

Ezra 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ezra chapter 3. Burnt offerings, morning and evening.

And they kept the feast of booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required. And after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon, and at all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord.

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, 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 Cyrus king of Persia.

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Josedach made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites, and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity.

They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Cadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad, and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

[1 : 47] And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests and their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel.

And they sang responsibly, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid. Though many shouted aloud for joy, 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 with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. After a number of them had returned from exile to Jerusalem, the people sought to re-establish the true worship of the Lord, and to rebuild the temple.

In Ezra chapter 3 we read of the first stage of this, and also received some foreboding of the opposition that the returnees would face in the future. Jerusalem had been the centre of Israel's life, and at the centre of Jerusalem had been the temple, and focal to all of the worship practices of the people was the altar.

[3 : 06] Rebuilding the altar, re-consecrating it for worship, and then doing the same for the temple, were matters of the utmost importance if Israel was to re-establish its life as the worshippers of the Lord.

As Israel and then Judah had fallen to foreign invaders, the Israelites had been sent off into captivity, and the land had been occupied by their enemies. Israel as a people and a nation had unravelled in many ways.

On their return, the challenge was to pick up the threads that had been dropped, and to mend that which had frayed. On their return to the land, they re-established settlement again. In verse 1 they are described as the children of Israel, terminology that is reminiscent of the Exodus.

After having made a solid start to resettling the land, the next task was to re-establish Jerusalem at the heart of Israel's worship. The necessity of a central site of worship that drew together all the people of the land was one of the commands in the book of Deuteronomy.

This commandment, among other things, was to ensure that Israel did not develop a multitude of different competing cults, each with their own regional forms of worship of the Lord. Such a situation had existed during the period of the Judges.

[4 : 14] After the division of the kingdom, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, had also set up false cultic centres, designed to compete with Jerusalem, to ensure that the people of his land did not join with the people in Jerusalem, in a way that might empower the kingdom of Judah against him.

The possession of a unified cult and worship, especially at the pilgrimage feasts, the Feasts of Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Tabernacles, was one of the most powerful nation-building forces, bringing together groups from many different tribes and many different regions of the land, as one single people.

Consequently, the re-establishment of worship in this way was a means by which Israel would return to itself once more. Even while many of them were still scattered in various parts of the Persian Empire, a central site of worship would give them a focal point as a people, a way of conceiving of their identity and their unity once more.

Unsurprisingly, given this fact, the re-establishment of central worship and of the temple building would be a cause of opposition from the surrounding peoples, who would be concerned seeing this as a reassertion of Israel's people and nationhood.

The same would be the case for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its walls. The exile had snapped a number of threads of Israel's identity, chief among them things such as their dwelling in the land, their having a king, their having a central site of worship in Jerusalem, and also their possession of a fortified capital city.

[5 : 39] Now the task of the returnees was to re-establish these things. In Ezra chapter 3 we get a sense of how mindful they were of the importance of doing these things properly. One of the ways that we see this is in the many recollections of the building of the first temple.

All the people gather together. They are led by the priest, Yeshua the son of Josedach, and by a descendant of David, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel. Just as David and his son Solomon had presided over the building of the first temple, now a son of David, Zerubbabel, is going to be involved in the overseeing of the process.

While a son of David, Zerubbabel seems to have had a complicated genealogy. In the book of Jeremiah, his ancestor Jeconiah or Jehoiakim was cursed in chapter 22 verses 28 to 30 with having no children.

However, elsewhere we see that he had a son, Shealtiel, through whom Zerubbabel came. It seems that the curse was relieved, and through Shealtiel, an adopted son, he had heirs.

Matters might be further complicated if Zerubbabel is the same man mentioned in 1 Chronicles chapter 3 verse 19, there spoken of as the son of Paddaiah. Some commentators such as James Bajon have suggested that what we see here is evidence of a lever at marriage.

[6 : 53] Jeconiah and his sons are cut off from inheriting the throne as a result of the curse. However, Jeconiah's adopted son, Shealtiel, raises up seed for the dead son, Paddaiah.

Zerubbabel then, along with Israel returned off to the exile, is as life from the dead. With the curse upon Jeconiah or Jehoiakim, it seems as if that line of the family had been wiped out.

But the Lord raises it up again, through adoption and lever at marriage. Jehoi and Zerubbabel lead the rebuilding of the altar. It is made clear that it is done according to the law of Moses.

The altar is made according to Moses' specifications, and it is placed where the altar was supposed to be placed in Jerusalem. With the rebuilding of the altar, many of the sacrifices and other practices associated with the temple and the altar there could be re-established too.

The morning and evening burnt offerings are reintroduced. The offerings at the new moon and the appointed feasts are also started. All of this is done in the seventh month, the month where most of Israel's feasts were to be found.

[7 : 54] In particular, it is the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. The seventh month was also often a time of covenant renewal, so it was an apt time to pick things up again. Much as King Solomon, in building the first temple, had sought resources from the Sidonians and the Tyrians, so the people of Israel, in rebuilding the temple, looked to them once again.

King Solomon had received foreign support in building the temple from Hiram of Tyre. Cyrus, the king of Persia, is the great Gentile sponsor of the project on this occasion. In the second year after their coming to the house of God in Jerusalem, and in the second month, they start the process of rebuilding the temple.

It is an auspicious time to do so. In 1 Kings 6, verse 1, it was in the second month that Solomon began the building of the first temple. In 1 Chronicles 23, the Levites, from the age of 20, were set apart for the service of the Lord.

The returnees follow David's pattern here, and the whole process of rebuilding the house of God is overseen by the priests. They were well trained in the law, and they knew the specifications that it must meet.

The dedication of the first temple is described in 2 Chronicles 5, verses 11-14. And when the priests came out of the holy place, for all the priests who were present had consecrated themselves, without regard to their divisions.

[9 : 13] And all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Juduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters.

And 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 forever, the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud.

For the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. The ceremony surrounding the beginning of the foundation of the temple here recalls that earlier ceremony for the dedication of the completed Solomonic temple.

Once again, the people under Jeshua and Zerubbabel are carefully following the pattern given to them by Solomon. However, while they are following the pattern of Solomon's activity in many respects, the temple that they are building pales in comparison with his.

Solomon's temple had been destroyed about 50 years previously, and some of the oldest among the people who had returned still remembered its glories. Verses 12 and 13 describe a poignant mix of emotions, people shouting with the greatest joy as they see the prospect of the worship of the Lord being established once more in its fullness.

[10 : 35] And on the other hand, people reflecting upon the great glories that had been lost as a result of Israel's sin. Weeping and joyful shouting mingle together in a great and indistinguishable noise.

A question to consider, can you think of any reasons why the Feast of Booths would be an especially apt festival for the re-establishment of the worship of the people?

