



Ezra - Chapter Two

I. Ezra 1:1-2:70 - Cyrus's Decree and the Return of Exiles from Babylon (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Two

This long chapter documents the exiles' return from Babylon to resettle in their former homes in Jerusalem and Judah. The information from Chapter 2 is given again in Nehemiah 7:6-73 in connection with a covenant renewal under Nehemiah. It shows that the exiled Judæans responded to Cyrus' decree and took it as a fulfilment of prophecy. The return is not just the end of the exile but also a reoccupation of the ancient homeland.

Those who returned are divided into ordinary Israelites (vv.2b-35) and servants of the temple, including priests and Levites (vv.36-58). The same division recurs in vv.59-63, regarding legitimacy. The balance shows a clear interest in the temple and its staffing. This return is about re-establishing the worship of the Lord there.

I.b. Ezra 2:1-70 - List of the Returned Exiles

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Now these were the people of the province who came from those captive exiles whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia; they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, all to their own towns. ^{2a} They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

Ezra 2:1-2a

Now these were the people of the province who came from those captive exiles. The author begins the list of the families and individuals who made the return to Judah and Jerusalem, now that it was a province of the Persian Empire, in the first wave. The word province is *medina*. These were people of the Persian province of Judæa and their leader bore the title of a Persian governor.

The leaders of the community are named, with Zerubbabel, the main figure, and Jeshua, the priest, given pride of place; refer also to Haggai 1:12-14, and Zechariah 3:1-10 and 4:7-10. Zerubbabel descended from King Jehoiachin as recorded in 1 Chronicles 3:16-19 where he is called Jeconiah, who was exiled in 597 BC and later given a place of honour in the Babylonian court; refer to 2 Kings 24:15 and 25:27-30. Haggai recalls his royal lineage: *<<On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts>>* (Haggai 2:23), compared with: *<<As I live, says the Lord, even if King Coniah son of Jehoiakim of Judah were the signet ring on my right hand, even from there I would tear you off and give you into the hands of those who seek your life, into the hands of those of whom you are afraid, even into the hands of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and into the hands of the Chaldeans>>* (Jeremiah 22:24-25).

The Nehemiah who later rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem came to Judæa almost a century after these first returnees; the Mordecai of the Book of Esther was also much later, and did not return to Jerusalem.

Rehum may be the same as in: *<<Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes as follows>>* (Ezra 4:8). Some exiles may have taken or been given Babylonian names, as was the custom: *<<Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother>>* (Esther 2:7a), and: *<<The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishaël he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego>>* (Daniel 1:7).

The other names in v.2a are mostly unknown.

There are eleven names here, but Nehemiah's copy of the list preserves one more, that of Nahamani in Nehemiah 7:7, which has evidently dropped out of this verse in the course of copying. The choice of twelve, like that of the twelve apostles, was a tacit declaration that the community they led was no mere rump or fragment by the embodiment of the people of Israel.

^{2b} The number of the Israelite people: ³ the descendants of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-two. ⁴ Of Shephatiah, three hundred and seventy-two. ⁵ Of Arah, seven hundred and seventy-five. ⁶ Of Pahath-moab, namely the descendants of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve. ⁷ Of Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four. ⁸ Of Zattu, nine hundred and forty-five. ⁹ Of Zaccai, seven hundred and sixty. ¹⁰ Of Bani, six hundred and forty-two. ¹¹ Of Bebai, six hundred and twenty-three. ¹² Of Azgad, one thousand two hundred and twenty-two. ¹³ Of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-six. ¹⁴ Of Bigvai, two thousand and fifty-six. ¹⁵ Of Adin, four hundred and fifty-four. ¹⁶ Of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, ninety-eight. ¹⁷ Of Bezai, three hundred and twenty-three. ¹⁸ Of Jorah, one hundred and twelve. ¹⁹ Of Hashum, two hundred and twenty-three. ²⁰ Of Gibbar, ninety-five. ²¹ Of Bethlehem, one hundred and twenty-three. ²² The people of Netophah, fifty-six. ²³ Of Anathoth, one hundred and twenty-eight. ²⁴ The descendants of Azmaveth, forty-two. ²⁵ Of Kiriatharim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty-three. ²⁶ Of Ramah and Geba, six hundred and twenty-one. ²⁷ The people of Michmas, one hundred and twenty-two. ²⁸ Of Bethel and Ai, two hundred and twenty-three. ²⁹ The descendants of Nebo, fifty-two. ³⁰ Of Magbish, one hundred and fifty-six. ³¹ Of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four. ³² Of Harim, three hundred and twenty. ³³ Of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred and twenty-five. ³⁴ Of Jericho, three hundred and forty-five. ³⁵ Of Senaah, three thousand six hundred and thirty.

Ezra 2:2b-35

The number of the Israelite people. The laity is described partly according to kinship divisions (vv.2b-19) and partly according to place (vv.20-35), without a real distinction in the form. The numbers may come from a census. The list shows an interest in the legitimate membership of the covenant people, as well as the legitimate reclaiming of ancestral land. The places that are named are in the territories of Judah and Benjamin, north and south of Jerusalem; a large proportion of the territories are actually in Benjamin; refer to Joshua 18:21-27. Some of them recall the first conquest of Canaan by Joshua, e.g. Bethel and Ai.

This list names the heads of families, with the numbers of the men of those families. It means that the total number of people would be more, because they are listed and counted by heads of families.

Of Arah, seven hundred and seventy-five. This differs with the record of six hundred and fifty-two in Nehemiah 7:10, and points to the often difficult correlation of numbers between the two passages. It seems that perhaps a copyist error is the fault, but others have suggested alternative solutions such as people dying en route or even putting their names forward to return but not actually starting out or even returning to Babylon after travelling only part of the way.

Parosh, Shephatiah, Arah. These names reflect the variety of influences that came in and among the children of Israel during the exile. Many of the names are connected to Biblical ideas, and others have connections to their exilic culture.

The names themselves give a personal flavour:

- Parosh means 'flea.'
- Shephatiah means 'Yahweh has judged.'
- Arah means 'wild ox.'
- Zaccai means either 'pure' or is a shortened form of Zechariah.
- Bani is a shortened form of Benaiah, meaning 'Yahweh has built.'
- Bebai means 'pupil of the eye.'
- Azgad means 'Gad is strong.'
- Adonikam means 'my Lord has arisen.'
- Adin means 'voluptuous.'
- Ater means 'a left-handed person.'
- Bezai is a shortened form of Bezaleel and means 'in the shadow of God.'
- Jorah means 'autumn rain.'
- Hashum means 'broad nose.'
- Gibbar means 'strong man.'

³⁶ The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred and seventy-three. ³⁷ Of Immer, one thousand and fifty-two. ³⁸ Of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred and forty-seven. ³⁹ Of Harim, one thousand and seventeen.

Ezra 2:36-39

The temple officials are divided according to function, headed by the priests and the Levites. The priests, all descendants of Aaron, are the most important group, for they are set apart for worship at the altar.

Three of the priestly names given here: Jedaiah, Immer, and Pashhur, also appear in 1 Chronicles 9:10-13 in that list of those who returned from exile.

Jedaiah, Immer, Pashhur and Harim represent only four of the twenty-four divisions of the priesthood established by King David in 1 Chronicles 24:8. Most of the priests stayed behind in Babylon.

⁴⁰ The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the descendants of Hodaviah, seventy-four. ⁴¹ The singers: the descendants of Asaph, one hundred and twenty-eight. ⁴² The descendants of the gatekeepers: of Shallum, of Ater, of Talmon, of Akkub, of Hatita, and of Shobai, in all one hundred and thirty-nine.

Ezra 2:40-42

The Levites are attendants, some of them singers and gatekeepers; refer also to 1 Chronicles 6:33-43 and 9:17-18. The number of Levites is surprisingly low compared to the priests. This means that a remarkably small percentage of the Levites returned from Babylon.

Some commentators speculate that the Levites were particularly invested in worship at the high places, scattered on the hills all around pre-exilic Israel and Judah. The purifying fires of exile effectively burned out this idolatrous impulse, and therefore few Levites wanted to return to the Promised Land. It is, however, only speculation!

⁴³ The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, ⁴⁴ Keros, Siaha, Padon, ⁴⁵ Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub, ⁴⁶ Hagab, Shamlai, Hanan, ⁴⁷ Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah, ⁴⁸ Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam, ⁴⁹ Uzza, Paseah, Besai, ⁵⁰ Asnah, Meunim, Nephisim, ⁵¹ Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, ⁵² Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, ⁵³ Barkos, Sisera, Temah, ⁵⁴ Neziah, and Hatipha.

Ezra 2:43-54

The temple servants, Hebrew *netinim*, a term appearing only in Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 Chronicles 9:2, were a further, lower class of officials appointed by King David to help the Levites: <<*besides two hundred and twenty of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name*>> (Ezra 8:20). There may be a connection between them and the Gibeonites, whom Joshua made servants of the sanctuary: <<*Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall always be slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God*>> (Joshua 9:23), and: <<*But on that day Joshua made them hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord, to continue to this day, in the place that he should choose*>> (Joshua 9:27). Here, however, they are apparently not slaves, and in Nehemiah 10:28 they are named among those who take the covenant oath.

The descendants of Hanan. Hanan means ‘[God] is gracious’ and is derived from the verb *hanan*, to be gracious, and its derivatives are the components of numerous names borne by fifty one people in the OT. These include Baalhanan,

Elhanan, Hananel, Hanani, Hananiah, Hannah, Hanun, Henadad, Jehohanan, and Tehinnah. The popular name John is derived from Johanan meaning ‘Yahweh is gracious.’

Bakbuk means bottle, referring to an earthenware container with a neck and a bulging body.

⁵⁵ The descendants of Solomon’s servants: Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda, ⁵⁶ Jaalah, Darkon, Giddel, ⁵⁷ Shephatiah, Hattil, Pochereth-hazzebaim, and Ami. ⁵⁸ All the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon’s servants were three hundred and ninety-two.

Ezra 2:55-58

The descendants of Solomon’s servants may be connected with foreigners whom Solomon originally drafted for building the temple: <<*All the people who were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of the people of Israel – their descendants who were still left in the land, whom the Israelites were unable to destroy completely – these Solomon conscripted for slave labour, and so they are to this day*>> (1 Kings 9:20-21). They are numbered here along with the temple servants (v.43), and like them are not regarded as slaves. Presumably they all returned voluntarily from Babylon.

⁵⁹ The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their families or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: ⁶⁰ the descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah, and Nekoda, six hundred and fifty-two. ⁶¹ Also, of the descendants of the priests: the descendants of Habaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai (who had married one of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). ⁶² These looked for their entries in the genealogical records, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean; ⁶³ the governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

Ezra 2:59-63

The following were those who came up. This section considers the legitimacy of claims to citizenship and membership in the priesthood.

Whether they belonged to Israel. It was important in this returning community to establish credentials. People were coming back after a long exile to claim inheritance and property. In the case of priests, it was paramount that only those with the correct pedigree should officiate at the altar. Such claims needed

evidence, and the record inevitably contained gaps. The claims entered here are not permanently refused, but held over, pending further inquiry.

They were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim. Those with questionable genealogies were not permanently excluded; each case required more research and seeking God. The Urim and Thummim, together with the Ark and the Shekinah, are named by the rabbis among the precious things that were never recovered.

The **Urim and Thummim** first appear in Exodus 28:30 and were to be placed in the breastpiece of judgement worn by the high priest. They were to be carried always before the Lord, but their function is not fully explained. From several contexts where they are referred to in the OT, as here, it appears that the Urim and Thummim, whatever they were, were used in seeking the Lord's decision on particular matters. Many commentators believe they were different coloured stones, perhaps white and black and whichever stone was drawn would determine either an affirmative or negative response from the Lord to the question asked. Refer also to Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 23:9, 28:6 and 30:7-8 for further references to Urim and Thummim.

⁶⁴ The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty, ⁶⁵ besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers. ⁶⁶ They had seven hundred and thirty-six horses, two hundred and forty-five mules, ⁶⁷ four hundred and thirty-five camels, and six thousand seven hundred and twenty donkeys.

Ezra 2:64-67

The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty. The conclusion of the chapter gives numbers of the whole assembly, then gives the number of their livestock, and closes with a picture of full resettlement (v.70). The size of this entire group is here stated to be about fifty thousand. However, this was only the first wave of repatriation to Israel from the Babylonian captivity and includes only the heads of families. The approximate total of the returned exiles was probably somewhere between one hundred thousand and one hundred and fifty thousand. This was only a small percentage of those who had been exiled and their descendants; the great majority stayed behind in Babylon.

As a whole, Israelites had some reason to feel comfortable in Babylon. Jeremiah had written to the first exiles to encourage them to settle: <<Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters;

take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare>> (Jeremiah 29:4-7). However, he only intended it to be a temporary measure. Many did well and wanted to stay.

The Murashu tablets were discovered in 1873 and are records from Murashu and his sons, wealthy bankers and brokers of the late period of exile, who seemed to loan out almost anything for a price. Among their customers are listed about sixty Jewish names from the time of Artaxerxes I, and forty from the time of Darius II. These appear as contracting parties, agents, witnesses, collectors of taxes, and royal officials. There seems to have been no social or commercial barriers between the Jews and the Babylonians. Their prosperous situation may explain why some chose to remain in Mesopotamia. Indeed, Josephus wrote, “many remained in Babylon, being unwilling to leave their possessions” (Jewish Antiquities 11:8).

One should not think that there was no spiritual life among the Jewish exiles; the priest and prophet Ezekiel, who went into exile after 597 or 586 BC, describes what might be called a ‘home Bible study’ or church connect group at his home with the elders of Judah: <<*In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there>> (Ezekiel 8:1).* Deprived of the temple, the exiles laid great stress on the observation of the Sabbath, on the laws of purity, and on prayer and fasting. It has often been suggested that the development of synagogues began in Mesopotamia during the exile. Indeed, in the Talmud it is said that only the chaff returned, while the wheat remained behind.

When the exiles came back to Judah, they found a much smaller state than their forefathers had before the Babylonians conquered Judah. One estimate says that the postexilic province of Judah was about 25 miles from north to south and about 32 miles from east to west. The total area was about 800 square miles, about one third of which was uncultivable desert.

The numbers given for their horses, mules, camels and donkeys indicate that this group did not return with much, but they also did not return with nothing. They had left with nothing as they went into captivity but at least they did come back with something.

⁶⁸ As soon as they came to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill-offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. ⁶⁹ According to their resources they gave to the

building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes.

Ezra 2:68-69

The crucial importance of the temple project to the whole returning enterprise is signalled here, where some of the heads of families, i.e. key people in the community, give of their own substance to initiate the rebuilding. This is reminiscent of the construction of the Tabernacle in Moses' day in Exodus 36:2-7. Because of prominence of those who made this offering and the priority in this record, it can be seen just how important it was for the leaders and the people to sacrificially give to the work of rebuilding the temple.

The location of the former temple is regarded as a holy place, such that it can already be called the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

According to their resources. These people gave generously, as generously as they could according to their means. This showed how highly valued the house of God was in their eyes. The apostle Paul encourages such a heart for giving regularly and generously in the local church: <<*On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come*>> (1 Corinthians 16:2), and: <<*For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means*>> (2 Corinthians 8:3).

A daric was a gold coin used throughout the Persian Empire. Introduced by Darius I at the end of the 6th Century BC, it weighed about 0.3 ounces or 8.5 grams. Beginning in the second half of the 5th Century BC, these coins with Hebrew letters on them appear in Judah. Several of them bear the name of the Persian province Yehud, i.e. Judah, which probably indicates that the province had some freedom to mint its own coins.



A typical daric

⁷⁰ The priests, the Levites, and some of the people lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity; and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all Israel in their towns.

Ezra 2:70

The priests, the Levites, and some of the people lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity. This shows that Jerusalem was once again populated, even though it was a humble beginning. Later Nehemiah would be compelled to move people into the

city by lot to reinforce the population of Jerusalem, as the capital city had suffered the severest loss of life at the time of the Babylonian attacks.

The temple servants lived in their towns, and all Israel in their towns. After two generations in exile, there was again a substantial presence of Jewish people in the land that was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was a wonderful fulfilment of God’s promise to bring Israel back from exile.

David Ben-Gurion described the 20th Century emigration of Jews from Iraq to Israel with a comparison to the account here, “Almost the whole community of Babylonian exiles who stayed when Babylon was destroyed came to this country then years ago - and their number was nearly thrice the number of those who returned to Zion in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.”



Judæa under Persian Rule 538-332 BC

Under Persian rule, the lands of Israel now called Samaria and Judah, now called Judæa, were minor provinces within the satrapy called ‘Beyond the River’. It appears that Edomites encroached upon Judæa’s southern border after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, and this territory was now called Idumæa. These regional boundaries remained more or less the same throughout the Persian period. Returning Judæans settled mostly in the province of Judæa, but a few settled in the plain of Ono and Idumæa as well.