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The Generosity of the People of God

Ezra 2: 61-70

The generosity of the people of God DIG: What happened to returnees who could not properly document their family ties (2:61-63)? What situation parallels this today? What does that tell you of keeping family records and legal documents? What is the Urim and Thummim? Why would they be necessary? What priorities are evident in the inventory of “Totals, Offerings and Settlements” (2:64-67)? In their designated gifts (2:68-69)? Why is it often easier to raise money for a building, as in 2:68, rather than a ministry program? In what towns do they all settle after 70 years of exile (2:70)? How do you explain that? Good collective memory? Fine-tuned homing instincts? Divine guidance?

REFLECT: Do you give according to your ability where you worship? This chapter underscores the importance of spiritual ancestors to Isra’el. Do you know who yours are? What has been passed on to you, good or bad, spiritually from your ancestors? What one quality are you now developing as a child of God that you would want to pass on to your children and grandchildren? How do you intend to do this?

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).**

We may infer from this periscope as it is clearly stated in **First Chronicles 5:17** and **Nehemiah 7:5** that **Jewish families** kept genealogical records to prove **their Jewish** descent (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ai - The Genealogies of Joseph and Mary**), and to ascertain that mixture with foreign nations was somehow avoided. A pure line had religious significance, because foreign elements could be apostasy in the **Jewish** community. The laymen who were unable to prove their **Jewish** lineage may have come from families who had lost their genealogical records as a result of the exile. This presented a real problem to the **Jewish** authorities. But an ever greater problem arose with **the priests**.

They had to be culturally clean and of true **Jewish** descent. As long as **they** could not prove **their Jewish** descent **they** were regarded as unclean and outside **the priesthood**. The prohibition was made to prevent ritual sin that was widespread in the ancient Near East.⁴²

Priests Removed: The fate that overtook **Korah** and **his following** when **they** tried to force their way into **the priesthood** (see the commentary on [Jude Aj - The LORD Delivered His People Out of Egypt, But Later Destroyed Those Who Did Not Believe](#)) was a constant reminder to the people of **Isra'el** of the danger of such a course of action. **So Eleazar the cohen collected the bronze censers . . . just as ADONAI had spoken to him by the hand of Moshe, so that it would be a reminder to the children of Isra'el that no one who was not a descendant of Aaron should burn incense before ADONAI, and so not one would become like Korah and his following (Numbers 16:39-40).** The danger of ritual contamination of the community was compounded by the great fear of committing another grave cultic offense like the one mentioned above.

There were **those** whose standing in the covenant community was in doubt. **Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name (Ezra 2:61).** **Barzillai** was a name that carried considerable weight. **He** had been a staunch supporter of David and helped him during his flight from Absalom (see the commentary on [the Life of David Ed - David Returns to Yerushalayim](#)). **His daughter married into a priestly family and her descendants found difficulty in establishing their claim to the priestly office.** The bridegroom that took the name of his wife's father reminds us of the Mesopotamian marriage arranged by a father who had no sons but only daughters (**First Chronicles 2:34-36**).

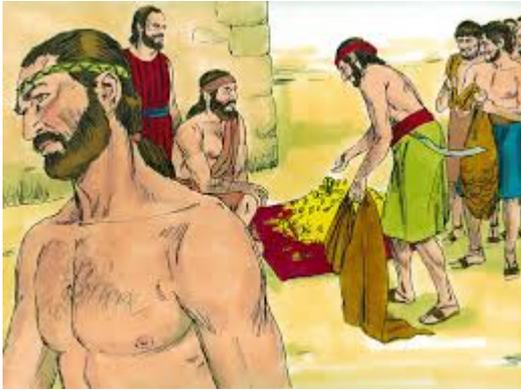
These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood (Ezra 2:62). **The importance attached to the genealogical accuracy of the claims to the priesthood was not merely the attitude of the exiles returning from the Captivity. It goes back to the abolition of the high places, first by Hezekiah** (see the commentary on [Isaiah Gr - Please Speak to Your Servants in Aramaic](#)), **and afterwards by Josiah** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Ai - Josiah Ruled For 31 Years from 640 to 609 BC](#)). **There was a sharp distinction drawn between those who ministered at the high places of pagan worship and those who were engaged in Temple**

worship in Jerusalem.

Then [Zerubbabel] the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a suitable time could be found for a priest to perform the ritual of the Urim and Thummim (see the commentary on [Exodus Gb - The Urim and Thummim](#)) (Ezra 2:63). They were temporarily suspended from duty even though they were allowed to return and count themselves as members of the covenant community. Of course, the proof never came, and the suspension became permanent.

The Generosity of the People of God: The whole assembly together was numbered 42,360, besides their male and female servants who numbered 7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women, lay singers who performed at marriages, feasts, and other occasions. They were distinct from the Levitical musicians mentioned in Ezra 2:41. Their horses, ridden by royalty and the military were probably donated by Cyrus for the nobility, were 736; their mules, 245; their one-humped Arabian camels, so useful in crossing the desert, were 435; and their donkeys, ridden by the poorer classes, hence the much larger number, were 6,720 (Ezra 2:64-67).

From these numbers we can see the modern parallel of the return of the Jews to Palestine after World War II. From the moment that a return became possible, large numbers of Jews flocked back into what they regarded as their own homeland. They spurned the system of rationing that tried to stem the tide of their return, and when the rationing was finally lifted they poured back in like a flood. The former prime minister of Isra'el, David Ben-Gurion, described the modern emigration of Jews from Iraq to Isra'el, "Almost the whole community of Babylonian exiles who stayed when Babylon was destroyed came back to Isra'el - and their number was nearly three times the number of those who had returned to Jerusalem in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah."⁴³



The exiles returned with gifts for the rebuilding work: **Some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the Lord, which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 Persian gold drachmas** (a thick piece of **gold** having on one side the figure of a king with a bow and javelin, and on the other side an irregular oblong depression)⁴⁴ **and 5,000 silver minas equal to sixty shekels, and 100 priestly garments made of fine linen (Ezra 2:68-69)**. There is an echo of the First Exodus account here (as there was in **Ezra 1:4** and **6**), for the people of Moses' generation were also asked to make large contributions to the building of the Tabernacle, and they responded willingly (see the commentary on **Exodus Ev - The Materials for the Tabernacle**). Likewise, the building of **the Second Temple**, the outward symbol of the presence of **ADONAI**, was accompanied, at least from the beginning, with a spirit of willing self-sacrifice.⁴⁵

There are several things worth noting here.

First, **they gave according to their ability** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Do - When You Give to the Needy, Do Not Do It to be Honored by Others: Seven Principles of Scriptural Giving**). Paul seems to adopt a similar reasoning when he wrote to **the Corinthians**, suggesting that every believer should **set something aside, saving up whatever is gained** and present it as a gift each **Lord's Day (First Corinthians 16:2)**. Giving out to be proportional to wealth. Paul employed this principle when collecting for the famine-stricken Messianic community in **Yerushalayim**. He commended the principle to the Corinthians to give **according to what a person has (Second Corinthians 8:12)**.

Secondly, if we were to calculate the ancient measures of **drachmas** and **minas** in

a modern way, **the** returning **Israelites** gave about 565 pounds of **gold** and over three tons of **silver** towards the rebuilding of **the Temple**. Since the number of **servants** amounted to one-sixth of the total, this meant that some of the returnees were very wealthy, something that is also indicated by the number of **horses and camels** (compared to the less costly **donkeys**), and the inordinate number of **servants** mentioned. The spirit of generosity was obvious, something that casuistic concerns about the relevance of tithing in the Dispensation of Grace often deliberately ignored. In an attempt to avoid legalism, far too many ask themselves, "What is the least I can give and still feel good about it." Instead, we should be asking ourselves, "How much more can I give than I currently do?"⁴⁶

Thirdly, only **some of the heads of fathers' households offered willingly**. This foreshadowed the disappointing levels of commitment to come. For now, at least, the emphasis is on giving and not withholding. **Haggai** will point out with considerable force that whatever amounts **the people** gave to **God's** work, **they** had more than enough left over to build for **themselves**. However, less than 20 years later a run of bad harvests and high prices (**Haggai 1:6, 9ff, 2:17**), to say nothing of the intervention by the opposition (see **As - Opposition to Rebuilding the Temple**), would soon leave nothing but **their** expensive houses (**Haggi 1:4**) to remind them of their former well-being.⁴⁷

Those were uncertain times. Returning to **Jerusalem** held no guarantee of prosperity for the returnees. Many had no homes to go to or jobs that provided financial security. Almost immediately there would be a need to rent or build something in which to live. As they settled in **Jerusalem** or in nearby **cities**, the temptation to withhold from giving must have been great. The fact that **Ha'Shem** had ordered them to give priority to reconstructing **the Temple** rather than personal gain highlighted the fundamental reason for their return: that way they should be found to worship **God** in accordance with the pattern **He** had established. Worship, then, comes before personal need.

Even among the most committed exiles, there remained a spirit of worldliness, a temptation difficult to repel and reject. Perhaps some felt that going back was enough of a commitment. It was, after all, more of a commitment than was shown by those who had remained in Babylon! Do we sometimes argue like this? After all, some of us do at least attend our messianic synagogue or church twice a week, which is more than a great many other believers do! How could anything more be expected? That is until we consider how our heavenly **Father did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Romans 8:32a)**. Perhaps we have some

more serious questions to ask ourselves questions such as these: To what extent am I devoted to the Kingdom of **God**? Am I ready to sacrifice treasure, or pleasure, for the sake of my **Lord**?⁴⁸

Concluding note: Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the Temple servants lived in their cities, and all Isra'el in their cities that they occupied before the exile (Ezra 2:70).

This entire chapter serves as a prelude to the great event of building the Temple and reestablishing Levitical worship as demanded in the Torah. There would soon be daily sacrifices to offer, many worshipers to attend to, and much work to supervise (Ezra 3:4ff).

The number 42,360 hardly adds up to **the number of stars in the night sky** or **the sand upon the seashore (Genesis 22:7)**. The number of **the righteous of the TaNaKh** was at this point in history no greater than the population of a small town. But "oaks grow from little acorns," the proverb says, and **ADONAI** is not about the business of mocking smallness. The invisible Universal Church, comparatively speaking, has sometimes been pitifully small by the standards of the world. Before Shavu'ot the entire Messianic Community amounted to no more than **120** people (see the commentary on **Acts AI - The Ruach ha-Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot**) - though **the Spirit of God** added **3,000** that day! In such times, these numbers were symbolic of both a winnowing process, whereby **God** in judgment removed the chaff, and a preserving hand that ensured that even in their darkest hours, **YHVH** could identify a remnant according to the election of grace (**Romans 9:27; Haggai 1:12-14**). **Ha'Shem** is faithful, then as he is now. We are not to despise **the small things (Zechariah 4:10)**.⁴⁹