions the singers. Nehemiah combines the singers with the Levites. According to 1 Chronicles 15:16-24, David had organized the singers into 24 groups to correspond to the 24 groups of priests. Only one group is mentioned here.

The name Asaph in verse 41 is associated with a number of the Psalms, including, for example, Psalm 50, which has the heading "A Psalm of Asaph."

Why so few singers? Again, most likely the demand for singers was small in Babylon and they gradually moved to secular occupations.

The work and the organization of the porters or gatekeepers in verse 42 are described in 1 Chronicles 9:17-29.

The people who returned were the same people who had been exiled – but they were also different. They had been changed by the exile, and some things had been lost. For example, some of those with skills dedicated to the temple had moved to secular jobs while in exile. Much had been forgotten as well, as we will see later in this book. The difficult task of restoration lay ahead, and the further the drift, the more difficult the task.

The church today is also exiled in Babylon. We are not located in our promised land of rest, but rather we are surrounded by Babylon. Will we let Babylon change us, or will we make it our task to change Babylon? Will we let the distractions of this world cause us to forget God's word? Will we transfer our loyalties to the world? The call of Ezra is a call for God's people to return to God's word – and that is a call for all of us.

Ezra 2:43-54

43 The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth, 44 The children of Keros, the children of Siaha, the children of Padon, 45 The children of Lebanah, the children of Hagabah, the children of Akkub, 46 The children of Hagab, the children of Shalmal, the children of Hanan, 47 The children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, the children of Reaiah, 48 The children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, the children of Gazzam, 49 The children of Uzza, the children of Paseah, the children of Besai, 50 The children of Asnah, the children of Mehunim, the children of Nephusim, 51 The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur, 52 The children of Bazluth, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha, 53 The

children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Thamah,
54 The children of Neziah, the children of Hatipha.

Verses 43-54 list the temple servants, which comes from the Hebrew word translated “Nethinim” in verse 43 and that literally means “the given” or “the dedicated ones.” Ezra 8:20 tells us that they attended the Levites, which most likely means they assisted the Levites in performing the more mundane duties.

The many foreign names in this list indicate that this group probably consisted of people of non-Israelite descent. Ezekiel 44:6-9 tells us that Israel was not always careful about using foreigners as temple servants and may have even allowed them to serve as priests. Exodus 12:48 and Numbers 15:14-16 tell us that foreigners were welcome, but they had to follow the law. (“One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.”)

Some of these people may have been descendants of the Gibeonites, whom Joshua had made woodcutters and water carriers in Joshua 9:27. First Chronicles 22:2 tells us that David brought in strangers to work on the temple. This group may also have included people who were acquired through war as described in Numbers 31:25-47.

Ezra 2:55-58

55 The children of Solomon’s servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Peruda, 56 The children of Jaalah, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel, 57 The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Ami. 58 All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon’s servants, were three hundred ninety and two.

Verses 55-57 list the descendants of Solomon’s servants. This group is a puzzling category, and it is not clear what they were supposed to do.

This group must have been closely related to the temple servants because they are both included in the single total given in verse 58. There were only 392 of these servants from all 45 of the families or clans, which means there were on average fewer than 9 per clan.

These servants of Solomon may have come from the native population that Solomon used for work on the temple. (1 Kings 5:13-18)

The name “Sophereth” in verse 55 means “the scribe” and the name “Pochereth of Zebaim” in verse 57 (translated “Pochereth-hazzebaim” in the ESV) means “the gazelle keeper,” and these may have been the names of guilds. If so, these servants may have been more involved with secular tasks than the temple servants. (But Ezra 7:24 seems to refer to this group as “other servants of this house of God,” so we can’t be certain about what they did.)

Ezra 2:59-63

59 And these were they which went up from Telmelah, Telharsa, Cherub, Addan, and Immer: but they could not shew their father’s

house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel: 60 The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two. 61 And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai; which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name: 62 These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood. 63 And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.

Verses 59-63 describe those who had lost their family records. The context here suggests that the towns in verse 59 are most likely the Babylonian towns from which these exiles had come. Apparently some had lost their family records during the exile, or possibly some of these people were proselytes. Nehemiah 7:5 speaks of “the book of the genealogy,” and for whatever reason these people were not in it. They were not sent back, but were likely given the status of circumcised foreigners, at least temporarily.

The “priests” among this group were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. Numbers 16:40 warned that “no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord,” and so these men were excluded.

Did that act make the governor popular? Likely not with some, and today it would be seen as the height of insensitivity, which seems to have recently replaced smoking as the great societal evil of our day. Obedience to God won out over popularity here, and that is a lesson we all need to hear. And we also see here a wonderful lesson in leadership. Good leaders don’t base their decisions on what is popular, but rather on what is right.

Keep in mind that after AD 70, when all of the genealogical records were destroyed, all Jews are in the situation of the Jews in these verses.

Barzillai in verse 61 is interesting, and is in fact unique in Scripture in having taken the name of his father-in-law. The elder Barzillai appears to be the same person in 2 Samuel 17:27 and 19:32 who helped David when he fled from Absalom. It is interesting that the priest who married his daughter took his name, and some surmise it was so he could inherit land (in violation of Numbers 18:20), which could explain the trouble his descendants were experiencing here.

The exact nature of the Urim and Thummim in verse 63 has been called “one of the great mysteries of the OT.” What is known is that they were placed in the breastpiece of the high priest.

(Exodus 28:30) And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron’s heart, when he goes in before the Lord.

(Leviticus 8:8) And he put the breastplate upon him: also he put in the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim.

It has been suggested that they were two small objects that were used to signify the will of God,

much like the casting of lots.

Josephus contends that the answer was given by a miraculous shining of the jewels on the high priest's garments. It is likely that 1 Sam 23:9–12; 30:7–8 may refer to them with the use of ephod.

The words Urim and Thummin are spelled with the first letter and the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Septuagint translates them as “lights and perfections.” We see them elsewhere in Scripture:

(1 Samuel 14:41) Therefore Saul said, “O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O Lord, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.”

(Numbers 27:21) And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

Apparently, as we said, they were small objects carried by the High Priest in his garments and used to answer questions that required a yes or no response. Such also occurred in the New Testament in Acts 1:26 when Matthias was chosen over Justus by the casting of lots.

These questionable priests were to be excluded from the priesthood until a High Priest would come who could use the Urim and Thummin to determine their true status. Since Jeshua is not mentioned here, it is possible that no high priest had yet been appointed.

We don't know for sure if these questionable priests were ever allowed to serve as priests in the temple because here and the parallel passage in Nehemiah 7 are the last time the Urim and Thummin are mentioned in Scripture. Some commentaries suggest that Hakkoz in verse 61 (Koz in the KJV) was later allowed to be a priest because Meremoth, the son of Uriah, is identified as a priest in Ezra 8:33 and as the grandson of Hakkoz in Nehemiah 3:4, but that could be a case of shared names.

Apparently either the Urim and Thummin had been lost during the exile or the ability to use them had been withdrawn. For now, it seems that God was speaking to his people only through his written word, but that would soon change because God was about to send Haggai and Zechariah to proclaim his word among the people.

The Tirshatha in verse 63 is the Persian word for governor and likely refers to Sheshbazzar as it does in Ezra 5:14, where the Hebrew word for governor is used, or it could refer to Zerubbabel. That the governor was making these decisions again suggests that perhaps no high priest had yet been appointed.

How important was it that only those Levites who were descendants of Aaron be priests? We could ask Korah from Numbers 16, but of course he did not live to see the end of that chapter. And, as we saw on our recent study of Jude, Korah remains today as an example of those who rebel against God's demands for proper worship. (Jude 11) Men ignore God's commands for proper worship at their peril. That has also been true, from the beginning pages of the Bible up until the present day.

Ezra 2:64-70

64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, 65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women. 66 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five; 67 Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty. 68 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place: 69 They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments. 70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

The numbers in the list add up to 29,818, which is 12,542 fewer than the total of 42,360 given in verse 64. Nehemiah 7 provides that same total, although the sum in his list is 31,089 (which is 11,271 fewer). (As a former math teacher, this may be why I like Ezra so much!)

As we discussed, the differences in the individual numbers might be explainable as rounding or copyist errors, but what about the larger total?

Some suggest it included the women and children under 12 (but that would be a surprisingly small number of women and children – but perhaps the difficulties in this first journey caused many women and children to remain behind), while others suggest it includes families from tribes other than Judah and Benjamin. Most likely, some families were simply omitted from the itemized list, but were included in the total (which we also saw as a possibility with the temple items).

Why are we told in verses 65-66 about how many servants and horses and donkeys they had? That information tells us about the economic condition of the people, and it indicates there were some wealthy people among them. The very large number of slaves (about one to every six freeman) combined with the gold and silver in verse 69 points to great wealth by some, but not by all. The rich had horses while the poor had donkeys, and the donkeys outnumber the horses 9 to 1.

When Haggai prophesied about 20 years later, the economic situation appears to have worsened considerably. A run of bad harvests and high prices combined with enemy intervention had left them with nothing but their expensive paneled homes to remind them of their former prosperity—and to remind them of their neglect of God's house. (Haggai 1:4)

The singers in verse 65 are not related to the temple singers we saw earlier. These singers were professional singers who could be hired to sing at marriage feasts and funerals.

Verse 68 provides a hint of what was to come when it says that “some of the heads of families ... made freewill offerings.” Some gave, but others it appears did not. Haggai 1:7-11 links the worsened economic condition to the people's neglect of the temple: it was “because of my house

that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.” (Haggai 1:9)

Although many of the Jews settled in Jerusalem, verse 70 tells us that some settled in other cities, either cities that they had formerly occupied or Levitical cities or elsewhere.

Although these numbers seem large, we should note that the vast majority of Jews remained in Babylon. Only a small group returned to Jerusalem. In fact, the book of Esther does not even mention any Jewish community living in Israel even though we know they were there at that time.

Chapter 2 at first glance seems long and tedious, but it is anything but tedious when you see it for it is. First, it is a roll call of all who were willing to leave comfort and security behind when God opened a great door for them. Second, this entire chapter is a prelude to the great events of rebuilding the temple and restoring proper worship that were to come. That restoration would not be possible absent the genealogical information in this chapter that had been carefully preserved during the exile.

It was a great joy for these people to be involved in the plan of God, as we see in Psalm 126 (which many think refers to this period of time):

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Ezra 3:1

And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.

After the issues involved with resettling on the land were completed, it was time to focus on the primary reason for the return – religious restoration.

Although the year is not indicated, the reference to the “seventh month” most naturally points us back to the first year of the return that we saw in Chapter 1. If so, that would mean that the events in these opening verses of Chapter 3 took place in 538, the same year that Cyrus issued his decree and the Jews first returned under Sheshbazzar.

The seventh month was Tishri (September-October). It was also in the seventh month that Solomon gathered the people together to dedicate the **first** temple (1 Kings 8:2).

The seventh month was the most important month in the Jewish calendar. On the first day they would have celebrated the New Year and the Feast of Trumpets. On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement. From the fifteenth until the twenty-first day they would have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verse 1 tells us that the people gathered “as one man.” They had a common bond and a common purpose, and they understood that a united worship was vital in dealing with dangers from outside. I’m sure I don’t need to point out the lessons for us in that description.

We also see here something we will see often in this chapter – a link with the church. Acts 2:44 tells us that on the day the church was established, “all that believed were together, and had all things in common.”

Ezra 3:2

2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

Two major leaders stand out in the first half of Ezra, and we see them both (again) in verse 2: Jeshua and Zerubbabel.

Jeshua was the High Priest as well as the grandson of the High Priest prior to the exile, and Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the King prior to the exile. Their presence provides very strong evidence of the continuity between these people and those who had been carried away 70 years earlier.

Again, we wonder what happened to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the people on their return in Chapter 1? As we discussed earlier, some surmise that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two names for the same person. Others suggest that Zerubbabel may have been a subordinate leader under Sheshbazzar. Meyers suggests that Sheshbazzar may have been an elderly figurehead, with Zerubbabel being in charge of the day-to-day affairs. In 5:16, we will be told that “Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Many times the hardest part of a project is just getting it started. Someone needs to step up and take the initiative, and that is why having good leadership is so important. Zerubbabel and Jeshua got things moving, and, as we discussed, their combined leadership as Priest and King was so effective that Zechariah used it to describe the perfect King and High Priest who was to come.