

Ezra 1-3 Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

Review of History of Israel

Let's begin with a thumbnail sketch of the history of Israel.

Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob → 12 sons = 12 tribes

Egypt – Slavery → Exodus: Moses – Covenant w/God; Law

Conquest – Joshua

Judges – Samuel

Monarchy – Saul, David, Solomon

Divided Kingdom – Israel (10 tribes), Judah (2 tribes) → Prophets, Idolatry

Exile – Israel defeated by Assyria, 722 BC // Judah defeated by Babylon, 609 BC

The Assyrians & Babylonians followed a policy of using ***terror*** as a way to keep their subjects in line.

They also shuffled the populations of those they conquered to new lands.

The idea was that people would be so busy trying to start new lives in a new land they wouldn't have time to stage a rebellion.

So the Assyrians deported the 10 tribes of Israel & scattered them throughout several of their provinces.

But they didn't want to lose the economic resources & income of the rich Israeli land so they transplanted to there people they'd conquered in *Syria & Mesopotamia*.

Because the capital of this region was located at the city of Samaria, the region became known as Samarian & the people, Samaritans.

They were a mixed race of mostly Syro-Mesopotamians with a smattering of Jewish blood.

Their religion was a mish-mash of Judaism & idolatry.

A little over a hundred years later, when the Babylonians defeated & deported the tribes of Judah & Benjamin from the southern kingdom, they relocated them in Babylon itself, & didn't really resettled anyone in Judah; they left the land vacant & desolate.

It fell into disrepair & ruin & became a wilderness where the nomadic eastern tribes would take their flocks & herds to graze.

During the final days of the southern kingdom, the prophet Jeremiah foretold Judah's defeat & exile.

He said because the people failed to keep the sabbath year for the previous 490 years, the land was owed 70 years of rest.

That's how long Judah would be in exile in Babylon,

But at the end of that time, they would return to resettle & rebuild.

Ezra, the author of this book, also wrote 1 & 2 Chronicles.

Let's read the closing verses of 2 Chronicles as they form the bridge between

the 2 books.

2 Chronicles 36:22-23 - ²² Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it in writing, saying,* ²³ Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who *is* among you of all His people? May the LORD his God *be* with him, and let him go up!

Those are the same words that begin Ezra.

It's a signature of his authorship of both accounts & meant to be understood as a seamless transition in the story.

Outline

I. THE RETURN UNDER ZERUBBABEL • Chs. 1–6

II. THE RETURN UNDER EZRA • Chs. 7–10

I. THE RETURN UNDER ZERUBBABEL • Chs. 1–6

A. The Decree of Cyrus • 1:1–4

We covered vs. 1-8 in depth Sunday so we'll just read the text tonight with a couple quick comments regarding some historical details we didn't have time for then.

¹ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it in writing, saying,*

The Babylonian Empire which had defeated the mighty Assyrian Empire before them, went quickly into decline after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar who led the conquest of Judah.

A series of weak kings ruined Babylon who in arrogance thought they were invincible.

Cyrus was a Persian who rose to power by leading the Persians in a conquest of the Medes & forging an alliance between the 2 that set the stage for them to defeat their old nemesis the Babylonians.

[MAP]

Babylon was a legendary in its greatness so when the Medo-Persians conquered it, they made it their western capital; Cyrus made it his base.

His "first year" here in v. 1 means his first year as king over Babylon. It was 539 BC.

And it was 70 years after Babylon's *first* conquest & deportation of Judah.

² Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which *is* in Judah. ³ Who *is* among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to

Jerusalem which *is* in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel (He *is* God), which *is* in Jerusalem. ⁴ And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which *is* in Jerusalem.

As we saw Sunday, it's pretty clear from the *language* of Cyrus' proclamation that someone, probably Daniel, had shown him the prophecies of both Jeremiah & Isaiah and these had resulted in Cyrus' coming to some kind of faith, however rudimentary, in the God of Israel.

What's interesting is that we know Cyrus not only allowed the *Jews* to return & rebuild, he gave permission to *all* those displaced by the Babylonians to return to their ancestral homes.

The *Cyrus Cylinder*, discovered in 1879 in the ruins of Babylon, relates a blanket request to all his subjects to consider returning to their homes.

What would move the Persians to enact such a widespread & far-reaching policy?

Well, we see the real agent behind that here; *God's Spirit* moved Cyrus to do it because God had spoken & God's Word cannot, NOT happen.

But as we look at the *historical situation*, we can see how God engineered world events to *facilitate* Cyrus' proclamation.

Cyrus was the *absolute monarch* over a vast empire.

Rulers like that rarely make far-reaching political decisions based purely on religious motivations.

They usually need some kind of *pragmatic encouragement* as well – & there was plenty of that in Cyrus' case.

It came in the form of the Greeks on Persia's far western frontier.

The Greek city-states had established colonies along the coasts of Asia Minor.

They butted up against the western border of the Persian Empire.

There'd already been blood shed in battles between them & each year the Greeks got stronger.

The Persians were astute enough to realize the gravest threat to their control over the region was the emerging Greeks.

As long as they remained fragmented in independent city-states who fought each other, Persia could hold them back.

But if they ever *united*, that would be a different story.

There was a lot of intrigue during this time as the Persians performed all kinds of espionage, sabotage & political maneuvers to keep the Greeks at odds with each other.

Of course, they eventually *did* unite under Philip & his son Alexander, who then led the Greeks in defeating the Persians & pushing them back to their homeland.

But during Cyrus' time, he knew the best way to resist the growing influence of the Greeks was to garner the *willing support* of his subjects.

They would be far less likely to rebel if Persia was a benevolent master.

So it as a pragmatically astute move to grant repatriation to anyone who wanted to return to their native homes.

Since it had only been 70 years since Judah's exile & the Jews from the southern

kingdom had remained together, there were many who wanted to return. That could not be said for the northern 10 tribes who'd been exiled & scattered over 200 years before by the Assyrians. So no return was made to Samaria, only Judah.

We can take great encouragement from all this because it reminds us that our God is in control of history.

Not only was Cyrus confronted by the prophetic words of Jeremiah & Isaiah, but God had worked providentially to put Daniel in his court to show him the prophecies & had worked in the world scene to set things up politically so that Cyrus would see it as the pragmatically smart move to allow the exiles to return.

God is on His throne; fret not!

B. Preparations and Provisions • 1:5–11

⁵ Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin,

The 2 tribes who'd lived in Judah.

and the priests and the Levites,

Who'd been based in Jerusalem where they'd served in the temple.

with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the LORD which *is* in Jerusalem. ⁶ And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all *that* was willingly offered.

Some 50,000 make this first return.

But many more remained in Babylon where after 70 years they'd settled down and were doing quite well.

They made large gifts to those returning so they could make a fresh start.

⁷ King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods; ⁸ and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

This was the sacred furniture & utensils that had been used in the service of God at the Temple in Jerusalem.

They would be needed once again after the temple was rebuilt.

They were entrusted to Sheshbazzar, which is the Babylonians name for Zerubbabel, the heir to David's throne.

He led this first return, not as the king of the Jews but as the governor appointed by Cyrus.

⁹ This *is* the number of them: 30 gold platters, 1,000 silver platters, 29 knives, ¹⁰ 30 gold basins, 410 silver basins of a similar *kind*, and 1,000 other articles. ¹¹ All the articles of gold and silver were 5,400. All *these* Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.

C. Register of Those Who Returned • Ch. 2

¹ Now these *are* the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his *own* city. ² Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, *and* Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

Then we get a count of the people by their cities . . .

³ the people of Parosh, 2,172;

⁴ the people of Shephatiah, 372;

⁵ the people of Arah, 775;

⁶ the people of Pahath-Moab, of the people of Jeshua *and* Joab, 2,812;

⁷ the people of Elam, 1,254;

And so on down through v. 35.

Then we start with numbering the priests.

³⁶ The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973;

³⁷ the sons of Immer, 1,052;

³⁸ the sons of Pashhur, 1,247;

³⁹ the sons of Harim, 1,017.

Next are the Levites -

⁴⁰ The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74.

⁴¹ The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128.

⁴² The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, 139 *in all*.

⁴³ The Nethinim:

These were temple servants; descendants of the Gibeonites who performed a host of menial tasks like carrying water & collecting firewood.

the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, . . .

And so it goes *all the way thru v. 58* were we finally read . . .

⁵⁸ **All the Nethinim and the children of Solomon's servants were 392.**

After reading all these verses it seems like there's been 392 names!

⁵⁹ **And these were the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer; but they could not identify their father's house or their genealogy, whether they were of Israel:** ⁶⁰ **the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, six 652;**

These people claimed to be Jews so they returned to Judah, but because their genealogy could not be verified, they were not considered Jewish citizens.

⁶¹ **and of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, and the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name.** ⁶² **These sought**

their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled.

Even some of those who claimed to be priests couldn't verify their genealogy so they were excluded from the renewed service at the temple.

63 And the governor said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim.

Without documentation of their genealogy, these claimants to the priesthood would have to wait until they were back in Jerusalem, and worship of God had been renewed so the high priest could use the Urim & Thummim as a way to discern if they were truly priests or not.

The Urim & Thummim were a means of discovering God's will during the days of the old covenant.

64 The whole assembly together was 42,360, 65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337; and they had 200 men and women singers.

Right around 50,000.

But if you total up the numbers given by Ezra, it comes up 12,000 short. What gives?

The difference is made up by those Jews who were of the other 10 tribes; they weren't from Judah or Benjamin.

Remember that most of the faithful Jews in the northern 10 tribes had moved south to Judah when the northern nation went whole-hog over to the worship of idols.

They'd been deported to Babylon along with Judah & Benjamin.

Some of them made this first return.

66 Their horses were 736, their mules 245, 67 their camels 435, and their donkeys 6,720.

The donkeys were the main burden carriers.

68 Some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God, to erect it in its place:

Of course, there was no temple yet; it lay in ruins after its destruction by the Babylonians.

Ezra means the *location* of the temple.

When the elders among the returnees arrived in Jerusalem, they made an immediate large contribution so the reconstruction could begin.

69 According to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priestly garments.

The drachma was a Persian coin. 61,000 of them would equal about 1,100 lbs. of gold.

That's 17,600 oz. @ \$888/oz. = \$15,628,800.

A mina is 1.2 lbs.

5,000 minas is 6,000 lbs. = 3 tons = @ \$12/oz. = \$1,152,000

70 So the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

Geographically, the province of Judah was greatly diminished at this time.

It was no where near the territory it had been during the days of the kings.

It was about 25 miles North to South // 32 miles East to West.

800 sq. miles, a third of which wasn't even arable.

D. Construction of the Altar and the Temple Foundations • Ch. 3

1 And when the 7th month had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

The year is 538 BC.

The people have set up only the most rudimentary form of housekeeping in the cities & towns of Judah.

Their first collective priority is to re-establish the worship of Yahweh.

So they gather at Jerusalem in the 7th month, the one in which they celebrate the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets & the Feast of Tabernacles.

2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as *it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.*

There's no temple yet but that doesn't mean they can't build an altar.

After all, at Solomon's temple, the altar was in the courtyard in front of the temple, not in it.

They can begin worship without a temple; all they need is a place to offer sacrifices.

3 Though fear *had come upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening burnt offerings.*

A bit later we'll learn more about this.

What happened was that the Samaritans didn't want to lose their dominance over the region.

They'd been top dogs until now and didn't want to relinquish control.

When The Jews first arrived, they asked if they could form an alliance and help in the rebuilding of the temple.

When the Jews had refused, the Samaritans came out in opposition to them & began to threaten them with violence.

They went so far as to send formal complaints to the Persians, saying the Jews were turning Jerusalem into a fortress & were planning to stage a rebellion.

These complaints worked for a while & the Persians called the rebuilding to a halt pending an investigation of the charges against them.

4 They also kept the Feast of Tabernacles, as *it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings in the number required by ordinance for each day.* ⁵ Afterwards *they offered the regular burnt offering, and those for New Moons and for all the appointed feasts of the LORD that were*

consecrated, and *those of everyone who willingly offered a freewill offering to the LORD.*

A regular pattern of sacrifices was reinstated for the first time in decades.

⁶ From the 1st day of the 7th month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, although the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. ⁷ They also gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre to bring cedar logs from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the permission which they had from Cyrus king of Persia. ⁸ Now in the 2nd month of the 2nd year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come out of the captivity to Jerusalem, began *work* and appointed the Levites from 20 years old and above to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. ⁹ Then Jeshua *with* his sons and brothers, Kadmiel *with* his sons, and the sons of Judah, arose as one to oversee those working on the house of God: the sons of Henadad *with* their sons and their brethren the Levites. ¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: “For *He is good, For His mercy endures forever toward Israel.*” Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

You can imagine just how moved they were – to see the foundation of the temple laid.

Why it was prophecy being fulfilled before their very eyes!

While the young were joyous & enthusiastic, not everyone was stoked that day.

¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes.

There were some old folks there who'd seen the glory of Solomon's magnificent temple.

The crude, discolored stones that were being laid now were pathetic in comparison to the former temple.

Everywhere the people looked they saw decaying ruins all around them.

In their minds eye they could see the former Jerusalem with its majestic buildings & tall walls.

Now, it's all gone. Nothing but heaps of rubble.

Weeds were growing up between shattered stones & broken columns.

The once white limestone blocks are now blackened by the fires that ravaged the city 50 years before.

It's those shattered burned stones that are being used now to lay the foundation of the new temple.

And though they're being laid in the same place, there's not way they will ever recapture the glory of the first temple.

So the seniors look at the present thru the eyes that beheld what they consider a greater day, & weep.

Yet many [of the younger generation] shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off.

How many times has this same scenario been repeated among God's people?

The older generation looks at the excitement of a younger generation and finds nothing to get excited about!

On the contrary, they *lament* that today doesn't come up to the thrill of some Golden Aged past.

Sadly, the senior saint who can rejoice in a fresh move of God's Spirit among the young is a rarity.

When we're young and begin our walk with God, everything is new & exciting.

It's so powerful & real. Because that's the way God worked in our lives, we think that surely that is the way He works in everyone's life.

When others share their testimony of how God revealed Himself to them, if it differs widely from our experience, we may doubt it.

Specially if our religious tradition puts a tight circle around what God can & can't do.

Jesus gave the parable of the wineskins as a way to confront his critics with their unreasoning rejection of the Truth.

He used an analogy from everyday life; you don't put new wine in an old wineskin because as it ferments it'll burst the skin which has already been stretched to it's max.

You put new wine in a new skin so that as it ferments the bag will stretch & accommodate the wine.

The point Jesus was making was that In each new generation, God puts His work into a new form that's able to best present the truth to that generation.

Some like the old wine, other prefer the new.

It's all wine! Which is *better* is all just is all a matter of taste.

In the same way, from generation to generation, from form to form, it's all the work & Spirit of God.

Which form you prefer is merely a matter of taste.

Enjoy whichever form you prefer; but don't judge others because they "drink from a different wineskin."

Let me share with you a little debate that's going on right now in the CC's.

There's the old guard who came out of the first generation of CC back in the hippie/counterculture days of the late 60's & early 70's.

For them, CC means verse by verse study thru the Bible, Saturday night concerts, long hair, barefoot, flared jeans, mod & tie-dyed shirts, singing

acapella, & beach baptisms.

It's 40 years later but these guys cling to that form because it's how God reached them in 1968.

They're bald but grow the back & side long.

They still wear Birkenstocks & tie-dyed shirt though they have a belly that sticks out to here.

They do concerts on Saturday nights with what's left of *Sweet Comfort Band & Daniel Amos* & can't understand why no one shows up.

But there's a whole new generation of young men, guys in their mid 20's that God has called to pastor a CC.

These guys are amazing teachers & great leaders!

They're creative & innovative with skills at communications that are light years ahead of much of the old guard.

God's Spirit is all over them & they're absolutely tearing it up in leading people to & in Jesus.

But because they dim the lights for worship, light some candles, have a tattoo, provide an open communion table instead of passing out the elements, & wear cargo pants instead of bell-bottoms, they're being told they aren't a real CC!!!!!!

I *remember* sitting at CCCM on a Sunday evening while Pastor Chuck talked about *wineskins*.

He expressed his desire CC would never become an old wineskin God had to set aside, but that we'd always remain open to the move of the Spirit.

I'm 53. I'm not a young guy. I've officially entered *geezerhood*.

But I don't want to be stuck clinging to an old wineskin.

I want to remain open to what God is doing & saying *now*.

I realize the need to *look for* who God is raising up from *this generation* of young people to lead His flock.

I have no sense God is telling me it's time to go.

On the contrary, I see a wonderful horizon of great ministry here at CCO for all of us.

But the future looms before us & wisdom demands we plan ahead.

I ask you → Are we stuck in the past or are we in step with the Spirit?

Do we weep with the old who look back nostalgically to some Golden Age or is our worship fresh & alive?