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Rebuilding the Bronze Altar and the Festival of Sukkot Ezra 3: 1-6

Rebuilding the bronze altar and the festival of Sukkot DIG: Why were they assembling “as one man” (Leviticus 23:23-36)? What is first on Jeshua’s “to-do” list? What is the value (symbolic and actual) of building the altar on “its foundation” and “in accordance with the Torah of Moshe?” Why did the people sacrifice before laying down the Temple foundations?

REFLECT: How does your zeal compare to the Israelites in this scene? Does worship come first for you? Or when it’s most convenient? Why? On what basis are you building your altar to the Lord? What do you sacrifice there? What happens when someone doesn’t accept the sacrifice of Yeshua Messiah?

536 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**).

Ezra 2 ended with **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).**

Now as the threads of normal life are picked up once again on the hills of Judea, we are reminded that **the people** could not dissolve into isolated groups, no matter the remoteness of the homes, or the difficulty of the terrain separating **them**, even though the demands of settling into a new life might tempt **them** to do just that.⁵¹

Now when the seventh month of Tishri came (September-October), and the sons of Isra’el were in the cities, the people gathered together as one (Hebrew: *echad*) man to Jerusalem (Ezra 3:1), obeying the commandment of **God** laid down in **Exodus 23:16**. The returning **exiles** barely had time to settle into **their** new homes when **they gathered as one** in **Yerushalayim**. It was literally

only weeks after **their** return. It appears too coincidental that **they** would just happen to be back in **Tziyon** in time for the most important month of the Hebrew religious calendar. It has all the signs of a plan, and **they** had timed it perfectly. On the first day of **the month they** would have celebrated **Rosh ha-Shanah (Leviticus 23:15-21)**, normally followed by the festival of **Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:1-34 and 23:26-32)** on the tenth day, (but not mentioned here since there was no **Temple**), and then by a weeklong celebration of **Sukkot (Leviticus 23:33-36 and 39-44)** starting on the fifteenth day of **the seventh month**.

But why did **they** want to gather in a place that looked so pitifully run down? A visit to **the Temple** Mount would only serve to remind them of how sadly small and insignificant **they** had become. All that was left of Solomon's **Temple** were piles of stone and rubble, blackened by the fires that had burned in the Babylonian invasion so long ago (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gb - The Destruction of Solomon's Temple on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC](#)). Standing there gazing at those stones, overgrown with weeds, **they** would be reminded of the past - a past that the oldest among them wanted to forget. So why gather there? The answer, of course, was worship.⁵² This is how **the Chronicler** described it:

Then Jeshua [the high priest] the son of Jozadak (a descendant of Aaron) **and his brothers the priests** (other descendants of Aaron), **and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel** (a descendant of David) **and his brothers** (other descendants of David) **arose and built the altar of the God of Isra'el to offer burnt offerings on it (Ezra 3:2a). The burnt** (or whole) **offering is the chief sacrifice in the Torah of Moses.** The animal was completely **burnt**. Neither **the priest** nor worshiper ate it. **The whole offering** went up to **God**. The ritual enacted for this kind of **sacrifice** provided that the one who offered it should place **their** hands on the head of the animal (**Leviticus 1:4**). In doing so, the worshipers identified with the animal, that is, **they** were offering **themselves** to **ADONAI**. As a result, **the burnt offering** was a symbolic action. In **burning** the whole animal - which goes up wholly to **God** - **the worshipers** declared **their** wholehearted devotion to **the LORD**. In presenting **burnt offerings** to **YHVH** on **the bronze altar**, even before **the Temple** was built, **the returnees** displayed **their** earnestness to be **a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1).**⁵³

As it is written in the Torah of Moshe, the man of God (Ezra 3:2b). It was crucial for **the returnees** to come back to **the Torah of Moses**. Because **their** forefathers had left the covenant, and as a result, **the nation** had been driven into Captivity (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial](#)

Babylonian Rule). Therefore, when **the exiles** returned, **they** did not want to make the same mistake.

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the congregations of **God**. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is the ultimate, not missions, because **ADONAI** is ultimate, not mankind. During the Eternal State (see the commentary on **Revelation Fq - The Eternal State**), when countless multitudes of **the redeemed** will fall on **their** collective faces before the throne of **the Lamb** to worship **Him**, missions will be no more. Missions is a temporary necessity. But worship will be forever.⁵⁴



So, led by **Sheshbatar (Ezra 5:16)**, they set up the altar on its foundation (**Ezra 3:a**). The altar spoken of here is **the bronze altar** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fa - Build an Altar of Acacia Wood Overlaid with Bronze**). It stood outdoors, in the Court of the Priests, between **the Temple** and the Court of the Women. It was on this **altar** that animals would be offered as a sacrifice. **The bronze altar** in Solomon's **Temple** had been an enormous structure - some thirty feet square and fifteen feet high with a ramp that led up to it (**Second Chronicles 4:1ff**).

The Chronicler introduces a note of anxiety here, caused by the tension between **the exiles** who had returned and **the people of the lands** around **them** - **the people** of Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, and Edom - **for they were terrified of them (Ezra 3:3b)**. The sudden presence of **42,360 people** needing food and shelter created huge administrative problems. Not only that, but **the returnees** regarded **themselves** as the true worshipers of **Ha'Shem**, and the rightful administrators of **the Temple** and **the Torah**. Given the fact that offers of help in rebuilding **the**

Temple were flatly refused, we have all the makings of a confrontation. Almost a century later, during **Nehemiah's** time, these threats were real enough to warrant arming the men who built the walls around **Tziyon** (see [Cc - Samaritan Opposition to the Building of the Walls](#)). There was no need for such drastic measures at this stage, though the tension did make **the exiles terrified of them**. Courage is not lack of fear. It is the will to act in spite of fear. **The Israelites** recognized, if only partially, that **their** power consisted not in armies but in the knowledge and service of **God**.⁵⁵

Finding **themselves** in that tense situation, **they** needed to turn to **ADONAI** and worship **Him**. It was **their** first order of business. Why should that be the case? The answer to this question lies in an understanding of what it is that is most needed – forgiveness and a sense of **the LORD's** nearness that comes on the other side of reconciliation. Once **the bronze altar** was rebuilt, it would be possible for **the returnees** to offer **sacrifices** again.⁵⁶

Therefore, **the returnees** turned **their** attention to **the bronze altar**. In the Dispensation of **Torah**, building **an altar** was a significant act. In the life of the patriarchs it marked a new dedication to **God** or a new experience of **God's** presence and leading (**Genesis 12:7, 13:4, 22:9, 26:25, 33:20, 35:1 and 7; Exodus 17:5**). This was the place where **ADONAI** had promised to be **with His people (Exodus 29:43)**. Consequently, **they set up the bronze altar on its foundation** – on the exact spot where **it** had stood in Solomon's **Temple**. Once **the bronze altar** had been rebuilt, it would be possible for **the exiles** to offer **sacrifices** again. Since it was **the seventh month**, over two hundred **sacrifices** of bulls, rams, and male lambs were to be made, not to mention the daily morning and evening **sacrifices (Numbers 29)**. The laying of **the foundation** was accompanied by a celebration, somewhat like a cornerstone celebration. **And they sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening (Ezra 3:3c)**. **Burnt offerings** emphasized total commitment where the whole animal was burned a symbol of total dedication to **ADONAI**. These were the first **sacrifices** to be **offered** there in 50 years – since 586 BC.



The first thing **they** did after building **the bronze altar** was to **celebrate the Feast of Sukkot, as it is written**, emphasizing the authority of **the Torah (Exodus 23:16, 34:22; Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43; and Deuteronomy 16:13-16)**. We can hardly imagine what this meant for the returning **exiles**. **They** had barely unpacked **their** belongings before **they** found **themselves** camped underneath leafy shelters in the open air looking up at the stars for a week to celebrate **Sukkot**. Returning to **Jerusalem** after life in **Babylon** forced **them to** remember that **their** lives were fragile and brief; much like **their** ancestors. The only reason they were in **the City of David** was due to **ADONAI's** intervention and deliverance. Forgoing the benefits of a comfortable bed and a roof over **their** heads, the returning exiles stopped everything in order to acknowledge the hand of **God** in their otherwise-fragile lives.⁵⁷

And they offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required; and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of ADONAI that were consecrated, as well as freewill offerings to the LORD. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to YHVH (Ezra 3:4-6a). Therefore, even though the **sacrificial** system had been reinstated, there remained much to be done. For almost four hundred years, **Isra'el** had connected worship necessarily with **the Temple**. In fact, **they** had come to rely more on **the Temple** than on **ADONAI** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Cc - False Religion is Worthless](#)). But since **the Temple** had been destroyed and **they** had discovered **God's** presence even in exile, **they** could then worship **Him** even without **the Temple**.⁵⁸

Where do *you* go when *you* are **terrified**? Where do *you* go when *you* **fall short of**

the glory of God (Romans 3:23)? Most of us think that the problem is outside us and that the resolution must come within ourselves. But the Bible turns this around and says that the problem is within us and that the solution must come from outside of us. The problem is **sin . . . our sin**. The solution comes apart from our own accomplishments and resolve, coming from **the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9)** that is seen on the other side of the cross. The averting of **Ha'Shem's** wrath only comes by means of the substitutionary death of **Yeshua Messiah**. It is the work of **Christ** that satisfies every claim of **the LORD's** holiness and justice so that **YHVH** is free to act on our behalf.

The substitutionary nature of animal sacrifice spoke of both the magnitude of **Isra'el's sin** (the Babylonian Captivity was, after all, a judgment on **Isra'el's sin**) and the need for justice to be met so that forgiveness could be given. In the end, however, **the blood of bulls and goats** could never **take away sin**. Only **the blood of the Lamb of God**, spilled in substitution for **sinner**s, could do that. **For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin (Hebrews 10:4).**⁵⁹ If you don't accept **His** sacrifice, you become the sacrifice.