

Old Testament History

Lesson #23

Ezra 1:1-10:44

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 - 1. Rebuilding of the altar (3:1-6).
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III. *Ezra's Return And Reforms (7:1-10:44)*

- A. The return of Ezra (7:1-8:36).
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 - 1. The sin of intermarriage (9:1-5).
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 - 4. List of those guilty of intermarriage (10:18-44).

Notes

Observations About Life In Captivity

- In some ways, the period of the exile was one of the most important periods in the history of God's people. After the havoc the Babylonians had caused, the chances that Judah could ever recover must have seemed terribly small. Her cities and towns lay in ruin. Her leadership was gone, killed in battle or taken captive to Babylon.
- The exile was a refining and tempering fire. When the faith of Israel passed through it, it emerged stronger and more secure. It was this faith -- reexamined, disciplined, renewed -- that gave the remnant of

God's people the will to survive. It is this post-exilic form of the religion of God's people that we usually call Judaism.

- The population was reduced to about 1/20th of what it had been in the days of Hezekiah, and the influx of Samaritans from the north and Idumeans from the south threatened to engulf the remainder.
- After the incident that cost Gedaliah his life, formal political organization in Judah probably all but disappeared. The people just scratched out a living as best they could, always on the verge of starvation. The abject misery of their condition is detailed in the book of Lamentations.
- Lamentations is a collection of five poems dealing with the calamity that had befallen Jerusalem. In the English translation there is nothing special about these poems except their content. In the Hebrew text, however, the first four poems are in acrostic form. Chapter 5 is not in acrostic form, but, like the others, it does have 22 stanzas, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. They brim with sorrow and desolation. They reflect the despairing conviction that God had deserted His people. Jeremiah vividly tells of the terrible toll the catastrophe had taken in terms of human life.
- From Jeremiah 41:5 we learn that people still came to offer sacrifice at the charred spot where the temple had stood. It appears likely that some kind of regular worship was carried on there, probably by second-rate priests who had not even been good enough to be deported. It may be that they chanted these poems as an act of mourning. If this was the case, the acrostic form would make them easy to memorize for worship.
- As conditions in Judah grew worse, waves of refugees, including Jeremiah, made the trip south and settled in lower Egypt (Jeremiah 44:1). A century later, there was a large colony at Elephantine, located on the first cataract of the Nile, the site of modern Aswan. These colonies spread so much that in the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Egypt was one of the major centers of Judaism.
- Babylon became a center of Judaism not simply because of the numbers, but because of the quality of the people who settled there. Actually the numbers themselves were not overwhelmingly impressive. The total taken to Babylon in the three major deportations was only 4,600 (Jeremiah 52:28-30). They included the best educated, the most capable political and religious leaders, the finest soldiers, and the most skilled artisans. If God's people were to make a comeback, the major thrust would have to come from this group.
- The exiles were under general supervision, but within this framework of supervision, they enjoyed considerable freedom. Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians made no attempt to destroy the sense of national solidarity among their captives. Several passages in Ezekiel and Jeremiah indicate that the exiles lived in communities of their own with

a considerable measure of self-direction and were permitted to carry on normal activities of farming and business (Jeremiah 29:5; Ezekiel 3:15; 8:1; 14:1; 33:30). Many of the captives were so satisfied in captivity that they refused to return to Judah when the opportunity was offered.

- These broken people were seeking for the heart of their religion. In their desire to restore the kind of fellowship of obedience that had existed (at least to some extent) in Moses' time, the exiles paid special attention to the written records and oral traditions that had been handed down from the past.
- Before the exile, we hear almost nothing about any sacred books in Israel or Judah. Within a few years after the return to Jerusalem, attempts were being made to collect and label those writings that were to be regarded as scripture. The writings of the prophets, once despised, but now confirmed by the events of history, were also cherished as a source of divine guidance.

Ezra 1:1-2:70

- Ezra and Nehemiah form one book in the Hebrew Bible because they tell one story -- the return of the remnant to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the city and the temple.
- The opening verses are almost identical with 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. Isaiah 44:28-45:3 contains an amazing prophecy of Cyrus before the great Persian ruler was born. In 539 B.C. Cyrus conquered Babylon and established the Persian empire. His policy with prisoners of war was opposite of Babylon, for he encouraged the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple, presumably for the purpose of receiving tribute. He reigned over the Persians from 559 until 530 B.C. He established Persian dominance over the Medes in 550, conquered Lydia and Anatolia in 547-546, and captured Babylon in 539. Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 speak of Cyrus as the Lord's "shepherd" and his "anointed."
- The Lord stirred not only the heart of the Persian king but also the hearts of many of the exiles who had maintained their faith in the Lord in spite of the devastation of their homeland. "Sheshbazzar" is Zerubbabel, the appointed governor. His official title was "tirshatha" (2:63), which means "governor." He was from the royal line of David (1 Chronicles 3:17-19), and was either the son or grandson of Jehoiachin.
- About 50,000 Jews were concerned enough to leave the safety and luxury of Babylon and return to their own land. A significant number of Jews stayed in Babylon. Up until recent times, there was a large number of Jews in Iraq, including a school of rabbis. Some of our finest texts of the Old Testament were preserved by the Jews in Babylon.

- Much has been said about the so-called “lost tribes of Israel,” but the New Testament makes it clear that all twelve tribes were represented in this remnant (Acts 26:7; James 1:1). Furthermore, Ezra 2:70 says “all Israel.” In Ezra 6:17 and 8:35 the priests offered 12 male goats for the 12 tribes.
- Because the Jews did not have a statue of the Lord, Nebuchadnezzar carried off the temple goods instead (cf. 2 Kings 25:13; Jeremiah 52:17). Jeremiah spoke of false prophets who prematurely predicted the return of these vessels (Jeremiah 27:16-22; 28:6); he prophesied their ultimate return (27:22). Belshazzar had the audacity to drink from some of the temple vessels (Daniel 5:23).
- We know nothing about the details of Zerubbab and Joshua’s journey, which probably took place in the spring of 537 B.C. Judging from Ezra’s later journey (7:8-9), the trip probably took about four months. The caravan would have proceeded from Babylonia up the Euphrates River and then south through the Orontes Valley of Syria to Palestine.
- The list of returning exiles in vss. 1-70 almost exactly parallels the list in Nehemiah 7:6-73. The list of localities indicates that people retained their memories of their homes and that exiles from a very wide background of tribes, villages, and towns returned.
- A comparison of Ezra 2 with Nehemiah 7 reveals a number of differences in both the names and the numbers that are listed. Though the lists of temple personnel show few variations, there are differences in about half the cases of the lists of the common people. Many differences may be explained by assuming that a cipher notation was used with vertical strokes for units, horizontal strokes for tens, and stylized mems (Hebrew letter “m”) for hundreds.

Ezra 3:1-6:22

- The altar was the center of the Jewish worship, for without their sacrifices they could not approach God or expect His blessing. Thus the exiles’ first task in the midst of hostile neighbors was to erect an altar to sacrifice to the Lord. The exiles feared their powerful neighbors, but they knew God would protect them if they obeyed Him. Joshua and Zerubbabel helped the people establish the sacrifices and keep the feasts.
- The people started rebuilding the temple in 535 B.C. The Levites led the way in doing the work, assisting the other workers on the job. As with the first temple, the Phoenicians cooperated by sending timbers and workmen. The people were so grateful that they sang and shouted when the foundation was laid. There were older people there who remembered the glory of the former temple, and they could only sweep as they saw the plainness of this second temple (cf. Haggai 2:3).

- The Jews' enemies did not have anything to fear from the rebuilding of the temple, as they did later from the rebuilding of the wall. Sincerely or not, they at first offered their help to rebuild the temple. They then hired men at court to resist the Jews, and this device succeeded in stopping the work for nearly 15 years.
- Chapter 4 summarizes various attempts to thwart the efforts of the Jews. In vss. 1-5 the author describes events under Cyrus (539-530 B.C.), in vs. 6 under Xerxes (485-465), in vss. 7-23 under Artaxerxes I (464-424). He then reverts in vs. 24 to the time of Darius I (522-486), when the temple was completed. Ezra drew from Aramaic documents from vs. 8 to 6:18, with a further Aramaic section in 7:12-26.
- After the death of Cambyses in 524 and the assassination of Gaumata (Pseudo-Smerdis) in 522, followed by the rise of Darius I to a position of power, the situation was somewhat more favorable to the Jews' renewing their efforts to rebuild the temple. Yet by that time the leading classes in Jerusalem had become so preoccupied with their own interests and concerns that they felt no zeal to renew the building project -- especially if there was any danger of their getting in trouble for rebuilding the temple without permission.
- Fifteen years go by between chapters 4-5. It was not until the word of God is proclaimed by the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah that the work of the temple begins again. Beginning on August 29th, 520 B.C. (Haggai 1:1) and continuing until December 8th (Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23), the prophet Haggai delivered a series of messages to stir the people to commence work on the temple. Two months after Haggai's first speech, Zechariah joined him (Zechariah 1:1).
- Darius added his own decree to the original decree of Cyrus. He stated that the governor must assist the Jews in their work and see that there is no opposition, and the supplies are to be provided out of the king's treasury. Darius had a strong motive for his kindness: he wanted the Jews to pray to God for the king's health and for the welfare of his family. The famous Behistun inscription, which supplied the key to the ancient Babylonian language, was made by this same Darius.
- "Adar," the last Babylonian month, was February-March. The temple was finished on March 12, 515 B.C., a little over 70 years after its destruction. The Jews joyfully dedicated the house of the Lord. The number of victims sacrificed was small compared to the thousands in similar services under Solomon (1 Kings 8:5, 63), Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:24), and Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:7). Nonetheless, they represented a real sacrifice under the prevailing conditions. They also kept the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Ezra 7:1-8:36

- A gap of 58 years occurs between chapters 6-7. The book of Esther fits in here. The Artaxerxes of 7:1 is Artaxerxes I (465-425 B.C.), who was Queen Esther's stepson. In his seventh year, he permitted Ezra to return to Jerusalem to assist the people in their spiritual needs. The genealogy of Ezra given in 7:1-5 is an extraordinary one that lists his ancestors back to Aaron, the brother of Moses. "Ezra" is a shortened form of Azariah, a name that occurs twice in the list of his ancestors.
- Apparently Ezra had requested permission from the king, realizing that the remnant in the restored nation desperately needed spiritual guidance. Ezra would have begun his journey on the first day of Nisan (April 8, 458) and arrived on the first day of Ab (August 4, 458). The 1,000-mile journey took 119 days (including an eleven-day delay, cf. 8:31), or four months. The king decreed that any Jew could go up with Ezra and return to the land. These Jews would take with them a large offering from Babylon to assist in the work of the Lord. Ezra's task was to establish order and religious worship in the land.
- Ezra 8:1-14 lists those who accompanied Ezra from Mesopotamia, including the descendants of 15 individuals. The figures of the men listed total 1,496, in addition to the individuals named. There were also a considerable number of women and children (vs. 21). An additional group of about 40 Levites (vss. 18-19) and 220 "temple servants" (vs. 20) are also listed.
- It was important that the Levites go along because it was their duty to study the word and teach it to the people. Unfortunately, Ezra had to draft some of the Levites because they did not volunteer to go. Ezra proclaimed a fast because he knew that God would bless their journey, for he had told the king that they would not require a military escort. Grave dangers faced travelers between Mesopotamia and Palestine. Some 13 years later Nehemiah was accompanied by an armed escort.
- According to Babylonian tradition, almost every transaction, including sales and marriages, had to be recorded in writing. Ezra may have had to send back a signed certification of the delivery of the treasures. The animal sacrifices were made as a thanksgiving to God for His goodness and as a sin offering to acknowledge their unworthiness for such mercies. Compared with the offerings of the returnees under Zerubbabel, when many more exiles were involved, the offerings on this occasion, except for the identical number of male goats, were far less.

Ezra 9:1-10:44

- Ezra discovered that the Jews had mingled with their heathen neighbors and married heathen wives. "The peoples of the lands" included the pagan newcomers who had been brought into Samaria by the Assyrians

and had moved south, and Edomites and others who had invaded former Judean land. The eight groups listed designate the original inhabitants of Canaan before the Hebrews. Only the Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians still existed in the postexilic period.

- Ezra was so burdened at hearing this report that he publicly tore his garment in sorrow and repentance, and sat like a dumb man until the hour for the evening sacrifice. The people who knew God's word began to tremble, fearing what the Lord might do to the nation.
- Ezra's prayer of confession should be compared with Daniel's prayer and the prayer of Nehemiah. He looked back to Israel's past sins and admitted that the nation deserved captivity. It is interesting to note that Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah all had to confess national sin and plead for forgiveness (cf. 2 Chronicles 7:14). But it was not enough for Ezra to pray; the entire nation had to face its sins and make matters right with the Lord.
- The measures dealing with intermarriage were announced on the 17th day of the ninth month, or four and a half months after his arrival. Because of Ezra's preaching, the people were convicted of their sins. Some of the men (including priests and Levites) came to him openly and confessed that they had married heathen wives and disobeyed the law of the Lord. The lowest classes were the least involved in intermarriage; the pagan women were probably not attracted to them.
- They offered to make a covenant with God and to put away their unclean wives. The people assembled on December 20, 457 and it took from December until April to straighten out the problem. There were a total of 17 priests, 10 Levites, and 87 other men found guilty of marrying foreign wives.
- Some of the marriages had produced children, but this was not accepted as a reason for halting the proceedings. As it was just under eight months from the time of Ezra's arrival to the committee's findings, the offspring mentioned here must be either the offspring of mixed marriages contracted in Mesopotamia or the offspring of mixed marriages contracted by those who had returned earlier to Palestine. Regrettably, about 25 years later, Nehemiah faced the same problem (Nehemiah 13:23-31). It was a repeated sin that required repeated discipline (cf. Matthew 26:41).
- Tradition says that Ezra was the originator of the synagogue worship and the president of the Great Synagogue. The Great Synagogue was a council, consisting of 120 members, said to have been organized by Nehemiah around 410 B.C. Its purpose was the rebuilding of the religious life of the returned captives. It is thought to have governed the returned Jews until about 273 B.C. and to have played an important role

in gathering, grouping, and restoring the canonical books of the Old Testament.