



## LIVING IN A HOSTILE WORLD Studies in Ezra and Esther Lesson 2

### “NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM”

The post-captivity books record the return and restoration at Jerusalem after the 70-year Babylonian captivity as predicted by Jeremiah. Six books belong to this series. They are divided into 2 groups:

Historical – Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

Prophetical – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi

Although Ezra is a continuation of the historical books begun with Joshua, the pre-captivity and captivity books could be profitably studied before beginning with Ezra. These books include all of the major and minor prophets, with the exception of the last three books of the Old Testament.

#### I. RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE BY DECREE OF CYRUS - EZRA 1

##### A. Cyrus, King of Persia

Cyrus, king of Persia” (1:1) was one of the most enlightened rulers of the ancient world. He was a subject of predictive prophecy. He was named before he was born – almost 200 years before he became king of Persia.

*Who saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure; even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. (Isaiah 44:28) Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two-leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut. (Isaiah 45:1)*

Apparently Cyrus knew about Isaiah's prophecies concerning himself (v. 2; cf. Isaiah 41:2; 44:28; 45:1, 4-5, 12, 13). Daniel was in the court of Cyrus and evidently introduced him to a knowledge of the living and true God. It was during the reign of Cyrus that Daniel gave some of his greatest prophecies.

Because of verse 2 some have thought that Cyrus was a believer in Yahweh. However, Isaiah predicted that he would not be (Isaiah 45:4-5). Evidently he was a polytheist and worshipped several gods. On the "Cyrus Cylinder," the clay cylinder on which Cyrus recorded his capture of Babylon, the king gave credit to Marduk for his success. He said he hoped the people under his authority would pray for him to Bel and Nebo. Probably Cyrus gave lipservice to all the gods his people worshipped, but the evidence suggests that he did not believe Yahweh was the only true God.

##### B. The Decree

###### 1. The name of God (1:2-4)

“The Lord God of heaven” (1:2) is a designation of God which is peculiar to Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. After the fall and destruction of Jerusalem, God could no longer be identified with the temple as the One who dwelt between the

cherubim. The glory had departed; “Ichabod” was written over the name of Israel. Ezekiel saw the vision of the departure of the Shekinah glory (see Ezekiel 9-11). It returned to heaven. For this reason, in the post-captivity books He is “the Lord God of heaven.”

## 2. The decree itself

Cyrus gave permission to the Jews to: (1) return to the land, (2) rebuild the city of Jerusalem, and (3) rebuild the temple. (1:5-6).

## 3. The response

Very few avail themselves of this opportunity (see Ezra 2:64, 65). Most of the captives are now settled and satisfied in Babylon. They still their consciences by giving generously to those who do return.

Here you begin to see the reality of the “remnant.”

**a. Isaiah 10:20** *“In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous.”*

**b. Haggai 1:12** *“Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.”*

**c. Romans 9:27** *“Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the Israelites were like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.”*

**d. Acts 15:17** *“that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things.”*

**e. Romans 11:5** *“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”*

**f. The remnant obviously has gone through a progression of understanding from a physical to a theological sense.**

**g. The remnant is those few individuals who are faithful to God.**

## 4. The return of the vessels of gold (1:7-11)

Note the generosity of Cyrus. He returns the vessels of gold taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar.

The inventory of temple articles here (vv. 9-11) does not add up. Verses 9 and 10 give the following quantities.

Gold dishes	30
Silver dishes	1,000
Others	29
Gold bowls	30
Silver bowls	410
Other articles	1,000
Total	2,499

However verse 11 says the total was 5,400. Perhaps the writer counted only the larger or most important vessels and the 5,400 figure includes the grand total including many lesser vessels.

Constable writes:

*Often warring armies in the ancient Near East carried images of their gods into battle to help secure victory (cf. 2 Sam. 5:21; 1 Chron. 14:12). When one army defeated the other the victors would take the images of their defeated foes captive and lock them up to testify to the impotence of those gods.*

*"To displace the authority of a city, it was normal practice for a conquering power to carry off the emblems of deity (cf. Jeremiah 48:7)."<sup>26</sup> William J. Dumbrell, "The Theological Intention of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Reformed Theological Review* 45:3 (September-December 1986):65.*

*Since the Israelites had no images of Yahweh, Nebuchadnezzar took the temple utensils in their place.<sup>27</sup> Kidner, p. 34.*

*Cyrus released these utensils so the returning Jews could take them back to Jerusalem (cf. Dan. 5:1-4).*

*"The return of the temple vessels (Ezra 1:7) reverses this and empowers Jerusalem once more in Persian eyes to become the city of Yahweh. Doubtless in this task Cyrus saw himself in typical Achaemenid fashion, as the representative and thus the 'servant' of Yahweh."<sup>28</sup>Dumbrell, p. 65.*

*There is no evidence that the Babylonians took the ark of the covenant to Babylon or that the returning Jews brought it with them back to the Promised Land. Most scholars speculate that the Babylonians broke it up when they sacked the temple.*

- Thomas Constable, Notes on Ezra

Breneman sums up the chapter well:

*"Throughout chap. 1 the author's purpose was clearly to show the small postexilic Jewish community their legitimate continuity with the preexilic community and with God's plan of redemption. Therefore he used motifs from the exodus; he emphasized God's providence; he mentioned Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites; and he explained that even the former articles from the temple had been returned." - Mervin Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, p 35.*

## II. THE CAPTIVES WHO RETURNED TO JERUSALEM – EZRA 2

### A. The List

All were agreed; all were involved.

Note the names & numbers given.

- v. 2            Leaders
- v. 3-20       Families
- v. 21-35      Communities
- v. 36-39      Priests

- v. 40-42 Ministers (Levites, singers, gatekeepers)
- v. 43-58 Servants
- v. 59-61 Non-registered (no record)

Although these could not prove their Jewish origin, they were permitted to return to Jerusalem. However without recorded genealogies they were not allowed to enter the priesthood according to the law of Moses (Numbers 16:1-40). In verse 63 Zerubbabel was careful to follow the law in not allowing them to participate in priestly functions.

## **B. Proof of Ancestry and The Urim and Thummim**

There is not much information about the Urim and Thummim. The word *Urim* is found 7 times in the Bible, and the word *Thummim* is found 5 times. In all 5 of these, *Urim* and *Thummim* appear together. There are 2 other places where *Urim* is found by itself. Commentators disagree over what they were. But many tend to think they were two objects probably shaped like flat stones. Originally, they were worn by the high priest. We find an additional description in Exodus 28:29-30. *"Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD. 30 Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD"*

These flat rocks (or whatever they were) were evidently used to help make decisions. They were used to find God's will. Some commentators think that the Urim represented the "No" answer, and the Thummim represented the "Yes" answer. After a time of prayer for God's guidance the priest would shake out one of the stones. If the Thummim came out, then God's answer was "no." If the Urim came out, then God's answer was "yes". Other commentators feel that each stone had a yes side and a no side. The priest would pray and then shake out both stones. If they were both on the "yes" side then God had spoken clearly on the "yes" side. But if they both fell on the "no" side then God's answer was "no." But if one was yes and one was no then that was considered no answer from God.

Evidently some of the captives were unable to prove that they were Jewish, or of the priestly line. They would have to wait until a priest administered the test, which, by the power of God, would show what was right and what was not.

## **C Who's Who**

### **1. The people of the province (2:1)**

This probably refers to the Jewish people of Judah. This registry was most likely compiled in Babylon.

"His own city" referred to the city where a person's family had lived.

### **2. The leaders of the expedition**

- a. **Jeshua was Joshua, a high priest (Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 3:1) whose father was Jozadak (I Chronicles 6:14; Haggai 1:1) who helped build the altar and later led in the re-establishment of temple worship.**
- b. **"Nehemiah and "Mordecai" (2:2) are not the same as the Nehemiah who later built the walls and the Mordecai of Esther.**
- c. **Sheshbazzar (1:8)**

**(1). Some suggest that Sheshbazzar died and his work was continued by Zerubbabel.**

**(2). Sheshbazzar, may have been another name for Shenazzar** (I Chronicles 3:18), an uncle of Zerubbabel. This is the view that Dr. Constable takes.

**(3). Ezra 5:2, 16, appear to identify Sheshbazaar and Zerubbabel.** Sheshbazaar may have been the name by which he was known in Persian circles, and Zerubbabel the name by which he was known in Jewish activity.

**d. Zerubabel - was a prince of Judah, meaning he was in the Davidic royal line.** He was the grandson of king Jehoiakim.

**e. The people of Israel - they were called this because all 12 tribes of Israel were represented.** (In contrast to British Israelism, all 12 tribes are represented in the return. In II Chronicles 11:13-17 we are told that at the time of Israel's civil war various individuals from all 12 tribes moved to Jerusalem. In Matthew 10:6 Jesus said he came to minister to the entire house of Israel. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali are referred to in Matthew 4:13, 15. Anna was from the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36), and Paul speaks of "our 12 tribes" (Acts 26:7).

### **3. Others:**

#### **a. The Levites**

Note that very few Levites returned at this time - only 74 (verse 40). Remember, they had no inheritance in the land, but their presence was needed for the Temple.

#### **b. The singers (2:41)**

The Levites who had the responsibility of praising God with music (1 Chronicles 15:16). Note that only 128 returned to Jerusalem out of as many as 4,000 in Solomon's Temple (1 Chronicles 23:5). However, there were still more than the others who are called "Levites."

#### **c. The gatekeepers (remember Parbar?) (2:42)**

These were also Levites. They prevented unauthorized people from entering the restricted area of the Temple. Again, only 139 returned out of some 4,000.

#### **d. The Nethinim (2:43-54)**

The word means "given ones" or "dedicated ones." In I Chronicles 9:2. They are distinguished from the priests and the Levites. Tradition identified them with the Gibeonites (see Joshua 9:27).

#### **e. The sons of Solomon's servants (2:38)**

These were probably descendants of the inhabitants of Canaan at the time of Solomon who were hired to build the Temple.

## **III. APPLICATION FOR TODAY**

### **A. The Urim and the Thummim**

Today the Christian knows the will of God, not from some divine "dice," but by being sensitive to the Holy Spirit's guidance, seeking godly counsel, and being mindful of circumstances.

### **B. Proving Heritage**

During the Old Testament times, it was important to show your ancestry to Ab-

raham. But now, more important than being Jewish, Paul says, we must be a Jew in our heart. Romans 2:28 & 29 says, *“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.”*

More important than showing if you are a child of Abraham is being able to show that you are a child of King Jesus Christ. And, as far as seeking guidance and direction from God - we do not use Urim and Thummim today. We do not need to use some sort of divination device. But Scripture tells us in James 4:8 that we can *“Come near to God and he will come near to”* us. We certainly do not need the Jewish High Priest. We have a new High Priest. His name is Jesus. Hebrews 5:10 says that Jesus *“was designated by God to be high priest.”*

There is coming a time when documentation will be very important for people. Jesus will open up a very important book called *“The Book of Life.”*

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Revelation 20:11-15

### **C. The Lists**

Most of the names and these records are only names to us, but God has not forgotten one of the persons once called by these names on earth. And someday He will reward each according to his works. Probably none of those devoted Jews recorded here, ever thought that God would preserve a registry of their names and families for future generations to read. But God honors all that is done from devotion of heart to Himself and for the glory of His name. In verses 66 and 67 of chapter 2, even the number of the beasts of burden was recorded. God seems to take note of all that may be connected with His people.

### **D. The Offerings (2:68-69)**

When the journey was ended and the former exiles stood up on the site of the ruined city of Jerusalem, the desolation did not lead to despair. Some of the leaders "gave after their ability" of both silver and gold and garments for the priests. And this was before the altar was rebuilt. The rule laid down in first Corinthians 16:2 is that every believer is to lay by him in store *“as God has prospered him”* is one that rarely claims a second thought, with many today.

### **E. The Company Seen from God's Point of View**

Verse 70 of chapter 2 says that "all Israel" dwelt in their cities. This is probably referring to the fact that the leaders dwelt in Jerusalem, the Levites and those working with the Temple dwelt in the immediate environs of Jerusalem, and the rest dwelt in the cities of their heritage. And yet there is something beautiful about

God, calling them "all Israel." We would not have expected to read this at such a time. God refuses to consider the nation except in her unity. God saw in this weak and feeble remnant a picture of what "all Israel" would someday be. In much the same way God sees the whole church united (1 Corinthians 12:12-14) and as Paul describes her in Ephesians "not having spot or wrinkle." (Ephesians 5:27)