

# “Everyone Whose Spirit God Stirred Up”

## The Second in a Series on Ezra-Nehemiah

*Texts: Ezra:1:5-11 (through 2:70); Romans 9:1-18*

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I think it fair to say that no one reading this would mention Ezra chapter 2, if asked to identify your favorite chapter in all the Bible. Why is a chapter which contains a detailed list of the family names of the 42,360 returning exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem, included in the Book of Ezra? Why is this list repeated in the Book of Nehemiah (chapter 7). Why does Ezra include an exact count of all the bowls, basins, censers, and other implements to be used in the rebuilt Jerusalem temple, which were to be brought back to Jerusalem, years after they had been taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar? Why all the detail? Ezra is a priest, not an accountant. He is not a store clerk doing inventory. Well, we will address the question of why such detail is important as we turn to the balance of Ezra chapter one (vv. 5-11) and all of Ezra chapter 2, our text.

In the opening four verses of Ezra, we read of a decree issued in 538 BC by the Persian king Cyrus, declaring that those Jews who had been held captive in Babylon (under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, whose empire Cyrus had defeated the previous year) were being sent home by Cyrus to restore and rebuild their capital city (Jerusalem) and its temple, identified by Cyrus as “the house of God.”

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: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever 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 rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Several things should jump out to us as we read this decree from the Persian king. The first is that Erza refers to several prophecies from Jeremiah, which foretold of Israel’s exile and return to the land. Last time, we considered several similar prophecies from the prophet Isaiah, but it is important to consider the remarkable prophecy mentioned by Ezra and found in Jeremiah 25:11–12. Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry took place from about the time of Josiah’s reform in 620 BC (and recounted in 2 Chronicles 34) until the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587. Through the prophet Jeremiah, YHWH told his people, “*this whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste.*” A similar prophecy is found in Jeremiah 29:10. “*For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.*” Cyrus’ decree in 538 BC, indicates that the seventy-years of Israel’s predicted exile are now blessedly over. God’s people will be set free, and will be directed by a pagan king to return to the promised land in what amounts to a second Exodus. They will even be given the support necessary to rebuild.

A second thing to notice in the opening verses of Ezra is that unlike the Babylonians—who plundered their defeated enemies and made captives of many of them, as they did with the Jews—the Persians sent tribal groups like the Israelites home, so that they might rebuild and re-establish themselves in their homelands. The Persians felt this strengthened their empire—creating loyal vassal states, who helped defend the empire, who paid tribute, and which did not require Persian soldiers to occupy the lands. Cyrus even decreed that those Jews returning to Israel will have the labor, money, and support necessary to do the job. In verses 5-11, we read of this prophesied release of the exiles from their captivity, and that the Jews return to their land along with much of their valuable treasure, taken from them by Nebuchadnezzar, but now returned to them by Cyrus. In this too we find an echo from Israel’s exodus from Egypt a thousand years earlier when the Jews left captivity carrying much gold and silver. So too, when the Jews return from Babylon to Jerusalem, will they bring their gold and silver back with them.

The third thing we should notice is that the Book of Ezra is clear that the ultimate cause of this amazing turn of events is that “*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.*” In verse 5 of our text this morning we read of “*everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.*” Throughout the Old Testament, when we read of God stirring up or directing up the Gentile nations to accomplish his purposes, it is usually in order to discipline his disobedient people. But in this case, God stirs the heart of Cyrus to restore Israel—to allow the Jews to return home, rebuild their temple and their city.<sup>1</sup> God has foretold of these events through his prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, and he will fulfill them, through his sovereign control of the free actions of a pagan king (Cyrus), and through the longing of his people to return home, and rebuild both their temple and their beloved city, Jerusalem.

This morning then, we will consider the balance of Ezra 1 along with the entirety of chapter 2. First, we will consider the lists of temple vessels (in Ezra 1:5-11). Second, we will cover the list of family names of the returning Israelites (2:1-70). Throughout, we will draw a number of points of application raised by our consideration of the biblical text.

We begin then by considering the broader historical circumstances which lay behind the opening chapter of Ezra. It has been nearly two hundred years since Israel was divided into northern and southern kingdoms, yet the southern kingdom of Judah managed to hang on until its eventual fall to the Babylonians in 587. Along with a number of survivors from the northern kingdom (which was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC) a significant remnant of believers in YHWH remained faithful, even after the terrible ordeal of Jerusalem’s fall, the temple’s destruction, and a seventy-year captivity in Babylon.

The situation facing the people of Israel in 538 does not come as a surprise to people familiar with Israel’s history. Israel’s circumstances in the days of the exile remind us of the days of the Judges when Israel’s fortunes fell to near oblivion, only to be restored by YHWH through unlikely leaders such as Othniel, Ehud, Barak, and Gideon. The struggle facing the exiles upon their return to their land was characteristic of Israel’s entire history. YHWH brings about judgment upon his disobedient people and upon those who persecute them, while at the same time ensuring that a believing remnant will always remain faithful, even if the total number falls to as few as 7,000 in the days of Elijah (cf. Rom. 11:1-6). One of the reasons why Ezra so carefully documents the family names and occupations of those who return home to Israel and Jerusalem is to remind his readers of the fact that although Israel has fallen on hard times, and come under YHWH’s stern discipline, YHWH’s covenant promise stands, no matter

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<sup>1</sup> Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, 776.

what the circumstances appear to indicate otherwise. 42,000 people is six times the number of the 7,000 faithful in the back days of Elijah.

According to verse 5 of Ezra 1, “*then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.*” As we noted a bit ago, YHWH had stirred up Cyrus, so that the Persian king determined to set the Israelites free and then send them on their way. YHWH also stirs the hearts of the remnant in Babylon. YHWH has often done this kind of stirring on behalf of his people. In many ways, this is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 2:12–13. “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” God may stir Cyrus’ heart so that a pagan Gentile king fulfills God’s ultimate purposes, but God also stirs the hearts of his people in a different manner and for a much different reason. YHWH is Cyrus’ sovereign Lord. Those Jews in Babylon whose hearts he stirs are his covenant people. YHWH kindles their faith, and their response is a deep-longing desire to return home, rebuild their city and the “house of YHWH” so that they might worship him in spirit and in truth.

So, as the remnant returns to Jerusalem to rebuild, Cyrus sees this as something which is to his political advantage. Happy subjects are loyal subjects. Once the city is rebuilt along with its temple, the Jews will pay him tribute, and help defend the southern flank of his vast empire. But YHWH’s purposes are much different for his people than Cyrus’s. Once their hearts are stirred so that the exile people realize that the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah are about to be fulfilled, YHWH’s people cannot wait to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, so that YHWH might be worshiped publically, as prescribed in his word, by his covenant people, as a testimony that YHWH alone is the true and living God. The words of Psalm 127:1 come to mind,<sup>2</sup> “*unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*” The Lord will rebuild his house, and he will watch over his beloved city. The returning exiles’ labor will not be in vain. As the author of Hebrews reminds us (Heb. 7:16), the rebuilt temple points us to Jesus, “*who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.*”

There are several loud echoes from the Exodus account found in verse 6.<sup>3</sup> “*And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered.*” Cyrus decreed to set the Jews free, and then directed them to return home. Just as in the days of the Exodus, the people of God will leave their time of captivity with what they need, plus much more. Those “*about them*” refers to the Jew’s Babylonian Gentile neighbors who assisted them with generous gifts so that the house of YHWH might be rebuilt.<sup>4</sup> In Exodus 3:21-22, we read of I AM’s word of promise to Moses from the midst of the burning bush, “*and I will give this people [the captive Israelites] 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.*” As in the former days, when YHWH directed Israel’s release from captivity in Egypt, so

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 34; Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, 776-77.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 16.

now he directs Cyrus to provide for his people, and stirs the hearts of many Gentiles to once again give the people of God that which they need to rebuild their temple as that place where they can properly worship YHWH—an act which serves as a testimony to all of Israel’s pagan neighbors that YHWH is the true and living God, unlike their lifeless idols. The allusions to the Exodus are hard to miss.

The great difference between the Jews and their Gentile neighbors can be seen in the fact that Cyrus releases to the Israelites those items which Nebuchadnezzar had pilfered from the Jerusalem temple previously. Ezra tells us in verse 7, that “*Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.*” Notice that there are no images of YHWH released to them, no objects of worship, no statues, or idols, or any of the things typical of all other religions—only those implements to be used in the temple as spelled out prescribed in the Jewish law. In fact, the written order (the royal decree), actually promulgated by Darius–Cyrus’ successor, is found in the first five verses of Ezra 6.

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record. In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.”

There is only one reasonable conclusion: YHWH is the sovereign Lord who directs the affairs of Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, and now Darius.

In verse 8, however, we begin to see the impact of Israel’s many years in captivity in a pagan land, in the city of Babylon. “*Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.*” Mithredath is a Persian name—originally given to honor the sun god Mithras. The term for treasurer is also Persian in origin. Sheshbazzar is named for the Babylonian god Shamash.<sup>5</sup> The project to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem, will be under the watchful eye of the Persians—a much different state of affairs than when the first temple was originally built during the days of Solomon. The latter’s name is the subject of some debate. Who is Sheshbazzar and why is he identified as “prince of Judah? Some think him to be a Persian governor (a political appointee), given the title “prince to Judah,” and who has no part in David’s dynastic line since no genealogy is assigned to him. Others think that Sheshbazzar is the Persian court name for Zerubbabel, whose Jewish ancestry is a matter of record. No one knows who Sheshbazzar is for sure, and good cases can be made for either interpretation.

In verses 9-11, Ezra gives us a detailed list of those items originally taken from the Jerusalem temple and now to be returned to the Jews. “*And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from*

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0. Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 34.

*Babylonia to Jerusalem.*” We may ask “why is Ezra so concerned about these temple utensils, that he includes an exact account of their kind and number?” As one writer tells us, “it is left to us to picture what it may have meant to see this consecrated gold and silver brought out into the light of day, every piece of it a witness to God’s sovereign care and the continuance of the covenant. The political kingdom [of Judah] perished but not the kingdom of priests.”<sup>6</sup>

In the opening verses of the Book of Daniel (vv. 1-2), we read “*in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And [Nebuchadnezzar] brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.*” According to Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar previously had looted the Jerusalem temple at a point before the temple and the city were actually destroyed in 587. The valuable temple vessels, it is believed, were taken to Babylon about 605 BC (as booty) when Nebuchadnezzar took control of the region before razing everything to the ground in 587, the time of Zedekiah’s rebellion. To add insult to injury, Nebuchadnezzar had the gold and silver implements from YHWH’s temple dedicated to the Babylonian gods, supposed proof that the Babylonian gods are mightier than the God of Israel.

The return of each and every one of these items to Jerusalem (as spelled out in Ezra’s inventory), proves otherwise. YHWH is restoring the fortunes of his people and demonstrating his sovereignty over the kings of the earth and their “sham” gods. And so under the supervision of a Persian appointed official named Sheshbazzar, the focus of redemptive history shifts from the life of the exile of God’s people under a pagan king in a pagan land, to that of to a new Exodus in which the people of God return home after seventy years in exile. This is one of those major turning points in the grand drama of redemptive history. Israel was cast from the land of Canaan, endures a seventy-year exile in Babylon, and now returns to Canaan in a new Exodus. Because redemptive history is exactly that—the history of our redemption, this inventory of vessels to be used in the temple really does matter.

As we move into chapter two and find seventy verses of hard to pronounce names of people long dead (and apart from this list, forgotten), we are tempted to skip over this list, or pay it scant attention. But the list is utterly remarkable in that it reminds us that God keeps his covenant promises to his people—a people who are here identified by family name and by occupation. Each one of these people matter to God, and will play a role (however small) in this great moment in redemptive history. If the temple is to be rebuilt and consecrated there must be priests, Levites, musicians, and temple servants. It is such an important list that Nehemiah repeats it (chapter 7). A rebuilt temple must also have the proper vessels, so that the priests and Levites reconsecrate the temple and begin offering sacrifices on behalf of the people.

The first two verses of Ezra 2, which includes the names of the leaders of the returning exiles, is filled with names each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a very dramatic and powerful indication of continuity between the nation of Israel which left Egypt during the Exodus (with its twelve tribes) and the nation now leaving Babylon (with those same tribes being represented yet again). Israel will be restored once again—and the divided kingdom will be no more.<sup>7</sup> A new Israel will take the place of that nation which was divided, and crumbled before the exile. Ezra informs us, “*now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon*

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 777.

*had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.”*

Several of the names mentioned jump out at us. The first is Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and grandson of king Jehoiachin. The second is Jeshua (Joshua), the high priest, who according to Haggai and Zechariah, is co-leader of the group along with Zerubbabel. This partnership is seen by Zechariah as the forerunner of a messianic figure, identified the Branch, who is both a king and a priest. Joshua is the same high priest about whom we read in Zechariah 3:1-10, who is brought to YHWH’s attention by Satan, and whose filthy priestly garments are stripped from him by YHWH, and replaced by spotless priestly attire—a prophetic image of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, as our sins are removed from us, and we are accounted righteous before God through the merits of Jesus Christ, which are imputed to us through faith. Nehemiah may be the same man mentioned in the Book which bears his name. Seraiah may be Ezra’s father. Mordecai may be the man mentioned in the Book of Esther (which is closely associated with the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah). But these are very common Hebrew names, so we cannot say with certainty that these are the same individuals.

In the list which follows, there are several important things to notice. In verses 2b-35, Ezra gives us the total number of lay-people identified by their home towns. In verses 36-39, we are given the family names of the priests—a total of 4,289 people, which means that 10% of the exile population are priests. These priests had no temple in which to serve while in exile, yet God preserved them, and no doubt stirred within them a great desire to help rebuild the temple and fulfill their calling. The opening words of Psalm 84 surely meant much to them.<sup>8</sup> *“How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.”*

In verses 40-42, Ezra recounts the family names of 341 Levites, which meant that there is one Levite for every seven priests. There will be much work for them to do. In verses 43-54, we have the temple servants, again identified by family. These were the assistants to the Levites. And then in verses 55-57, Ezra lists Solomon’s servants (again by family names). The servants of Solomon are closely linked to the temple servants, because one total is given for both groups in verse 58. Edwin Yamauchi points out that 68% of the names of the temple servants are of foreign origin, and that 33-40% of “Solomon’s servants” also have foreign names. Perhaps these men were the descendants of prisoners of war (during David’s time), or descendants of the neighboring pagan tribes that Solomon pressed into slavery (according to 1 Kings 9:20-21). If so, the descendants of these pagan ancestors are now listed among the covenant people of God as they are restored to their land.<sup>9</sup> They are now worshipers of YHWH. In verse 70, Ezra concludes by informing us that *“now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.”*

Therefore, in many ways, the exhaustive list of the 42,360 exiles returning to Jerusalem should be considered as though it were a church membership roll. It is a list we could easily skip over, but then we would miss the point Ezra is making—these are the covenant people of God, the believing remnant, people

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Davis, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (part one) IIIM Magazine Online, Volume 2, Number 43, October 23 to October 29, 2000

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 4:717ff.

who have been exiled from their home and desperately long to return after nearly two generations in captivity.<sup>10</sup> These are the people, in part, about whom Paul writes in Romans 9:4 ff. (from our New Testament lesson). *“They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.”* This entire exile-return scenario of this new Exodus reflects the greater purposes of God, as spelled out in Romans 9:16-18. *“So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”*

Change the name of Pharaoh in Romans 9:16 to Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, or Darius, the application is still the same. God directs all things to accomplish his will, often times unknown, unseen to us, and unclear to us. God has mercy upon his covenant people. Because he shows his mercy to his people, he will send them a redeemer—Jesus Christ. This redeemer will indeed lay down his life to save his people from the guilt and the power of sin. But, in order to send such a redeemer to his people, Israel must first return to the land, rebuild their city, and their temple. In the list given us by Ezra in chapter 2, we read of *“everyone whose spirit God stirred up”*—those people looking and longing for this redeemer. And in the detailed list of those temple implements returned to Jerusalem, we see the triumph of YHWH over all the pagan gods, ensuring that the coming redeemer not only dies for his people, but will be raised for them as well. Yup, the details matter.

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<sup>10</sup> Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part two).