

Lesson 5

Verses 1-4 showed us the famous decree by Cyrus, and also showed us who was behind that decree – and it wasn't Cyrus!

What do we have at the end of Ezra 1:4? What we have is a tremendous open door. That door was opened by God when he started stirring Cyrus to open that door long before Cyrus was even born. God has opened the door to Cyrus' kingdom, and the path is now free for God's people to return to their promised land and restore proper worship. What will happen next?

The first three words of verse 5 will tell us – “Then rose up...” What happens next is that God's people rush through that open door – and we need to do exactly the same thing today when God opens doors for us.

And God is still opening doors! That is what God has always done, and that is what God is still doing today.

“I have set before thee **an open door**, and no man can shut it.” (Revelation 3:8)

“For a **great door** and effectual is opened unto me.” (1 Corinthians 16:9)

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.
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Verse 5 tells us that those who returned were those “whose spirit God had raised [or stirred], to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.”

The Hebrew word used here is the same that was used in verse 1 to describe how God stirred up Cyrus to issue his proclamation. God was accomplishing his plan of redemption using his own people and using foreign rulers.

Once again we see the goal of the return – to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. And we see here something we will see throughout the book, a parallel between this exodus from Babylon and the original exodus out of Egypt.

A large part of the book of Exodus (Chapters 25-40) is concerned with the construction of the tabernacle and the establishment of worship. Ezra is largely concerned with the restoration of those same things.

A central message of the Bible is that men must worship God in the manner that God has prescribed. We see that in Genesis; we see that in Exodus; we see that in Ezra; we see that in the prophets; and we see that in the New Testament.

When men forget that message, a restoration is required – and we saw such a restoration in recent centuries as some left the denominations to restore proper worship and restore the church. We will see many parallels in our studies between these two restorations.

In verse 5 we see yet another theme that will appear again and again throughout this book – the continuity between the post-exile community and the pre-exile community.

It was important for the people to understand their connection with those who had occupied the land prior to the exile. Those who returned are grouped under four genealogical headings: Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites. We learn elsewhere that the various returns to Jerusalem also included some from the ten so-called lost tribes of the Northern Kingdom (1 Chronicles 9:3 and 2 Chronicles 11:16).

What, by the way, was the difference between a priest and a Levite? In short, all priests were Levites, being from the tribe of Levi, but not all Levites were priests. Those Levites who were not priests were assigned duties connected with the tabernacle (Numbers 3-4). They assisted the priests, they prepared the cereal offerings, and they cared for the courts and the chambers of the sanctuary.

Another theme we see in verse 5 is that while God’s work requires decision and faith, it also requires planning and preparation and demands a specific goal.

The idea of a return to Jerusalem was wonderful, but absent planning, preparation, and goals it would have accomplished nothing. Here the immediate, realizable goal was the construction of the temple.

There is, of course, a lesson there 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!*

As our society becomes increasingly casual, I fear that attitude is making its way into the church. The people of God must never be casual when it comes to our mission. We are engaged in a serious business, and we must take it seriously, and we must let the world know that we take it seriously. If not, how can we ever expect them to take it seriously?

How would the events in this book have turned out if the exiles had a casual attitude about his mission? What if they had left the work for others to do? We need to follow their example of dedication and focus when it comes to doing our work for God. (And we should note that Ezra also has some examples we should not follow!)

We won’t meet Ezra until Chapter 7, but did Ezra prepare himself? Ezra 7:10 – “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” The Hebrew word translated “set” in the verse is usually translated “prepare” in the KJV. Ezra prepared himself for the tasks he wanted to accomplish. And what was the first step in that preparation? He opened the word of God.

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 who returned, and, if so, we see yet another parallel between the first and second exodus. Those who left Egypt also took with them supplies from their 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, 22 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 Cyrus and God's own people, God was stirring up all of those who remained 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.

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) That Cyrus returned these objects to the Jews shows how serious he was in respecting their religion and customs. The decree in Ezra 6 specifically mentions that these objects were to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

There is a very interesting back story about the temple vessels.

Hezekiah had displayed the temple articles to Babylonian emissaries one century 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!

We also saw these vessels in Daniel 5 when Belshazzar and his friends were using them in a drunken feast while they praised their false gods and idols. They did not last out the night!

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

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.

Both the name “Mithredath” and his title “the treasurer” are Persian words; the name refers to Mithras the sun god.

Sheshbazzar was a Jew with a Babylonian name, likely referring to the Babylonian sun god, Shamash. Although Sheshbazzar quickly disappeared from the scene, he led the first group of returnees back to Jerusalem.

Verse 8 shows us how carefully the temple objects were treated—the treasurer “counted them out” to Sheshbazzar. This is quite unlike their treatment by the Babylonians—you will recall that Belshazzar had the audacity to drink from the temple vessels in Daniel 5:23.

The Identity of Sheshbazzar

The relation between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (the leader 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 he is called governor of Judah. In Ezra 5:14, however, Sheshbazzar is called governor, and verse 16 says, “This Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem.” Zechariah 4:9 says: “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house.”

Thus, both are called governor, and both are said to have laid the foundation of the temple.

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 those verses. The foundation could have been laid by more than one person, and they could have been governor at different times.

The most likely explanation is that Sheshbazzar was governor at the beginning and started the foundation, then Zerubbabel became governor after Sheshbazzar died and completed the foundation. Sheshbazzar was the leader and governor when the first group of captives came (Ezra 1:8; 5:14). He disappears from our view quickly, and Zerubbabel, who accompanied Sheshbazzar to Judah and led in the building project, continued as governor (Ezra 3:2; Nehemiah 12:1; Haggai 1:1).

We will have much more to say about Zerubbabel, a vital link in God’s plan of redemption, when we get to the next chapter.

The Vessels

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.

The gold dishes may have been the vessels use 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, and I have been unable to find a completely satisfactory answer to that question – 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 in the first place.

2. A very common view is that verses 9 and 10 list only the most important or the largest items, whereas verse 11 gives the total of all items. A possible problem with this view is the catchall 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. If you look at verse 10 you will 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, as we all know, 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.

4. The Persian loan words that appear in this inventory suggest that the list may have come 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 inventory.

My preference is the second explanation, which is also the simplest explanation. The inventory covers only the largest vessels; the total covers both small and large vessels.

It is interesting to note one thing that did not accompany the exiles back to Jerusalem – the ark of the covenant. Most likely, it was 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 commentator suggested that the purpose of the list is to stress that all of the vessels had been returned. But there are some problems with that view. First, this view has the immediate problem that the numbers don’t add up – if the purpose of the list was to really to stress that all had been returned, then wouldn’t we expect the numbers to add up? (But perhaps they did in the original, as we suggested with one of our theories.) A bigger problem, though, is that we know that not all of the vessels were returned. 2 Kings 24:13 tells us that some were cut up into pieces by Nebuchadnezzar, presumably those that were too large to transport otherwise. Also, additional vessels are transported to Jerusalem later, as we will see in Ezra 7:19.

I think a better view is that what we see here is 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, were being brought from Babylon unto Jerusalem. They were the same vessels – and 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. In 27:22, Jeremiah said they would remain in Babylon until the day that God visited them, which 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), but men are poor judges 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 events that take place here or the events 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 church as God sees the church?

If you want to see how God views the church, read Revelation 21 – the most beautiful description of the church ever given. Verse 2 pictures the church coming down "out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." And why is the church shown as coming down out of heaven? That answer will need to wait until we have the opportunity to study that beautiful book in detail.

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.

It was also important that they preserve their purity 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. 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, whereas the latter was not.

Some of the names are listed by ancestral families while others are listed by geographical location. Why the difference? Some suggest that the latter were the poorer people who did not have land in their name. Others suggest that the former group were those who could trace their lineage back to a known Jewish ancestor, while the others could only identify their former city—which is supported by the observation that these geographical locations appear to be places where the families lived prior to rather than after the exile.

Significantly there are no references to towns in the Negev south of Judah. The Edomites had moved into that area after Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem. (See Obadiah.)

I think we can see one more reason this list is included 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.” Although Mark did not give us her name, she is being honored here today 2000 years later for the act of kindness and love that she demonstrated. Ezra 2 is filled with such people. Why did they leave their homes to return to a place of suffering and hardship? Because they loved God and longed to worship him as he desired to be worshipped. And for that they are honored by God. And when you read their names and descriptions, 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 group and their descendants that we have the Old Testament Scriptures, which they carefully preserved, and it is through this group and their descendants that Jesus came into this world. Even though they were practically unnoticed in the world at that time, they were the center 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 center of his attention. We are the means by which he is fulfilling his plan in this world. 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.

Mark Twain: Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is probably time to change sides!

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 he came out of the lions' den in his eighties! Also, the families of Ezra and Nehemiah must have stayed behind as well, along with the many others who returned to Jerusalem later.

My point is that we should not be automatically 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.

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-12)