

Chapter Three

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. How much time has passed since the events beginning in Ezra 1:1?
2. How much time is consumed by the events in Ezra three?
3. According to 3:1, the people gathered "as one man." Do you think this means that everyone came, or that those who came had one will and purpose?
4. Why do you suppose they started their rebuilding with the altar, instead of some other structure?
5. How many things that they did in this chapter reflect a knowledge of God's Law given through Moses, or of other sacred institutions?

OUTLINE

Chapters three to six are titled in our outline for the book, "The Temple Is Rebuilt." This is most generally seen as the main topic of the book; this, then, is the heart of its message. Our outline for chapter three:

II. The Temple is Rebuilt (3:1—6:22)

A. The altar and the foundation laid

1. The altar and the sacrifices are restored (vss. 1-7).
2. The foundation of the new Temple is laid (vss. 8-13).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

Chapter three begins the topic of the Temple's reconstruction by describing the building of the altar, the making of the first regular sacrifice, and then the construction of the foundation. Nothing could emphasize more sharply the centrality of sacrifice to worship. The altar was the reason for erecting all of the rest of the building; it was the object for which all else existed.

Now, Jesus is our Temple (John 2:19-21). His greatest work on earth was to be our altar (Heb. 13:10, 12). We love Him because He offers us forgiveness, and cleansing, and consecration, and fellowship. We see in Him the glory that speaks of His Father's glory.

We, too, are building a temple, as described in I Cor. 3:16; 6:19f. and I Peter 2:5: *we are that temple*. It would be well for us to begin in like fashion with the altar of sacrifice. Notice what Heb. 13:13-16 enumerates as our sacrifices: especially praise and sharing.

II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (3:1 — 6:22)

A. The altar is built, and the foundation laid.

1. The altar and the sacrifice are restored.

TEXT, 3:1-7

- 1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.
- 2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.
- 3 So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.
- 4 And they celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required;
- 5 and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.
- 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.
- 7 Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

COMMENT

Verse 1: "Now when the seventh month came." This would correspond roughly to our September; though that is our ninth month, the name comes from the Latin for "seven" (septem). There is no year stated, so it must be in the same year as the previous events. Verse eight will confirm this, since it refers to the start of the second year after their return. They had barely had time, at best, to set up residence in cities when this busiest month of the year in terms of religious obligation arrived: the month of Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles. In Ezra 7:8, 9 the same trip from Babylon required four months, and their getting ready for the trip must have taken a substantial part of the other two, so the events of this chapter must have followed very closely their arrival in their homeland.

The number seven would be significant to Israel: the word itself signifies completion, or taking a vow. Every seventh day was holy; seven weeks separated two other feasts (Passover and Weeks) from each other; the seventh month as noted was particularly marked for religious observances; every seventh year was a Sabbath Year, and seven sevens of years (the fiftieth year) brought them to the Year of Jubilee.

Their assembling at Jerusalem would not have been a great hardship, for all the towns in which they had resettled were within a 25-mile radius of the Holy City.

In *verse 2* Jeshua and Zerubbabel are mentioned again, with their brothers. Obviously, all Jeshua's brothers would be priests also. Zerubbabel is called the son of Shealtiel; this presents a problem. I Chron. 3:16-19 calls him the son of Pedaiah, who is the son of King Jeconiah. Since Jeconiah's oldest son is Shealtiel, we can assume that this is an illustration of the Levirate law (Deut. 25:5ff.); when an heir would die without children, his wife was to marry his next brother, or his nearest available kin, and the first son of that marriage would be legally the heir of the woman's earlier husband. The story of Ruth (2:2) and of Tamar (Gen. 38) are examples of this principle. Thus Zerubbabel probably was legally the son of Shealtiel, but actually the son of Pedaiah.

But the center of focus in verse two is the altar. Since a second smaller altar was also located in the original Temple and used exclusively for incense offerings, it is necessary to specify that the altar which they built was the one for burnt offerings (animal sacrifices).

It is further specified that the pattern for their offerings was the Law of God given through Moses. One of the reasons for their bondage was that the Law had been neglected; now they set themselves scrupulously to observe it.

The timing for constructing the altar may need further explanation. Verse six indicates that sacrifice began on it on the first day of the seventh month; verse one says that they assembled in the seventh month, and then verse two describes the building of the altar. We may wonder how they could make sacrifice on it the first day if it was built during the month.

One possibility is in the translation of these words; they could just as accurately be rendered, "Now Jeshua . . . and Zerubbabel . . . had arisen and built the altar . . ."

A second possibility is that the altar which they constructed may have been temporary and very simple: a pile of dirt or stones as specified in Ex. 20:24f. Elijah had built a similar altar in a small part of a day (I Ki. 18:20ff.).

Verse 3 speaks of setting up the altar on its foundation, which would not need to be said unless to indicate that it was on the same foundation as the previous altar. This emphasizes their effort to be in continuity with the past. The reason given for it is their fear of the neighboring peoples; we will shortly see how justified this fear was. Stated positively, they were convinced that if they would complete this obligation to God, He would consequently protect them from their enemies.

With this verse begins a list of the different offerings and celebrations which they observed. The first of these, the burnt offering, is regarded as the most ancient and noble; it was placed first in the descriptions of sacrifices in Lev. 1-7, and it required the most expensive, most perfect animal. It is also appropriate as the first because it portrays dedication, or consecration, where the others speak more particularly of fellowship

or of expiation; so it would be most useful at dedications, or beginnings.

Verses 3, 4, 5 each mention the daily, or continual, burnt offering made morning and evening (Num. 28:3). Thus each day was made holy to God. In *verse 4* this is also said to be "according to the ordinance." A reading of Numbers chapters 28 and 29 will explain the different offerings and celebrations alluded to here.

Verse 4 also mentions their celebration of the Feast of Booths; this was one of the three major feasts of the year. If we wonder why they should begin their observance of the yearly feasts with this instead of with the Passover for example, an answer is quickly found. It was the first one that came up on the calendar, after their arrival in the land.

But what is undesigned by man may be designed by God. The Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) was the one which relived the experiences of Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan. Now they had arrived at home at the end of a similar journey, and the parallel would be especially meaningful. Matthew Henry¹ calls it "the feast . . . which had a peculiar reference to gospel times," and notes Zech. 14:16-18, a prophecy incidentally which was written very close to this same time. If the Passover found its fulfillment in the event of the Cross at the Passover season (John 19:14; I Cor. 5:7), and if the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) was fulfilled for the Christian in the birth of the church at a Pentecost celebration, perhaps the Feast of Booths can speak to us of the age in which we live, as sojourners or ambassadors separated from but moving toward our permanent home which we will receive at the end of our journey or at our Master's return.

Verse 5, in addition to the burnt offering, speaks of the monthly or new moon offerings (Num. 28:11) and of the other festivals which are described in Num. 28, 29. Added also are the freewill offerings which were not restricted to any special times

1. *Commentary on The Whole Bible*, p. 1037.

or circumstances, but which arose out of the spontaneous gratitude and affection of the offerers; there is never a time when they are not appropriate.

Within *verses 3, 4, 5* are described offerings which came each day, each month, each year, and whenever the offerer chose. One periodic offering most conspicuous by its absence here is that which came each week, and marked each Sabbath (Num. 28:9, 10). Strangely enough, Ezra nowhere specifically mentions the Sabbath. However, it would be included in the phrase, "all the fixed festivals" (verse five).

Verse 6 states clearly that the sacrifices were renewed beginning with the first day of the seventh month; this was one of the lesser feasts, the Feast of Trumpets, though it is not mentioned here. The subject of the last half of the chapter is anticipated in the statement that the Temple foundation had not been laid; this stresses once more that they did not wait for a temple to be completed, or even started, before they began worship through sacrifice. (As noted in the *Interpreter's Bible*, David also had an altar without a temple.)²

Verse 7 continues this transition by showing the preparations made, the gathering of materials, for the beginning of construction. The citizens are paid with money for their work; the foreigners receive goods (food, drink, and oil) instead, which would be more useful to them. Food is a better international currency than money.

The materials were brought from Lebanon, as the materials had been originally in Solomon's time; we recall Hiram of Tyre. These would have consisted of timber; the stones of the old structure probably still remained. Sidon (also called Zidon) was close to Tyre, and had assisted also with the earlier structure (I Ki. 5:1, 6). Then, Hiram of Tyre and Solomon had been bound together by friendship; now both lands were under the heel of Cyrus. Joppa, as any reader of the book of Jonah would be aware, was the seaport closest to Jerusalem.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 588.

2. The foundation of the new temple is laid.

TEXT, 3:8-13

- 8 Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD.
- 9 Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.
- 10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.
- 11 And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.
- 12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy;
- 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

COMMENT

Verse 8 refers to the following year, the second month: our April or May. Their religious year began with the beginning of

Spring, which would be easy to justify. No work had been done during the Winter months, but with the arrival of seasonable weather the construction began. This was also the month in which Solomon had begun his building (I Ki. 6:1).

Again we have the names of the two leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, this time in reverse order from verse two. Perhaps the author is emphasizing their equality in importance and honor. They were assisted not only by their relatives and by the whole band of Levites, but by the total company who had returned to Jerusalem. There would be no restriction on the other tribes' entering the Temple till it was dedicated.

We may be surprised that the Levites were put to work beginning at the age of twenty (nineteen by our reckoning, since an Israelite was one year old through the first year of life). Previously we have been told that their responsibilities began at the age of thirty (Num. 4:46f.), or twenty-five (Num. 8:24). But David reduced this age to twenty (I Chron. 23:3, 24-27). They are the only group for whom the age requirement is made; perhaps this is to tell us of their care in conforming to the sacred ordinances. Also, it made good sense to assign the Levites, the tribe of priests, to positions of overseership as they would be more familiar with the services for which the House of God was designed, and they would be the ones making greatest use of these facilities.

In *verse 9*, the identity of Jeshua is not as simple as we might suppose. G. Coleman Luck³ believes him to be not the high priest, but the Levite named in 2:40, where he is also associated with Kadmiel, and where the name Hodaviah (very similar in its Hebrew spelling to Judah) also appears. Young's *Concordance* lists five different Jeshuas mentioned in Ezra!

This is certainly a possibility. Nevertheless, the mention of Jeshua the high priest with his kin in the previous verse leads more normally to seeing him here, setting an example to others by his involvement in the construction. Holy hands are not defiled by heavenly work.

3. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 28.

Verses 10 and 11 call attention to the revival of another long-standing tradition. King David had divided some of the Levites into twenty-four groups to provide music, each in their turn, at the House of God (I Chron. 6:31-48; 25:1-31). On the completion of the foundation the successors of these groups, with musical instruments and with their voices and accompanied by the priests, praised and gave thanks to God. This was another function of the Temple, and it was resumed without waiting for the building to be completed. The service of song has its God-given usefulness, as do the sacrifices, in inspiring and purifying the worshipers.

In *verse 11*, the words of their song are reminiscent of several of the Psalms: 106:1, 118:1, and 136, every verse, all speak of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, "For he is good, for his lovingkindness is everlasting." The words, "toward Israel," could be deduced from Psa. 118:2. The response of the people was a great shout in celebration of the finishing of the foundation.

Verse 12 further describes this reaction as being of two kinds. Some of them, the more aged people, could recall seeing the previous Temple; it had been but a few more than fifty years since it had been destroyed and they had been led to Babylon. What they saw now must have been a pitiful reminder of the splendid Temple they had known before (Hag. 2:3). Or for some, even the small beginnings would bring a flood of holy memories that would be expressed in tears; they need not all be the tears of sadness. For some, this was the end of fifty years of frustration. And from others (even of the elderly; the verse does not specify that the younger persons had a monopoly on the rejoicing) rose a great shout of joy.

Verse 13 concludes the scene as the two emotions, the shout of joy and the sound of weeping, are blended into one indistinguishable but impressive tone. For in worship there is a place for both: the tears of sorrow, and the shout of joy.

WORD STUDIES

LAW: Torah (“Law of Moses,” verse 2). The idea of legalism is not present in this word. It is possible that the word is derived from a verb, “throw”: hence, to throw out the hand, to point out, to direct or instruct. It is more likely that it comes from the verb, “give light”: hence, enlightenment or instruction. “Law” in the O.T. is the kind of loving instruction which a father gives to his children to help them avoid unhappy consequences of bad choices, or to enable them to live happy lives.

ALTAR: Mizbeach. The verb from which it is taken means “slaughter,” either for food or for sacrifice. Most of the meat or food which was sacrificed in Israel, specifically of the peace and thank offerings, the meal or grain offerings, trespass or guilt offerings, and even certain sin offerings, was eaten by the offerers, or by the priests, or by both (Lev. 7). This excludes only the burnt offerings. Sacrifice in Israel was a time of festivity and fellowship.

TABERNACLE: Sukkah, or Sukkoth (“Feast of Tabernacles”): tent, booth, hut, or temporary shelter made of green boughs. This was the housing of the Israelites on their trek from Egypt to Canaan, and they were commanded to keep it fresh in their memories by living in such structures one week of each year.

LEVITE: the basic idea is to join, or cleave, or entwine. It was the function of the Levites to join the people to God, to cause them to cleave to Him, or to be entwined with Him.

SUMMARY

What a variety of material in one small chapter!

Ezra has informed us of the prompt and effective religious action of the people and their leaders. He has singled out for emphasis the one most important article in the holy surroundings: the altar. He has stressed the part played by the Law of the Lord in their renewal, and has taken us through a brief but detailed review of the ancient ritual. If he has left out

an item or two, we have not been offended; his number of the vessels in chapter one had included many which he had failed to name, and his final total of the returnees in chapter two was more than the names and numbers he had previously given.

Then he has shown us the gathering of materials and workmen, and the beginning of construction of the new Temple. We have thrilled to the sound of music, and we have felt the surge of a variety of emotions as they observed the first small results of their labors. So far there has been no significant opposition, and no enemy has been singled out by name.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long was it after Israel returned before they began public worship?
2. Who were the individuals most responsible for the restoration of worship?
3. What observances or ceremonials did they keep?
4. What part did music fulfill in their renewal?