



Ezra - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

In this chapter the altar is rebuilt on its former site, and foundations are laid for the new temple.

II Ezra 3:1-6:22 - The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple on Its Original Site

The Book of Ezra spans several generations, as the returnees rebuild and encounter resistance, and finally receive renewed imperial authorisation for their efforts.

II.a Ezra 3:1-13 - The Foundations of the Temple are Laid

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.a.i Ezra 3:1-7 - Worship Restored at Jerusalem

The first priority for the returnees was to build the altar in order to make offerings to the Lord. This was not just as an act of worship but a plea to the Lord to protect them from the surrounding people whom they feared. Their offerings were in line with the law and the people were generous in their giving for offerings and to pay the works for their labour.

¹ When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem.

Ezra 3:1

According to Israel's calendar of pilgrimage festivals, the seventh month, Tishri (roughly September/October), was the month of the Festival of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25), the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32), followed by the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43), which celebrated the

exodus from Egypt. Thus in the first year of the return, the people make their first pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The people gathered together in Jerusalem. This was an encouraging sign of obedience among the returned exiles. In a time of small resources and great work to be done, they took the time and money to observe the commands to gather in Jerusalem for the major festivals as noted above.

² Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt-offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God.

Ezra 3:2

Build the altar of the God of Israel. On this occasion, the broken altar had first to be repaired so that sacrifices could once again be made. The leading roles of Jeshua and Zerubbabel are again emphasised, with some stress on the role of the priests. Out of the rubble of the destroyed temple and its courts, an altar now stood ready to receive sacrifices both on behalf of the people as a whole and individuals who brought their offerings.

They built the altar first because it was an act of obedience to do so. They needed to resume the burnt-offerings for the atonement of sin and the morning and evening burnt-offerings because all this was written in the law of Moses the man of God.

They built the altar first because it something they could do relatively quickly and easily. It was also because they understood its spiritual significance. Fundamentally, the altar was where sin was dealt with and where the common man met with God for the temple itself had only ever been for the priests to enter. They started with the altar because it was a wise spiritual priority, showing they understood their need to have atonement for their sin and to perform acts of dedication to God.

Jeshua was the grandson of Seraiah the high priest, who was put to death by Nebuchadnezzar: *<<The captain of the guard took the chief priest Seraiah, the second priest Zephaniah, and the three guardians of the threshold; from the city he took an officer who had been in command of the soldiers, and five men of the king's council who were found in the city; the secretary who was the commander of the army who mustered the people of the land; and sixty men of the people of the land who were found in the city. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard took them, and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah. The king of Babylon struck them down and put them to death at Riblah*

in the land of Hamath. So Judah went into exile out of its land>> (2 Kings 25:18-21). He was the first high priest after the captivity.



Zerubbabel's Temple

The rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple was done in stages, circa 536-516 BC. First, the altar was built, so that sacrifices could again be made. The second phase was the laying of the foundation of the temple. This elicited mixed reactions from the people. Some rejoiced that the foundation was laid, while others, especially the elder priests, were sad, presumably because the quality of construction was inferior to that of the previous temple and they remembered how it had all ended. Due to the opposition of the local population and the lack of motivation among the Jews, it took 20 years to complete the construction of the temple building.

The only information given in the biblical record about the architecture of the temple is the dimensions, which were sixty cubits, 90 feet or 27m high and

wide according to Ezra 6:3. As there is no mention of the length of the building, these dimensions must refer to the facade of the temple, i.e. the Porch.

³ They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt-offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening.

Ezra 3:3

They set up the altar on its foundation. There may have been visible remains of the original altar as perhaps implied by: <<On the day after the murder of Gedaliah, before anyone knew of it, eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria, with their beards shaved and their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed, bringing grain-offerings and incense to present at the temple of the Lord>> (Jeremiah 41:4-5), which occurred after the destruction of the temple; in any case, its exact location was evidently known. The altar has absolute priority, as it had at the first entry into the land, many years before; refer to Deuteronomy 27:1-8.

It is significant that they built the altar in Jerusalem, on the same ground where it had once stood. They might have reasoned that the altar and conceivably also the temple could go anywhere, because Yahweh was God of the entire earth. Yet in the Jewish mind, there was only one place where the altar and the temple could stand: on God's holy hill: <<*I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill*>> (Psalm 2:6), and: <<*Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy*>> (Psalm 99:9), in his holy land: <<*The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem*>> (Zechariah 2:12).

The haste to erect it is perhaps heightened by the dread of the neighbouring peoples. This phrase refers to residents of Judah, and perhaps neighbouring areas, who were not part of the group returning from exile. Some may have had Jewish origins, but they present themselves as a distinct group, and they would soon oppose the work. The exiles' fear is another echo of their first occupation of the land, when fear had at first overwhelmed the Israelites: <<*Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?'*>> (Numbers 14:1-3). On this occasion, despite their fear, they are resolute.

This fear will resurface: <<*Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build*>> (Ezra 4:4), but it was prophesied that trouble would come on the faithful in all ages: <<*Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince, there shall be seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time*>> (Daniel 9:25).

Burnt-offerings were to be offered daily on the altar, morning and evening, as Moses commanded in Exodus 29:38-42.

⁴ And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt-offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day, ⁵ and after that the regular burnt-offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill-offering to the Lord. ⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt-offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. ⁷ So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia.

Ezra 3:4-7

The people keep the festival of booths or Tabernacles, Hebrew *Succoth*, with its proper sacrifices; refer to Numbers 29:12-38. This great festival, one of the three major festivals of Israel, celebrated God's faithfulness to Israel during the wilderness journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. During this festival the families of Israel were commanded to 'camp out' in temporary shelters, meant to remind them of how their forefathers lived during the exodus. In this context - when in returning to destroyed cities, they were forced to live this way until they could properly rebuild - the Festival of Tabernacles held a special meaning for these Jews returned to Judah.

The Festival of Booths was a weeklong celebration and one of the times when all the men were summoned to attend in Jerusalem: <<*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the Lord. The first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. For seven days you shall present the Lord's offerings by fire; on the eighth day you shall observe a holy convocation and present the Lord's offerings by fire; it is a solemn assembly; you shall not*>>

work at your occupations>> (Leviticus 23:33-36). However, it had been common practice for them to take their entire families with them.

They began to offer burnt-offerings to the Lord. The perspective shifts to the regular sacrificial worship: <<*I am now about to build a house for the name of the Lord my God and dedicate it to him for offering fragrant incense before him, and for the regular offering of the rows of bread, and for burnt-offerings morning and evening, on the sabbaths and the new moons and the appointed festivals of the Lord our God, as ordained for ever for Israel*>> (2 Chronicles 2:4), since the particular acts of worship in the seventh month are essentially portrayed as a renewal and a beginning. The next task is to rebuild the temple, and the preparations recall those made by King Solomon half a millennium earlier; refer to 1 Kings 5:13-18, 1 Chronicles 22:4, and 22:15, and 2 Chronicles Chapter 2.

During their long stay in Babylon, the Jews were not able to offer any sacrifices, as this could only be done in Jerusalem. Instead, they were surrounded by a myriad of pagan temples. About fifty temples are mentioned in Babylonian texts together with 180 open air shrines for Ishtar, three hundred daises for the Igigi gods, and twelve hundred daises for the Anunnaki gods.

The offerings at the new moon. The new moon marked the first day of the month and was a holy day; refer to Numbers 28:11-15. It was one of the celebrations that continued even into NT times: <<*Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths*>> (Colossians 2:16). Paul says this because the requirement to keep such festivals was then optional because Christ had fulfilled the Scriptures.

So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters. Once the work of restoration began at the altar of sacrifice, they followed through by assembling and hiring the workers they needed to build the temple.

Cedar trees from Lebanon. The cedar trees of Lebanon were legendary for their excellent timber. This meant that they wanted to use the best materials they could in construction and the same materials that Solomon used in building the first temple: <<*Therefore command that cedars from the Lebanon be cut for me. My servants will join your servants, and I will give you whatever wages you set for your servants; for you know that there is no one among us who knows how to cut timber like the Sidonians*>> (1 Kings 5:6), although they had far fewer resources than Solomon had.

The timber would be floated from Tyre to Joppa, modern day Jaffa, by the Sidonians and the Tyrians and from there transported to Jerusalem overland by the Jews, as was the case in the days of Solomon: <<*We will cut whatever timber you need from Lebanon, and bring it to you as rafts by sea to Joppa; you will take it up to Jerusalem*>> (2 Chronicles 2:16).



The map shows Tyre and Sidon in relation to Jaffa and Jerusalem

According to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia. This grant was not only the legal allowance to build the temple, but it also included financial support from the royal treasury. This shows that they used Gentile money to purchase the supplies from Gentile Lebanon to build the second temple. Solomon's temple used Gentile supplies and labourers; God directed the building of the second temple to likewise be built with Gentile cooperation.

This participation of Gentile resources and labour comes as no surprise as the temple was always intended to be a place for everyone: <<*Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built*>> (1 Kings 8:41-43), and: <<*And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the*

sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples>> (Isaiah 56:6-7).

II.a.ii Ezra 3:8-13 - Foundations Laid for the Temple

The time came to start rebuilding the temple and its foundations are laid. The Levites are given the task of overseeing the work.

⁸ In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upwards, to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord.

Ezra 3:8

Work begins on the temple itself, with the laying of its foundation in the second year of the return, circa 537 BC.

The second month, Ziv – the same time of year when Solomon had begun his temple: <<*In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord*>> (1 Kings 6:1), and: <<*He began to build on the second day of the second month of the fourth year of his reign*>> (2 Chronicles 3:2) – is in the spring. The time of the return from exile is dated with the formula after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem.

Even though the temple still lies in ruins, the place could be called the house of God because of its consecration for worship. The narrator stresses that it is those who have come from the captivity who do this. The priests and Levites are emphasised, and the qualifying age for Levitical service is mentioned, see below. The work seemed to begin as soon as it could allowing for the logistical preparations described in v.7.

They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upwards, to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord. The Law of Moses commanded that the Levites begin their service at thirty years of age; refer to Numbers 4:1-47. David changed the starting age for Levitical service to twenty years of age: <<*These were the sons of Levi by their ancestral houses, the heads of families as they were enrolled according to the number of the names of the individuals*>>

from twenty years old and upwards who were to do the work for the service of the house of the Lord>> (1 Chronicles 23:24). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, they adopted David's revised practice.

⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

Ezra 3:9

And Jeshua with his sons and his kin. These sons of Jeshua are only recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. Yet they were clearly prominent in the tasks they performed.

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

‘For he is good,

for his steadfast love endures for ever towards Israel.’

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

Ezra 3:10-11

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord. This was a memorable scene. The priests were dressed in their ceremonial apparel, the musicians were ready to praise the Lord with instruments and song, and they sang responsively in an arranged presentation. In general, the description matches the massive and elaborate dedication ceremony for Solomon's temple: *<<it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever’, the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud>>* (2 Chronicles 5:13), except this was held in far humbler circumstances

And all the people responded with a great shout. The laying of the foundations occasions praise, which echoes the celebrations of King David when he prepared for the building of Solomon's temple in 1 Chronicles Chapter 16, especially v.7, v.34 and v.37. It was an appropriately joyful occasion. Since the destruction of the temple under the Babylonian conquest there had been no proper place for sacrifice and worship for the people of Israel. Another important step was made in the long

and difficult process of the restoration of Biblical worship and service to God. This time there is no ark, no visible glory, indeed no temple; only some beginnings, and small beginnings at that. However, God is enthroned on the praises of Israel, and these could be as glorious as Solomon's.

¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

Ezra 3:12-13

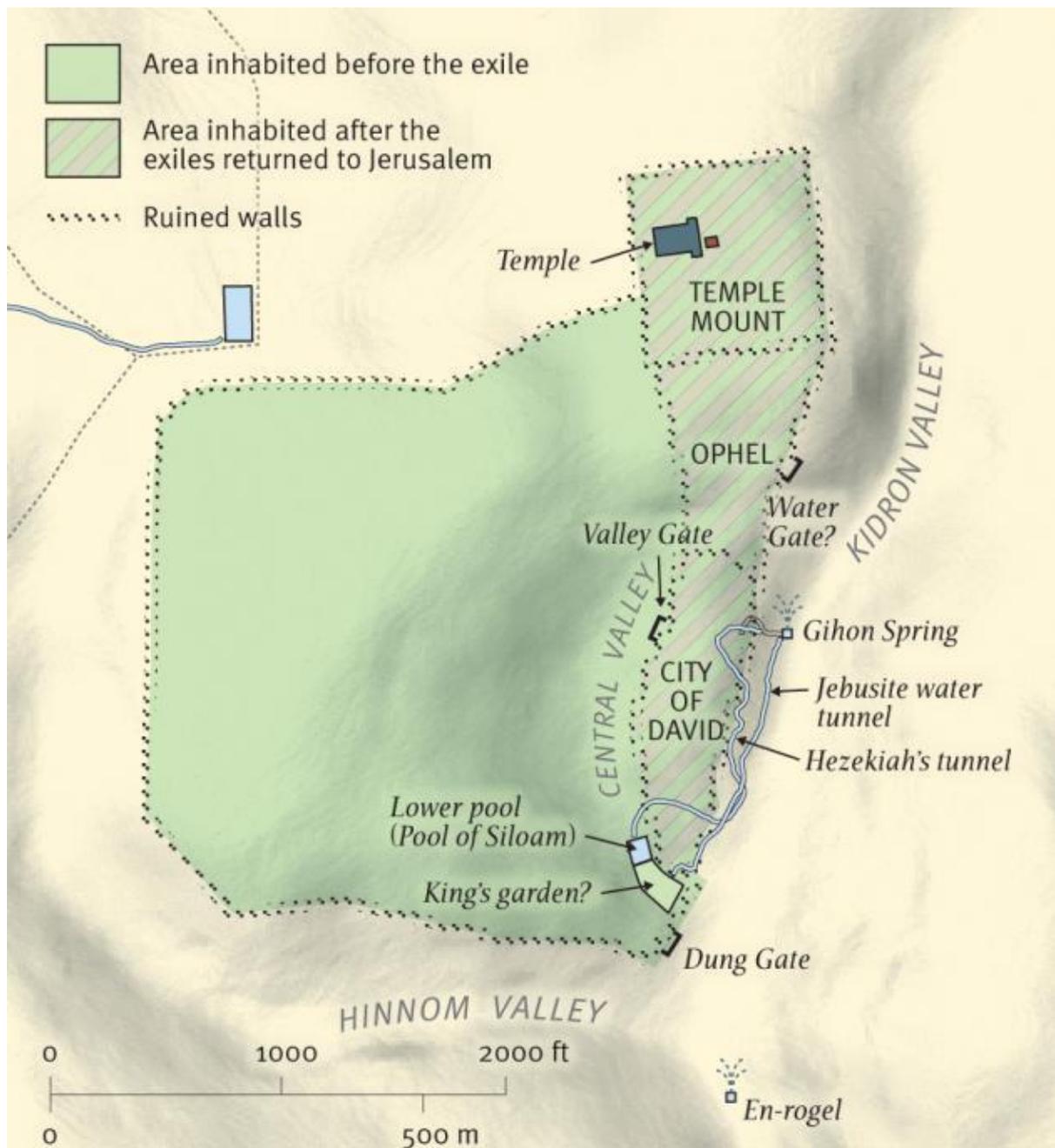
But many wept with a loud voice. Sadness is mixed with this rejoicing, for some of the very old remembered the former temple and believed that this new one would not match the former temple's glory. They would also have remembered how the previous glorious temple had met its end. The picture of mitigated celebration is a small symbol of the whole event of the return, which was in itself a triumph yet fell far short of the great hopes the people might have had; refer to Haggai 2:2-9.

They saw that the glory had departed from Israel; in their circumstances it was impossible to build such a house as the first temple was; and had this been even possible, still it would have been greatly inferior, because it lacked the Ark of the Covenant, the heavenly fire, the mercy seat, the heavenly manna, Aaron's rod that budded, the divine Shekhinah, the spirit of prophecy and most probably the Urim and Thummim.

There was a danger in their weeping. The backward look which discounts present activity is always a peril. Regrets over the past which paralyse work in the present are always wrong. Moreover, all such regrets, as in this case, are in danger of blinding the eyes to the true value and significance of the present. In fact, the prophets warned against despising this temple for its humble beginnings; refer to Haggai 2:1-9 and Zechariah 4:8-10.

Though many shouted aloud for joy. The younger people, who had no remembrance of the prior temple, felt nothing but joy in seeing this important step in the restoration of the temple and its worship.

So that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping. This profound scene showed the depth of the mixed feelings among the people. The sight must have been very affecting: a whole people, one part crying aloud with sorrow; the other shouting aloud for joy; and on the same occasion too, in which both sides felt an equal interest!



Jerusalem at the Time of Zerubbabel 538-515 BC

Among the first tasks undertaken upon the exiles' return was the rebuilding of the altar and the temple. Almost immediately the altar was set up, and regular burnt-offerings were resumed. About a year later the foundations of the temple were laid, but opposition from other local governors halted the completion of the temple for over 20 years. Finally, in 515 BC during the reign of King Darius of Persia, the temple was completed. The city walls, however, would not be rebuilt until about 70 years later under the leadership of Nehemiah.