

## The Jewish Captives in Babylon Who Returned to Jerusalem

### Ezra 2

**Ezra 2:1** - *“Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to their own town...”* Ezra 2 lists the names of Jews who returned to Jerusalem and Judah in 538BC. King Nebuchadnezzar had carried them away into captivity in Babylon many years before. We’re not going to read all the names. I’ll select a few specific verses.

The **leaders** (v1-2) . Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah.

The **families** (v3-20). For example, verse 3: *“The people of Parosh, 2,172.”* And verse 20: *“the people of Gibbar, 95.”*

The **home cities** (v21-35). Verse 21: *“The people of Bethlehem, 123.”* And verse 35: *“The people of Senaah, 3,630.”*

The **priests** (v36-39). Verse 36: *“The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; the sons of Immer, 1,052; the sons of Pashhur, 1,247; the sons of Harim, 1,017.”* Verses 40-42 list

The **Levites** (v40-42). Verse 40: *“The Levites: ... 74. The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. The sons of the gatekeepers: in all 139.”*

The **Temple servants** (v43-54). Verse 43: *“The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth.”* And verse 54: *“The sons of Nezhiah, the sons of Hatipha.”*

The **sons of Solomon’s servants** (v55-58). Verse 58: *“All the temple servants and the children of Solomon’s servants were 392.”*

Those with **uncertain genealogies** (V57-63). Verse 59: *“And these are those who... were not able to give evidence of their fathers’ house or their genealogy, whether they were of Israel: ...652.”* *“...And 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. These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood. The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest should consult with Urim and Thummim.”*

In verses 64-67 the totals are given of all those who returned from Babylon, including the animals. Verse 64: *“The whole assembly together was 42,360, besides their male and female servants, 7,337; and they had 200 men and women singers. Their horses were 736; their mules, 245; their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720.”*

## Background Notes

Why did the Persian king, Cyrus, issue his edict that allowed these Jewish people to return to their homeland, and rebuild the Temple of the Lord? Had he become a believer in the God of Israel? No. Cyrus was a polytheist, and he wanted to appease and gain credit with all the “gods” of all the nations. Of course we know that the one true God was working behind the scenes, and using Cyrus to accomplish His good purposes for Israel. And God works behind the scenes today as well!

In 538BC, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, about 50,000 Jewish captives returned to Jerusalem. Where do we get 50,000? Look at verses 64-65. Add those totals, and you get 49,897 - about 50,000 total. The historical record of this first return of the Jews in Nehemiah 7 is very similar to the record here in Ezra 2.

And by the way - the “Nehemiah” in verse 2 is **not** the same “Nehemiah” of the book of Nehemiah. The Nehemiah of the book of Nehemiah came to Jerusalem about 100 years later! And the “Mordecai” of verse 2 is **not** the “Mordecai” of the book of Esther - he lived in Persia about 70 years later! “Nehemiah” and “Mordecai” were common names in that day.

One more background note. What are the “Urim and Thummim” (v63)? We don’t know! Exodus 28:3 says that the Urim and Thummim were associated with the breastplate of the high priest, and they were used for making important decisions, but we don’t know **how** they were used. They may have been precious stones, and they may have been used somewhat like “drawing lots” to determine God’s will in some situations. In any case, God was able to make His will known through them.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. God keeps records of the activities of his people.

Why did God include all these names in Ezra 2? Was it just to test us, to see if we would actually read this chapter of the Bible and not consider it boring? That would be a test, wouldn’t it? Well, of course that’s not the reason! God ordained this list of names to be recorded in Scripture - not only to show its historical importance, but also to show us that He keeps track of the activities of His people. Then and today!

When God sent his people into captivity because of their unfaithfulness and sin, He didn't just write them off and forget about them down there in Babylon. God had His people keep accurate records while they were in captivity, and when they returned every single individual was accounted for! The leaders were known, the different families and the cities they came from were known, the priests and the Levites were known, and the Temple servants, and the singers and the gatekeepers were known. God knew all about them and what they were doing.

And God keeps records of His people. God knows all about you. He knows your background, He knows your family ties, He knows your abilities, and, if you're a believer, He knows your place and function in the body of Christ.

Some people who thought they were priests were excluded from the priesthood because they could not show their lineage. *"These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood. The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest should consult with Urim and Thummim"* (v62-63).

There's a spiritual lesson here for us. When we become Christians, and we're born again into God's family, we become part of a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). However, some people who "profess" to be Christians, and who only **say** they're Christians, aren't true believers. They aren't born into the family of God, so they do not have the birthright. And "professing Christians" are excluded from the "royal priesthood" of true believers. Are you part of the royal priesthood? Or have you only made a "profession" of faith? You may fool other people by mouthing words, but you can't fool God. God keeps records of the activities of his people.

## 2. God keeps records of the attitudes of his people.

Ezra 2:68-70: *"Some of the heads of fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to erect it in its place. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments. So the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities."*

Notice that verse 68 does not say that the people returned to the "ruins of the Temple," but rather they came to "**the house of the Lord.**" Even though the former Temple was lying in ruins, in the mind of God - and in the minds of the people - it was still **the house of the Lord!** What a great attitude! I can just imagine, as the people arrived in Jerusalem after the long journey from Babylon, that they went straight to the Temple site – straight to the site of the house of the Lord!

And the people **willingly gave** money for the rebuilding of the Temple (v68). No “fundraising programs” or “arm-twisting sermons” were needed! The people had a great attitude, and they gave willingly. And they gave according to their ability (v69). They gave! And they even gave more than just their tithes. They gave more than just “a few dollars in the collection plate.” They gave almost 300,000 ounces of gold and over 6,000 pounds of silver! What a great attitude! And what a great example for God’s people today!

When you give to the Lord, do you give willingly – or do you give grudgingly, because you’d really rather keep the money for your own needs and desires? 2 Corinthians 9 is one of the Bible’s great chapters on giving to the Lord. *“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work”*(2 Corinthians 9:6-8 NIV).

Verse 8 is an amazing verse! *“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”* Notice how often the words “**all**” and “**every**” appear! This verse reminds us of the great promise in Malachi 3:10: *“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.... Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”* Read those promises whenever you feel you just don’t have enough to give to the Lord!

It has often been said, “It’s not the amount that counts, but the attitude of your heart.” And that’s true. But the amount is important, too, because our **true attitude** towards giving to the Lord may be indicated by **the amount we use for other things before we give** – or by **the amount we have left after we give**. God knows, because God keeps records of the attitudes of his people!

## Practical Application

### Let’s sing unto the Lord!

In verses 65 and 70, special mention is given to the “singers.” They were musicians who were chosen to lead and promote music as an aspect of worship to the Lord.

There’s a practical application here for us. Singing was important in worship then, and singing is important in our worship now. In fact, in Colossians 3:16 we are **commanded** to sing! Colossians 3:16 says, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”* Singing is part of our worship! This verse doesn’t say you have to be a **good** singer, but it emphasizes that singing should be part of our worship. Let’s sing unto the Lord!