–Save This Page as a PDF–

The Return to Isra'el Under Sheshbazzar
Ezra 1: 5-11

The return to Isra'el under Sheshbazzar DIG: Why did the Ruach Ha'Kodesh only stir up a small remnant of Israelites? How did this stirring-up repeat itself in the Second and Third Returns? In what ways did this Second Exodus mirror the First Exodus? What do you make of the missing or un-counted articles in verses 7-11a (see Second Kings 25:13-15)?

REFLECT: God "stirred up" the hearts of kings and families alike to do his will. How has God "stirred up" your heart? If you must wait, as Isra'el did, for God to restore your place in His service, are you content to do so? Or do you push for change?

537 BC During the ministry of Zerubbabel (**to see link click Ag – The First Return**).
Compiled by the Chronicler from the Ezra memoirs
(see **Ac – Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: The Ezra Memoirs**).

Nearly two hundred years after the kingdom of **Isra'el** had conquered by Assyria, the remains of the little kingdom of **Judah**, which had always included members of all the twelve tribes, still had some cohesion and could rightly bear the name of **Isra'el (Ezra 1:3b** and **2:2b)**. Then **the LORD**, as though to emphasize that it was **not by might, nor by power, but by His Ruach, ADONAI-Tzva'ot (Zechariah 4:6** spoke to that very generation**) stirred up** only a remnant into action. This whittling down of numbers and **power**, ever since the glory days of the kings, is reminiscent of the way **God** reduced the size of **Gideon's** army when they defeated the Midianites **(Judges Chapter 7)**.[23] Thus, only a small group returned and many pious and prosperous **Jews** remained in **Babylon**.

Just as **ADONAI** had **stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia** (see the commentary on **Dani'el Ag – Cyrus and Darius**) **to make a proclamation throughout his realm,** which enabled **the First Return** to **Jerusalem (1:1b)**, **so** then **the patriarchal leaders of Judah and Benjamin, along with**

the kohanim and the Levites – everyone whose spirit God had stirred up – arose to go up to build the House of Adonai in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). Generally speaking the Jewish exiles were from Judah and Benjamin; however, all of the righteous of the TaNaNk from the northern Kingdom of Isra'el migrated down to the southern Kingdom of Judah and were also taken captive (First Chronicles 9:3).

It is important to recognize that in the First Return led by Zerubbabel, in the Second Return led by Ezra, and in the Third Return led by Nehemiah, it was always the gracious prompting of Ruach ha-Kodesh that led the remnant home to Jerusalem. The Second Return will begin with **God's** prompting of **the Persian king** to act compassionately toward **Isra'el** by granting **Ezra everything he requested because the hand of ADONAI his God was upon him (Ezra 7:6b).** Similarly, in **the Third Return**, **Nehemiah** will again express the conviction that **Ha'Shem** was responsible for the gracious support of **the Persian** throne when **he** stated: **The king granted me the request because the good hand of my God was upon me (Nehemiah 2:8b).**

Continuing with the theme of the Second Exodus, one of the ways in which **the Chronicler** depicts the return to **Yerushalayim** is for those **Jews** who stayed behind in **Babylon** to **strengthen the hands** of the returnees **with vessels of silver, gold, goods, cattle and valuable gifts, besides all that was willingly offered (Ezra 1:6).** This strongly points to plunder **the Egyptians (Exodus 3:21-22, 11:2** and **12:35-36; Psalm 105:37)**. In both the First Exodus under the leadership of Moshe, and the Second Exodus under the leadership of **Sheshbazzar** and **Zerubbabel**, the needs of **the people of God** were met, whether for the hazardous journey or for the reestablishment of worship.

In many ways the clearest expression of the connection between the First Exodus and the Second Exodus appears in the returning of **the vessels** from **the Temple** in **Tziyon** that **Nebuchadnezzar** had carried off was war trophies **(Second Kings 24:13, 25:13-16; Second Chronicles 36:10-18; Jeremiah 52:17-19). Then King Cyrus brought out the vessels from the House of ADONAI that Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Jerusalem and placed in the treasury of his god (Ezra 1:7; Dani'el 1:2).** Those **vessels** supposedly symbolized the superiority of **the Babylonian** gods over **YHVH, the God of Isra'el.** It was this superiority that **Babylon** could flaunt on occasion. This is strongly suggested by **Dani'el 5:1-4**, which relates **King Belshazzar's** toasting to the power of **his gods** with the very **vessels** that had been removed from **Jerusalem** after the destruction

of **the Temple** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gb – The Destruction of Solomon's Temple on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC**). But **his** prideful toast didn't last long because **on that very night King Belshazzar of the Chaldeans was slain (Dani'el 5: 30).**The return of those **vessels** would be a powerful symbol of both the restoration of worship and continuity with the past that the budding community so desperately needed to see.[24]

But how could **the Jews** have been so filled with the conviction that **Isra'el** would indeed be restored, even after complete destruction, unless there were prophecies to believe in. So these exiles believed **Isaiah** when **he** said: **Get out of Babylon, flee from Chaldea! With a shout of joy, proclaim this, send it out to the end of the earth,** saying: **ADONAI has redeemed His servant Jacob (Isaiah 48:20)! They** trusted in **God's** Word when **the prophet** wrote: **Leave, Leave! Get out of there! Touch no unclean thing. Go out of [Babylon's] midst. Purify yourselves, your who carry the vessels of ADONAI. For you will not go out in haste, nor will you go in flight, for ADONAI will go before you, and the God of Isra'el will be your rear guard**, just like the First Exodus **(Isaiah 52:11-12).** So far as we know, no people except **Isra'el** has ever been restored to their homeland after such a clean break. And if there were any remaining doubt, we now have a Fourth Return in 1947. No one disputes the fact that it was a firmly held rabbinic belief in their ultimate return as a nation to Palestine that brought **the Jews** back to **their** ancient home in recent generations.[25]

King Cyrus of Persia had them brought out by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out for Sheshbazzar the prince (Hebrew: *nasi*) **of Judah (Ezra 1:8)**; the uncle of **Zerubbabel (First Chronicles)** who had risen to an important position in the government. It was not unusual for **a Jew** to be given **a Babylonian** name, as was the case with **Zerubbabel**. It is clear from this statement that **Cyrus** worked through official channels by commanding **the treasurer of Persia** to release the vessels. **Mithredath** appears to have been charged with the task of returning **Babylonian** temple treasures to the various peoples who were restored by **Cyrus'** decree (see **Ai – The Decree of Cyrus**) to their homelands.[26]



Sheshbazzar and **Zerubbabel** were the leaders of **the First Return** of settlers. In the eyes of the government, and in any report submitted to it, **Sheshbazzar** would have been responsible for the building project. **He** had been **appointed governor of Judah** by **King Cyrus (Ezra 5:14)**, but later **Zerubbabel** was **appointed governor** by **King Darius (Haggai 1:1, 14** and **2:2, 21)**. Therefore, it seems that **Sheshbazzar** stayed in **Jerusalem** until **the vessels** for worship were safely transferred back to **Jerusalem**, and **the foundations of the Temple** had been **laid (Ezra 5:16)**. Then, as some point, we don't know exactly when, **he** walked off the pages of the Bible. **He** might have merely gone back to **Babylon**, or **he** might have simply faded into the background as **Zerubbabel** became more of a dominant figure in the narrative. But either way, we never hear from **him** again.

When **Nebuchadnezzar** carried off **the vessels** from **Jerusalem** in 586 BC **his** scribes made a careful **inventory** of **them.** The actual figures in the Hebrew text add up to less than half the recorded total; **2,499** rather than **5,400**. Perhaps **the Chronicler**, in using the **inventory** list, may have copied only part of the list but included the total of **5,400** in the last verse. There were:

gold basins were basket-shaped cups used to collect the blood of the slaughtered lambs – 30

silver basins – 1,000

silver knives used in the ritual slaughter of animals – 29

gold bowls were used by the priests to wipe the sacrificial blood from their fingers on the edge of these bowls after sprinkling. The Hebrew noun *kephor* is said to be connected with the Talmudic root meaning *to wipe* – 30

other silver bowls either in kind or shape – 410

then **other** smaller and less significant **vessels** were listed **– 1,000**

In all there were 5,400 vessels of gold and silver. But not every item was returned. The Ark of the Covenant wasn't among the **inventory**. It contained a jar of manna, two tablets of stone upon which the ten commandments had been written, and Aaron's rod that had budded **(Hebrews 9:4)**. The Ark was never seen again after the **Babylonian** conquest of **Yerushalayim**. It had almost certainly been destroyed.

Sheshbazzar brought them all along when the exiles were brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:9-11). We know nothing about the details of **Sheshbazzar's** journey. Judging from **Ezra's** later journey **(Ezra 7:8-9)**, the trip probably took about four months. The caravan would have proceeded from **Babylon** up the Euphrates River, and then down through the Orontes Valley of Syria to Palestine.[27]

The return of these items to **Jerusalem** was no small thing. **The vessels** represented **the people's** hope of a rebuilt **City** and a rebuilt **Temple**, which, as a result of the exile, was monumental. Yet, even more significant were **the people** who returned with those **items**. For those who carried them back, most of whom had never seen Solomon's **Temple** or the city of **Jerusalem**, the journey was one of faith. There were few guarantees about any aspect of **their** journey.

As the chapter closes with the words **from Babylon to Jerusalem,** a new era began for **the people** of **God**. Nothing could signal this more than the return of **the vessels** of worship. **ADONAI** had returned to **them** in favor (see the commentary on **Isaiah Hd – That Her Hard Service Has Been Completed**), but the journey that lay ahead of **them** was of greater significance than the journey to **the City of David**. **Jerusalem** had become a symbol of **God's City**, just as **Babylon** had become the symbol of the fallen world's city. However, there were no promises on **their** return. **They** had no homes to go to! **They** needed to trust **the LORD's** guidance and provision. **They** needed to step out on a journey of faith, looking to **YHVH** every step of the way. It was a pilgrimage to **a City** in ruins, but in their hearts it brought to mind the true nature of **God's** promise of **the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).** With this journey every believer can identify. And uniquely, it is a journey **Yeshua** took for us.

After the Visigoths sacked Rome in the fifth century, many believers who had

placed too much hope on the success of the empire were in a deep state of shock. In that atmosphere, the Church Father Augustine (354-430 AD) wrote one of the most important books in all of history, "The City of God." It presented human history as one giant conflict between what Augustine called the "city of man" and the "City of God." All of human history is ultimately a battle between **Babylon** (the city of man) and **Jerusalem** (the City of God), and only the latter would triumph. The closing pages of the Bible record **Babylon's** downfall (see the commentary on **Revelation Em – Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She Has Become a Home for Demons**).

And within these words lies the great divide between the way that leads to death and the way that leads to life. As **the righteous of the TaNaKh** left **Babylon** on **their** journey to **Jerusalem, they** were indicating that a clear choice had been made (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dw – The Narrow and Wide Gates**). **They** had chosen the way of life, **the City** of **God**. And the question that rings in our ears as we read this chapter is clear. What city have we chosen (see the commentary on **Hebrews Dc – The Earthly Sinai and the Heavenly Tziyon**)?[28]