

# **BIB104 OT2 Life & Literature of Israel**

## **Unit 5a Ezra: Return of the Remnant**

Presented by the



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After 70 years in exile, the people of Israel were finally coming back home. The new Persian emperor Cyrus had decreed that they could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of their God, which had lain in ruins the whole time. You'll find that in Ezra 1:1-4. One thing I'd love to note as we go through some of these books is the interesting fact of how often God used the unbelieving, even the hostile, to be able to accomplish his will. And we even see that today where oftentimes, just like we'll see in the Book of Ezra, we see how God uses individuals that we would have never guessed to be able to accomplish his will. What an incredible encouragement to us. If he'll do that, how much more if he works even with our own lives as we seek to follow him?

Zerubbabel and Jeshua, descendants of King David, and Aaron the priest, all answer the call to rebuild the house of God. But the temple wasn't the only thing that needed attention. Many of the returning Hebrews had forgotten God's laws and were disregarding them in front of the people. They needed to remember the covenant they had made with God. They needed to remember why they were in this situation they were, why they had to go to Babylon, which you can read about in Kings and Chronicles, and why they'd been allowed to come back again. The temple needed a new foundation, but the people needed to return to the foundations of their faith too. Ezra the scribe answers the call, and he teaches the Israelites the ways of God again. You'll see that as we kind of begin that part of things in Ezra 7:10. And it begins a whole new story in Israel's history.

So let's review just a little bit the overall breakdown leading up to Ezra. We're going to see from Genesis to Deuteronomy that God calls out Israel as a special nation and teaches them his laws. And then in Joshua through 2 Chronicles, we see that God gives Israel a land and a king, but Israel loses both when they consistently disobey God. And then lastly, from Ezra through Esther, we see that God restores Israel from exile to their own land again. This book provides a much needed link in the historical record of the Israelite people. When their king was dethroned and captured, the people were exiled in Babylon. Judah, as an independent nation, ceased to exist.

The Book of Ezra provides an account of the Jews re-gathering, of their struggle to survive and to rebuild that which has been destroyed. I picture as the Israelites came back to their homeland, the remnant, they didn't just see a place that needed rebuilding. They saw a place that had been devastated. They saw a place that was hardly even recognizable that there were buildings in places. Only piles of rubble, weeds overgrown, creatures of prey roaming around. It was a desolate place. And from that, God would rebirth his nation. And I love even in our lives how Christ comes in no matter how desolate things are and he can save us. And as Christians, even as we struggle with battles and face the different difficulties of life, how God can come and take us through horrible situations, but we can see his love and his care and his provision in those times.

They did struggle to rebuild and they certainly met obstacles, but they did see the hand of God in all of it. Through this narrative, Ezra declared that they were still God's people and that God had not forgotten them. We also see in this book that as we witness the rebuilding of the temple, the unification of the returning tribes is really neat to see happen because they shared in a common struggle and they were challenged to work together again. Later, after the original remnant has stopped working on the city walls and spiritual apathy sunk in, Ezra arrived with another 2000 people and it sparked a spiritual revival. By the end of the book, Israel had renewed their covenant with God and had begun acting in obedience to him again.

If you read back through Chronicles and Kings, you're going to see a nation divided. Now you see a nation being unified, a nation that is all about tribal strength and tribal unity. And the division that they had between the two segments of Israel, it now comes together to be able to accomplish great things for God. And even, again, in the church, when we see a unified body, in the kingdom, when we see unified churches even in different locales and across the nations and across the world, we see amazing things happen when the people of God decide to work together for God's honor and glory.

Now, Jewish tradition has long attributed authorship of this historical book to the scribe and scholar Ezra. He led the second group of Jews returning from Babylon, as we just mentioned, which went from Babylon to Jerusalem. We find that in Ezra 7:11-26. Now, Ezra 8 includes a first person narrative. Now, this would imply that the author was actually participating in the events and gives more credence to Ezra being the author of the book. Now, he plays a major role in the second half of the book, but you're also going to see him playing a role in the Book of Nehemiah, which is the sequel. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible, these two books were considered one work, though some internal evidence suggests they were written separately and then joined together later in the Hebrew canon. But then you see that they're separated again in the English translation.

Now, Ezra focuses on rebuilding the temple, whereas Nehemiah focuses on rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. They both form the story of how God re-establishes Israel and the land that he promised to her. The Book of Ezra also references other biblical prophets, namely Haggai and Zechariah whose message has stirred up the people to finish building the temple, we see in Ezra 5:1. And he's traditionally credited with writing the books, Ezra is, of 1 and 2 Chronicles also. Now, if this is true, then Ezra is the second most prolific author in the Old Testament outside of Moses. Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron, the chief priest (Ezra 7:1-5). Thus, he was a priest and a scribe in his own right. His zeal for God and God's law spurred Ezra to lead a group of Jews to Israel during King Artaxerxes' reign over the Persian Empire, which had since replaced the Babylonian Empire that was the original group that exiled the nation of Judah in particular. Israel had already been taken into captivity.

I love that, again, we see Ezra who takes spiritual leadership and spiritual authority to lead the people back to establish a spiritual foundation. If we'll keep our eyes consistently on that as our number one goal as we try to accomplish God's will, that will help us to understand, no matter what happens in our life, what needs to be those nonnegotiables, those core things: Christ first, taking in and reaching out to the lost, and making disciples. Ezra brought that remnant back to not forget the God that had saved them, the God that had brought them out of captivity, the God that had provided for them even back into the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, those books of the Pentateuch. They saw his protection and care, and Ezra was going to lead them back to that again.

Now, I love the way that Ezra calls attention to Israel's covenant history with the Lord as well. God had made promises to Israel through Moses, if you remember. If the people obeyed him, was one of them, they would enjoy a good land and prosperity. But if the people disobeyed him, they would face punishment and exile. Just like today. If we choose to obey God, then God certainly takes care of us, blesses us. There's repercussions. And if we disobey God, then there are punishments that come. Now, mind you, what one has to be careful of is that nowadays especially, there are people whose voices are strong that are trying to misdirect this Mosaic covenant. And what they're saying is if you obey God, you will get material wealth and gain as a result of it. This is not a prosperity gospel covenant at all. This is a covenant saying "Do what God has called you to do."

What has God called us to do? Love others. Take care of the widows and the fatherless. There's some basic commands that we're called to do as Christians in the way we treat people and the way that we worship God, and then God blesses as a result of that. He didn't promise us that blessing would come necessarily through material wealth. He promises that blessing to come through his ongoing work and development of us to become more like him. So be very careful about that when you see that tie-in there. This isn't saying material wealth. This is saying "Obey God and he will continue to direct you to become more like him and your heart be more knit with his heart."

Now, we saw, if you look back into the previous books, Chronicles and Kings, that the people disobeyed and God kept his promise (Ezra 9:7). However, God made another promise. He would gather Israel back to her land after he had punished her. We see that all the way back in Deuteronomy 30:3. Now, the Book of Ezra shows us how God keeps that promise. It's devoted, in fact, to events occurring in the land of Israel at the time of the return for the Babylonian captivity and the subsequent years, covering approximately a time period of a whole century beginning in 538 B.C. The emphasis in Ezra is, as I said before, on that rebuilding of the temple. And so as a result of that, the book contains extensive genealogical records principally for the purpose of establishing the claims to the priesthood on the part of the descendants of Aaron. Now, again, I said there was about a century there. This book was probably written between 460 and 440 B.C. So the book was written only a period of 20 years, but you see a time span that was much greater than that that was recorded.

The Book of Ezra records two separate time periods directly following the 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Ezra 1 through 6 covers the first return of the Jews from captivity. Now, that was led by Zerubbabel, and that was a period of about 23 years beginning with the edict of Cyrus of Persia and ending at the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem, which was 538 B.C. through 515 B.C. Now, in Ezra 7 through 10, we see that we pick up the story more than 60 years later when Ezra leads the second group of exiles from Babylon back to Israel. And that's in 458 B.C. The book could not have been completed earlier than about 450 B.C., the date of the events that occurred in Ezra 10:17-44. The events are all set in Jerusalem and around the surrounding areas there. The returning tribes that came, or exiles as we call them, were able to populate only a very small tiny portion of their former homeland. So be careful not to think that they came back and everything happened like that. Remember, again, the devastation that took place. They came back. They were in Jerusalem and in those surrounding areas initially to get things started before other areas were inhabited by the individuals, as well as it was a small fraction compared to the many that had lived then in Israel and Judah prior to their exile into the Babylonian and the Persian empires.

Now, Ezra is a book that's a narrative history, and it also contains, as I mentioned, those genealogies. It was written, as we said, about 440 B.C. And I love the fact that it records some very key personalities that we need to make note of. Cyrus, that non-believing Persian king. Ezra, which we've mentioned. Haggai and Zachariah, both minor prophets who we see they're used by God to stir up the people spiritually. We also see Darius I, Artaxerxes I, and Zerubbabel. Now, Ezra, because he was a scribe, he was tasked with the responsibility of making sure that he made very accurate records of the return from the exile. After that 70-year period that we talked about, the events that surrounded the rebuilding of the temple, God wanted to have some very exact records in relationship to that rebuilding. Now, again, God was faithful in fulfilling his promise. And so as the Jews returned from Jerusalem from their exile into Babylon, we see the way that this narrative plays out and how they reacted with each other as well as with the task that was put in front of them.

Now, there were two main issues that the exiles that returned were facing. The first one was their struggle just to restore the temple. And that's in Ezra 1:1-6:22. Now, remember, if we were to go back a few books back when we saw Solomon and what he did, he built a temple that was monumentally gorgeous. The amount of wealth that was in there. The amount of decoration that was put there. Everything with the purpose of bringing honor and glory to God. That was the best of the best of the best. And now the temple that they would rebuild, remember, they're going in as exiles. They're going in as a nation that was captive. They're going in as a nation that is now destitute financially, and they're going back into the situation. And some of the folks we even read about in here were mourning the fact that the temple that would be built would be nothing compared to the temple that Solomon had built.

Now, the second challenge that we see is the need for spiritual reformation. And we see that tackled in Ezra 7:1 through 10:44. Now, both were necessary in order for the people to renew their fellowship with the Lord. He wanted the temple built. But obviously, the temple without their commitment to God was just as useless as their commitment to God without the temple because in the Old Testament times, the temple represented the place that God inhabited. It was a drawing place for them to be able to come and worship him in a very special, focused way.

The Book of Ezra chronicles both that series of rebuilding the temple and also remembering the law. They bring the law back to be read and understood and applied. The account weaves in some really cool, several different aspects of written works. You see the historical narrative, and that's the events surrounding Israel's return, the temple reconstruction, and the revival. The second is the official documents, letters and decrees that were sent to and from the Persian emperors during this time period. The third thing we see are the Jewish records, which were the names of individuals and families who returned to Israel. And the last, we see that autobiographical text that Ezra had that shows his prayers, his reflections, and his actions from Ezra's point of view as he led things in that area of spiritual reformation and temple rebuilding. These pieces all come together to tell how God began restoring Israel.

Now, let's kind of quickly go over what that outline of the book was in a little bit more detailed form. The rebuilding of the temple, chapter 1 to 6. So the remnant returns to Judah in chapters 1 and 2. And then Judah lays the new temple foundation (chapter 3). And then Judah's adversaries stop the temple work in chapter 4. Then Judah resumes the temple work in chapter 5. And the temple is completed in chapter 6. The second part that we talked about starts in chapter 7 and goes through chapter 10. And that's when they remember the law. Artaxerxes sends Ezra to teach the law in Jerusalem. Again, God using another unsaved king to go back and to teach and impact the nation of Israel for God's honor and glory. And that's chapters 7 and 8. And then 9 and 10 is where Ezra has the people put away their foreign wives, which was a real stronghold that they had at that time.

There are some key verses in the Book of Ezra that we would want to make note of. The first is in Ezra 3:11. And listen to this. "With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: 'He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.' And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid." It's interesting as I think when I go into church on Sunday. I don't look at the building that we worship in, but I think, "I'm able to gather with the people of God and to be able to see God working in corporate ways, as we lift our voices and praise to him." Keep that in mind the next time you visit your church, and think about the singing and the fellowship that takes place there.

Now, in Ezra 7:6, we see another one. “This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked.” Did you hear that? “The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him.” Now, that’s powerful because, as I mentioned a couple of times, an unsaved king said, “You take whatever you need to accomplish your God’s purpose.”

And then the last key verse is in Ezra 9:9. “For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended loving kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.” And again, this was before the walls were completed, so you see the confidence in what God was going to continue to do and the thankfulness for what he had already done. Even though they still knew they were in bondage to the Persian Empire, they knew they were free in God and they saw his will being done in their nation.

The book also contains, I think, some great intercessory prayers that I would encourage you to look at. I think some of the most powerful in the Bible. And that’s in Ezra 9:5-15. You’ll also see in Daniel 9 one of Ezra’s intercessory prayers. And then also in Nehemiah 9, there’s another one. His leadership proved crucial to the Jews’ spiritual advancement. Now, as I stated a few minutes ago, now with a little bit more detail, the book, we said, was divided into chapters 1 through 6, the first return under Zerubbabel and the building of the second temple; chapters 7 through 10, the ministry of Ezra since well over half of a century had elapsed between chapter 6 and chapter 7. That’s very important to note. So they’re rebuilding the temple through 6. It didn’t just happen next, that spiritual part. There was a real battle in there where you could see the devil really trying to tear apart the nation. So almost 50 years took place between chapters 6 and 7.

And the characters of the first part of the book had died by the time Ezra began his ministry in Jerusalem. Ezra is the one person who was prominent in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Both books end with prayers of confession (Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9) and the subsequent separation of the people from their sinful practices into which they had fallen. Some concept of the nature of the encouraging messages of Haggai and Zechariah are definitely there who are introduced in this narrative in Ezra 5:1. You can read them, if you like, in the books of the Bible that are named after them. But isn’t that awesome when you think about that and the role that God gave to Ezra and how God had both books be ending with prayers of confession? Christian, do we take time to, first of all, praise God for what he’s done? But do we also take time to take responsibility for the sins that we’ve committed against God? I encourage you to consider that and make sure we take time to keep our relationship with God the way it should be by regular confession of the sins that invade our life in such a rapid way.

Now, we see in the Book of Ezra a continuation of that biblical theme of the remnant that we mentioned. Whenever disaster or judgment falls, God always saves a tiny remnant for himself. Now, just to give us some history on that, we see Noah and his family from the destruction of the flood. We see Lot's family from Sodom and Gomorrah. We see the 700 prophets that were reserved in Israel despite the persecution by Ahab and Jezebel. When the Israelites were taken into captivity in Egypt, God delivered his remnant and took them to the Promised Land. Some 50,000 people returned to the land of Judah in Ezra 2:64-67. And yet as they compare themselves to the number of Israelites during his prosperous days under King David, their comment was this: "We are left this day as a remnant." [Ezra 9:15a]

The remnant theme is carried into the New Testament where Paul tells us that "At the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace." (Romans 11:5) Although most people of Jesus' day rejected him, there remained a set of people whom God had reserved and preserved in his Son and in the covenant of his grace. Throughout all generations since Christ, there is the remnant of the faithful whose feet are on the narrow road that leads to eternal life (Matthew 7:13-14). This remnant will be preserved through the power of the Holy Spirit who has sealed them and who will deliver them safely in the last days (2 Corinthians 1:22 and Ephesians 4:30).

A broader theological purpose is also revealed in this. God keeps his promises. Through the prophets, God had ordained that his chosen people would return to their land after a 70-year exile. Ezra's account proclaims that God kept his word. And it shows that when people remain faithful to him, he would continue to bless them. Hence, the book emphasizes the temple and proper worship, similar, by the way to Chronicles, which was also written during this time period. The Book of Ezra is a chronicle of hope and of restoration. For the Christian whose life is scarred by sin and rebellion against God, there is great hope that ours is a God of forgiveness, a God who will not turn his back on us when we seek him in repentance and brokenness (1 John 1:9).

The return of the Israelites to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple are repeated in the life of every Christian who returns from their captivity of sin and rebellion against God and finds in him a loving, welcome home. No matter how long you've been away, he is ready to forgive us and receive us back into his family. He's willing to show us how to rebuild our lives and resurrect our hearts wherein it's the temple of the Holy Spirit. As with the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, God superintends the work of renovating and redirecting our lives in his service. The opposition of the adversaries of God to the rebuilding of the temple display a pattern that's typical to that of our enemy of our soul's Satan, how he uses who would appear to be in sync with God's purpose to deceive us and attempt to thwart God's plan in our life like he tried to with the Israelites (Ezra 4:2). In fact, that verse in particular describes the deceptive speech of those who claim to worship God but whose real intent was to tear down, not to build up. We're to be on guard against such deceivers. Respond to them as the Israelites did, and refuse to be fooled by their smooth words and their false professions of faith. God moved the hearts of secular rulers Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes to allow and even encourage and help the Jewish people to return home. He used these unlikely allies to fulfill his promises of restoration for his chosen people.



Have you encountered unlikely sources of blessings? Have you ever wondered how God can really work all things together for the good of those who are called by his name (Romans 8:28)? Take time today to acknowledge God's sovereignty and mercy in your life, and recommit to him your trust, your love, and your obedience. I end with this last verse from Ezra 7:10. "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in all Israel." What a great example to follow.