

## Ezra: Rebuilding the Temple

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Ezra 1

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In 539 BCE, about 50-60 years after the Children of Israel were forced into captivity in Babylon, Cyrus of Persia captured the city of Babylon without a fight. The next year, he decreed that all foreign people who wished to return home could do so.

By this time the Hebrews had made homes in Babylon and the Babylonian territories. They had multiplied and many of them had even become successful and powerful in their own right. So only about 25-30 percent of the Hebrews took advantage of Cyrus's decree.

Cyrus appointed a Hebrew man named Sheshbazzar as the new governor of Judea and the people who were returning to that area were called Jews – the first time this designation was used to describe the entire ethnic group that had, heretofore, been known as Hebrews.

They left Babylon in January of 538 BCE and arrived four months later in about April of that year, just in time to get some crops into the ground.

What they found when they got to their old home was disappointing and depressing. The city of Jerusalem and the temple had been torn down, brick by brick, stone by stone, by the army of Nebuchadnezzar. Those who were left behind had made no effort to restore anything so it sat that way, in ruins, for nearly seventy years. Where there had been streets and houses and shops, there was now weeds and even trees and piles of brick.

The wells were dry. The few houses that were not torn down were empty and falling down. The people who had stayed behind had gone into the countryside and returned to the nomadic life, living off the land, following the grass with their sheep and goats. Whatever Jewish civilization that survived the Babylonian captivity had survived not in Judea but in Babylon.

The first order of business for the people arriving from Babylon was survival. They planted crops, grazed their livestock, dug wells, and built rudimentary shelters and homes for themselves around the outskirts of the great city. And they spent the first two years after their return tending to the business of getting by.

Then, in 536 BCE, Sheshbazzar declared that it was time to be about the business of reclaiming not just their land but their culture and their religious faith as well. In the spring of that year reconstruction began on the temple.

The book of Ezra tells us that, when they left Babylon, Cyrus allowed them to take with them all of the gold and sacred relics that had been removed from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. He had also provided them with money and some of the raw materials they would need to rebuild their temple. So when they first arrived, they found the old altar and cleared the debris from around it and immediately began to offer sacrifices and worship YHWH at the original altar in the midst of what had been the temple.

Now it was time to rebuild the temple around the altar, so they removed the rest of the debris – no small task, as some of the stones were as tall as a man – and began to reset the foundation stones for the outside walls.

No sooner had things begun to take shape than their neighbors – the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Hittites, and some others – began to make threatening gestures. They did not like the idea of these trouble-making Hebrews, or Jews, or whatever they were calling themselves these days, coming back and claiming their old land.

So, afraid that they would be attacked and not able to defend themselves, the Jews stopped working on the temple and went back to herding and farming.

The temple would sit that way, begun but not finished, for sixteen years. Then, in 520 BCE a new governor named Zerubbabel was appointed and he, along with a prophet named Haggai, would badger the people into resuming construction on the temple. Zerubbabel would divide the workers into thirds, with one third of the workers standing watch and keeping guard over the other two thirds during work hours.

Five years later the temple was completed without major interference from their neighbors and in 514 BCE the first Passover in seventy five years was celebrated in the Jerusalem Temple.

The next forty-six years would go by pretty uneventfully in the lives of the Jews. The rest of the western world was in such turmoil that it didn't have time to care about what was going on in Palestine.

It was during this time that Xerxes would come to power in Persia and the Jews, there, would find themselves in his favor and prosper in Persia. (The biblical story of Esther comes from this time.)

Also, Xerxes would attempt to expand his power, as kings and emperors are wont to do, and he would find his march into Greece stifled at a narrow pass called Thermopylae. There, his army of nearly three hundred thousand soldiers would be stopped and held by fewer than seven thousand Greeks led by just three hundred Spartans.

Later that year his navy would be defeated by the Greek navy led by Athens in the battle of Salamis and he would return home to lick his wounds and take up the study of philosophy.

In 466 BCE, about fifty years after the reconstruction of the temple was completed, a renowned Jewish scholar named Ezra, who was living in Persia, went to the new emperor, Artaxerxes (son of Xerxes) and asked permission to take a group of Jews and go to Jerusalem and complete the rebuilding of the city.

Atraxerxes not only agreed but, so fond was he of Ezra that he offered to outfit the expedition, provide letters of safe passage, send soldiers to guard them on the journey and provided building material for the reconstruction of the city. No fool, he, Atraxerxes thought that a well built and thriving city was more of an asset to his kingdom than one lying in ruins.

So Ezra led what is called the “second return” of Jews to Judea.

But when he arrived, he was appalled at what he saw. What you have just heard is a digested version of the first six chapters of the book of Ezra. Ezra, himself, arrives in Jerusalem in the seventh chapter.

### **THE CHURCH IS NOT A BUILDING**

Do you remember that little children’s song, “I am the church?”

It goes like this: “I am the church, you are the church, we are the church, together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we’re the church together.” Then the verse goes: “The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is the people.”

Apparently, in their effort to rebuild the temple and reestablish their religious rituals, the people in Jerusalem had forgotten the lesson of that little song.

They had built the building. They had reestablished the rituals.

And, Ezra discovered, that is as far as their religious lives had progressed. They had the look of Judaism, the form of Judaism, the building of Judaism, but not the heart of Judaism.

Judaism lived in the religious rituals of the sacrifice but was absent from the rituals of everyday life.

The Torah was unrolled and read in temple but there was no room for it in the home.

The lord, God, lived in the temple of stone but was absent from that temple which is the human heart.

Now, we have to stop for a few moments in our story to talk about the things which Ezra identified as evidence of this collapse of morality and the rise of religious hypocrisy.

And the reason we have to talk about it is that it doesn’t really resonate with us, today. In fact, if we insist on taking it literally as a moral guide for all people, everywhere, we will find ourselves in serious ethical trouble, dealing with issues that will only undermine and weaken the message of the Christian gospel.

We must understand that, in 466 BCE, the Jewish people were trying to preserve and rebuild their culture which had been nearly annihilated during the Babylonian captivity. Fewer than 50,000 Jews had come back from Babylon and the struggle for survival – personal survival and cultural survival – was paramount.

One of the avenues that they pursued toward the survival of their culture was that of ethnic purity. There was another time in the past when they had found themselves struggling for survival as a people, the time before they came to the Promised Land and God had given them a set of rules, the Torah, to guide their lives together so they could survive. And the Torah called them to preserve their ethnic purity through intermarriage. Jews were to marry and bear children only with other Jews.

Later, as mere survival ceased to be a concern, those laws and rules had been relaxed. Jews were allowed to marry outside their own ethnic group. But now, when survival was, again, at the forefront of their concern, Ezra reminded them that the Torah was given to their ancestors for that very purpose and should be followed to the letter.

Not only did he convince the Jews to follow the Torah explicitly, he convinced them that anyone man who married a woman who was not a Jew should divorce her and abandon her children and send them back to the country they came from. And they DID it.

The last pages of the book of Ezra gives the list of men who divorced their foreign wives and sent them and their children back to their home countries in an effort to preserve the ethnic integrity of Judaism.

Now let us all agree, right here and now, that we no longer consider ethnic cleansing to be part of God’s will for God’s people. We are rightfully appalled at this behavior by our spiritual ancestors and we understand it to be a primitive and cruel response to their own fear and their imperfect understanding of God’s will.

But...

But just because we reject the notion that this story should be literally applied to our own lives, does not mean that there is nothing to be learned from it.

### **THE CHURCH IS THE PEOPLE**

Many Christian churches, including our own, are struggling for survival, today.

In the past five years we have lost nearly 150 members. Fifty have left the church and/or the community for various reasons and had their names voluntarily removed from the rolls. Fifty have been removed from membership by Charge Conference action because they did not keep their membership vows. And about fifty have died.

In fact, we have lost to death or infirmity about one member a month for the past five years.

We are not alone in this, of course. All of the old mainline Protestant denominations have undergone the same kinds of declines as we. And we are all struggling to figure out how to reverse that trend.

We are all struggling for survival and, as we struggle, we may discover that the Book of Ezra can be instructive if we do not take it literally but, rather, understand it as a metaphor for our own times.

When Ezra arrived in the Holy Land with the second wave of returnees in 466 BC he discovered that the people, in their struggle to survive had made two crucial errors.

**First**, they had made the mistake of thinking that the temple was a building.

They thought that all they had to do to reestablish, reclaim, and renew their spiritual life was to rebuild the temple. Clean off the altar, brush away the dust, roll the stones around and restack them, put on a new roof, fix the plaster and slap on a new coat of paint and they were good to go. They could show up once a week and walk through the rituals and sing the hymns and make the sacrifices and read the scriptures aloud and then they could go back to their homes and ignore it all, just live any way they wanted.

Ezra reminded them that the temple did not end at the door of that great and magnificent building. It continued out into the world and was carried in the hearts of those who worshipped there.

The first and most important temple of God is to be found not in Jerusalem but in the hearts of God's people. That was the lesson they had learned in Babylon. That was the lesson that had sustained them for nearly seventy years of captivity.

The temple, the real temple of Yahweh, is not in Jerusalem.

And the church, the real church of Jesus Christ, is not at the corner of South Street and Walnut. It is to be found on no slab of real estate but is carried in the hearts of everyone who is a member there.

We are the church, brothers and sisters.

This building, as lovely as it is, is just bricks and mortar and colored pieces of glass. It was torn down and rebuilt eighty-three years ago and, if a tornado blew it down tomorrow, we would just rebuild it again. It's a building, a tool that our fathers and mothers, with the help of God gave us to be used. The real church, the church of Jesus Christ is the one we carry it in our hearts. We can spend a million dollars fixing up this wonderful edifice and making it pretty and it will be to no avail if we do not understand that it is merely a metaphor, a snapshot, a symbol of the church that lives in the depth of our souls.

It will do no good to us or God's Kingdom if we replace the carpet and ignore the renewing of our hearts.

It will be so much wasted resources if we fix the plaster but leave our relationships in disrepair.

It will be just wasted space if we pour our love into it and withhold our love from our brothers and sisters and those who are hungry, alone and forgotten.

Like the Jerusalem temple, this structure, this church is beautiful and marvelous to behold. But it fails in its mission and the mission of those who first put brick upon brick, if it is not also a metaphor for the faith we hold and practice in our community and the world.

The **second** mistake the people made was to believe that it was enough to read the scriptures without studying them and taking them into their hearts and lives.

The reading of the Torah was part of their weekly worship services. It was part of their ritual. But they had come to understand that it was of no practical value. They had read the passages it contains about ethnic purity but they had ignored them because they did not see them as practical. "Yeah, well that's all well and good for God to say, but we're dealing with the survival of our race here and we gotta do what we gotta do." That was pretty much their attitude. They would read the scriptures in church but they would ignore them in their Monday through Friday lives.

Kinda strikes a nerve, doesn't it?

Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

John the Baptizer tells that, if we have two coats, to give one of our coats to our neighbor who has none and to do the same with food.

Jesus tells us that, if we're really interested in having eternal life, we are to sell all we have and give it to the poor and follow him

Paul tells us to speak softly and lovingly, to be a kind and gentle and unassuming people and, as far as it is up to us, to live peaceably with everyone we encounter.

And we read those things in church on Sunday and, often, our response is the same as those folks living in Jerusalem in 466 BC: "Yeah, well that's all well and good for Jesus and John and Paul, but we're talking about the survival of our...country...economy...church...community...way of life...culture...lifestyle... (you fill in the blank, here) and we gotta do what we gotta do."

### **WE ARE THE CHURCH TOGETHER**

Ezra came to Jerusalem to celebrate the reconstruction of the temple and to start the reconstruction of the city but when he arrived he realized that the reconstruction of the temple was incomplete.

Only the bricks and mortar had been reconstructed.

The temple of God that is the human heart remained, he discovered, in ruins. It, too, had to be rebuilt. In fact, he says, it is this temple that is the most important. It is in this temple, the one in each of us, that the Lord, God, truly lives. That other one, the one of bricks and mortar is merely a symbol for this one we carry with us every day.

It is this temple that must be rebuilt if God is surely to live in Zion...in America...in Wilmington.

And the bricks of its rebuilding are bricks of faith.

And the mortar of its rebuilding is mortar of hope.

And the cornerstone of its rebuilding is the cornerstone of love.

May God grant us all the resources we need to rebuild his true temple here in Wilmington and in the hearts of all his people.

**AMEN**