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Numbering the Exiles Who Returned Under Zerubbabel

Ezra 2: 1-70

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**).



Several **prophets** had spoken fervently about the return of **the exiles to the Promised Land (Jeremiah 50:17-20; Ezeke'el 20:33-44)**. However, the most passionate and descriptive oracles on this theme come from **Isaiah**. Frequently **he** described the return to **Palestine** as a Second Exodus (**Isaiah 48:20-21** and **52:11-12**). But we do not possess many hard facts about the character of **the refugees** or the character of **their** return journey. Why did **some** return while **others** stayed behind in **Babylon**? Did all **the exiles** of **the First Return** come in one group, or did **they** return to **the Land** in small groups over time? Was the Second Exodus as wonderful as that described in **Isaiah Chapters 40-55**?

The Chronicler had little interest in those matters. **His** focus was on the character of the returning righteous of the TaNaKh. But even at that, **he** was very selective. **He** tells us almost nothing of the great leaders of **the First Return: Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua** the high priest. It is obvious that **he** was not writing to

satisfy our thirst for the details. **His great concern was to demonstrate that ADONAI is with those who establish and preserve a pure society.** A “pure society” means, positively, loyalty to **YHVH** through obedience to the Torah and proper **Temple** worship; negatively, a “pure society” means separation from the people who would pollute the congregations of **God**.

The people who belong: Many today have little appreciation for the genealogical lists in the Bible (**Ezra Chapter 8; First Chronicles Chapters 1-9**). The names are not only ancient and unfamiliar, but more importantly, they represent a different way of looking at life. Today we place great emphasis on the individual. Ancient societies, however, placed greater importance on the family and clan. In the ancient societies there were no “free-floating” individuals. Everyone is a member of some family and comes from some place. These were people who understood themselves in terms of a family, and were known and valued by others as an individual who came from a specific place. The character of every one of them was known by their background, because (it was believed) their ancestors lived on through them. Naturally, the presence of a non-**Israelite** family in the genealogy would raise serious questions because they would carry foreign elements into **the community**. Later (see [Ao](#) - **The Generosity of the People of God**), the issue of descent was an extremely important issue for **the Jews** who were establishing themselves in the Land.

Genealogy and membership in Isra’el: Genealogical information was important to ancient **Isra’el** because it protected **the community** from a disruptive person – the person would destroy **the community**. This screening by genealogy didn’t always work because some people didn’t live up to the character of their ancestors. For the most part, however, it was believed that those who came from established **Jewish** families would be good members of **the community**. Although exceptions were recognized, **Isra’el** shared the belief with other ancient societies that “the apple does not fall far from the tree.” King Solomon put it this way: **Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it (Proverbs 22:6).**

Synagogue and church membership: In our day many messianic synagogues and churches share the concern of the Second Exodus. These congregations don’t want to allow people to become members who are not committed to their fundamental beliefs. One purpose of membership requirements in synagogues and churches is to screen people who want to become members. The requirement may be flexible and generous, but all the same requirements are there to preserve and

protect the core beliefs of **the community** from those who would try to change them. On the one hand, **a religious community** that pays no attention to the preservation of its fundamental values and beliefs will eventually lose its character – its life. But on the other hand, **a community** that focuses too much on its distinctiveness may also suffer loss by becoming so exclusive that it refuses to receive people who deserve to be welcomed. Not surprisingly, **a community** living under threat and living on the edge of existence is tempted to embrace the latter policy.

Genealogy, a reminder of God's grace: The descendants of **the people** who are named in the first eight chapters of **First Chronicles** are reminded that **they** belong to **a select community – the people of Isra'el** whom **YHVH** has **chosen** as **His own people (Deuteronomy 7:6), the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:12)**. To the Hebrew mind, this demonstrates in the clearest way the specificity of **ADONAI's** love and concern that lies at the heart of the gospel. The genealogical listings in **Ezra 2, Nehemiah 7, First Chronicles 1-8, Matthew 1:1-7** and **Luke 3:23b-38** highlight dramatically the words spoken to **Moshe** by **YHVH**, **“Now then, if you listen closely to My voice, and keep My covenant, then you will be My own treasure from among all people, for all the earth is Mine. So as for you, you will be to Me a kingdom of cohanim and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6)**.

Who was included and who was excluded: The book of **Ezra-Nehemiah** describes **a community** that was formed around **Jewish** families there were in exile (see my commentary on **Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Rule Babylonian Rule**). The leaders made a serious attempt to keep out those who did not qualify, but they also tried to include all who actually did belong. This concern can best be seen in the cases of **people** who said **they were priests**, but were unable to prove it through genealogical records. **They** were not immediately cast out. The final decision was made with the consultation of **the Urim and Thummim** (see the commentary on **Exodus Gb - The Urim and Thummim**). So, on the one hand, **the community** appears to be very strict on the matter of membership; but on the other hand, they could also quite gracious when they celebrated **the Passover** at the dedication of **the Temple**. **So the children of Isra'el who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the impurity of the [Gentile] nations to seek ADONAI the God of Isra'el (Ezra 6:19-22)**.

The true Isra'el, the righteous of the TaNaKh: Although we must allow for the

possibility of exceptions and modifications, for the most part **the community** of **Isra'el** that formed in **the Promised Land** following the decree of **Cyrus** was limited to **Jews** who had been in **exile**. However, **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** were not the first to identify **the Jewish exiles** as **the righteous of the TaNaKh**. Earlier **Jeremiah** had the same belief. **He** considered **the Jews** who went into exile to be **the good figs** as opposed to those who remained in **the Land**, whom **he** labeled **the bad figs** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Ei - Two Baskets of Figs](#)).

The names had a religious significance: This long list of names appears to have a religious and legal significance. As already stated, it served a religious purpose in that it established the identity of those who belonged to the congregation of **Isra'el**. The list, which is headed by **twelve** names (**Nehemiah 7:7**) indicates that **the righteous of the TaNaKh** thinks of **itself** as continuing in some manner the tradition of **the twelve tribes of Isra'el**.

But the names also had a legal significance: **The decree of Cyrus** (see [Ah - Cyrus Decrees: Rebuild the Temple](#)) assigned the responsibility for the rebuilding of **the Temple** to **the exiles (Ezra 2:1-4)**. Offer of help from those who did not belong to **the exiles** were rejected (see [At - Opposition during the Reigns of Cyrus and Ahasuerus](#)). The refusal was probably made on religious grounds, that is, fear of foreign religious traditions infecting their faith, but it was based on legal grounds. **The decree of Cyrus**, specified that only **the righteous of the TaNaKh** were to **build the House of ADONAI, the God of Isra'el (Ezra 1:3)**. Although the refusal created resentment and opposition, the legal basis was solid. At one point, **Tattenai, the governor of Trans-Euphrates (Ezra 5:3-6)**, was inspecting the building project and asked: **Who gave you the authority to build this House and to complete this structure? They also asked them, "What are the names of the men who are constructing this building" (Ezra 5:3-4)? The decree of Cyrus** provided the answer to the first question, and the list of names in **Ezra 2:1-70** covered the second.

Isaiah and Ezra: This description of **the restored community** appears dull beside the story of **Isaiah**. **His** colorful and energetic language excites our faith. **YHVH** is on the move with **His people** - leading them in a new **Exodus** (see the commentary on [Isaiah Ix - How Beautiful on the Mountains are the Feet of Those Who Bring Good News](#)). He is a **God** of great power (see the commentary on [Isaiah Hg - He Sits Enthroned Above the Circle of the Earth](#)), but also most tender to those worn down by the captivity (see the commentary on [Isaiah Hh - But Those Who Hope in the LORD Will Renew Their Strength](#)). Opposed

to the dull list of names that confronts us in **Ezra 2**, stands the open and intimate relationship between **ADONAI** and **the people** in **Isaiah 43:1-7** and **54:5-8** for example. It is a temptation to assume that if **Isaiah** had lived to guide **the exiles** back on the Second Exodus that the results would have been quite different from that of **Zerubbabel, Ezra** and **Nehemiah**. Maybe, but then again, maybe not.

The difference between **Isaiah** and the leadership of the Second Exodus was just a matter of emphasis. On the one hand, **Isaiah** spoke of the downfall of **Babylon** and the glory of the release from captivity, but says nothing specific about what was to be done when **the returnees** reached the Promised Land. On the other hand, the book of **Ezra-Nehemiah** focuses on **the restored community** in the Land, but don't give us a hint of the drama of the return itself. Although we cannot say that **Isaiah** would have fully agreed with the policies of the later leaders of **the exiles**, it appears that **he** would have supported the establishment **of a Temple community**. It is also likely **the prophets** who ministered before the **Babylon Captivity**, such as **Isaiah, Jeremiah** and **Ezeki'el**, would have also endorsed the building of a new **Temple**.²⁹

These names were the living plants of **Isra'el**, roots and all, for replanting. But the fundamental motive for this careful grouping was not social, but a matter of faith. This holy **nation, the righteous of the TaNaKh**, had been given a new chance to live up to **her** calling. By returning to Palestine to establish a new **Temple community, they** announced **their** refusal to let the exile discourage **their** faith in the promises of **God. They** believed that **the past** deserved a future, and they were determined to work with **ADONAI** to create that future.³⁰