

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 2

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What You Can Discover on the Church Roll (Ezra 2)

We might as well admit that most of Ezra 2 doesn't exactly give us a warm glow inside. In Ezra 2 we have a list of returnees in 538 B.C., years before Ezra came on the scene. We can find a parallel to Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 7,¹ but we will focus on Ezra 2. In this chapter we snoop on the church roll and find it instructive, for it shows us what is — or should be — characteristic of the people of God.

I. The Passion that Should Rule Us – Ezra 2:36-39

In vv. 2b-35 we have the tallies of the lay people; in vv 36-39 we have the tallies of four clans of priests. The total of almost 4,300 (actually, 4,289) priests constitutes approximately 10% of the total of v. 64. One in ten of the returnees was a priest. *Why so many priests?* Doubtless because they longed to serve at the altar in a restored temple, which they could not do in the exile. Their desire was to rebuild the altar and the temple, to restore the public worship of God so they could serve where they were meant to serve. Their attitude must have been like that of Psalm 84:1-2. What of you? Do the public ordinances of God's worship hold your affections? Does worship have such a grip on you?

II. The Status that May Elude Us – Ezra 2:40-42

Although probably all in these verses are Levites (341 of them), Kidner is probably right that those in v. 40 directly assisted the priests (seventy-four of them; cf. Num. 3:5-10). That's one Levite to every fifty-eight priests. Those are precious few Levites to do the chores and the assisting tasks connected with temple worship – no big incentive for Levites to return. But here are seventy-four of them who did. There was plenty of work for them, but little recognition or status.

A good bit of Christian work is pretty plain and basic — not much drama or flair about it. We are not called to promote ourselves or to gain status and recognition, to make the Christian “All Star” team. Yet, an assisting role does not appeal to our pride. We don't want to play second fiddle. We want credit, recognition, thanks, praise, and visibility – or we'll be “hurt” (see 1 Cor. 3:5).

¹ See Yamauchi, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 4:717ff. on the differences — of 153 numerals, 29 are not the same.

III. The Providence that Leads Us – Ezra 2:43-58

1. Text

There are two sections here: the temple servants (Ezra 2:43-54) and the sons of Solomon's servants (Ezra 2:55-57). The total number of people contained in the two groups is 392 (Ezra 2:58). According to Ezra 8:20, David had given these "temple servants" to the Levites to assist them. Their work, therefore, consisted of the most menial tasks around the temple complex.

2. Observation

Edwin Yamauchi says 68% of the names of the temple servants are of foreign origin, and 33-40% of "Solomon's servants" are foreign names. Perhaps they were descendants of prisoners of war (during David's time) or descendants of the pagan enclaves that Solomon pressed into slavery (1 Kings 9:20-21). If so, now the descendants of these pagan ancestors are listed among the covenant people of God as they are restored to their land.

3. Circumstance

It seemed to be a chance occurrence — an ancestor had been captured in war years ago, had been brought into Israel, and had done menial grunt work around the first temple. But that placed them in the very sanctuary of truth, where they might see the gospel of atonement via the sacrifices, or hear priestly instruction. Somewhere in the passing of generations the truth took hold so that these "foreigners" came to be numbered among God's people in Ezra 2.

4. Import

Don't some of you know something of this sort of thing? A disappointment, a change of fortune in your life or in your family, a circumstance radically and sadly altered — yet it proved to be the launching pad for the gospel coming into your life. That's the providence that leads us.

IV. The Uncertainty that Can Shadow Us – Ezra 2:59-63

1. Problem

Here are three lay families and three priestly families that are unable to prove their descent (vv 59b, 62).

2. Clarification

This is not to say that these folks were not Israelites or *bona fide* priests, but that they could not prove it, could not authenticate their standing. They could have temporarily lost access to genealogical records. In any case, the problem is not that their status was not genuine but that

it was not clear. Hence, as in v. 63, those who claimed to be priests could not serve in that capacity until they could demonstrate their position.

3. Observation

They did not have credentials and so were limited, but it did not keep them from “coming up” from Babylon, from joining the pilgrim people and returning to Jerusalem. They remained among the people of God even though this uncertainty hung over them.

4. Application

Is there a rough analogy here with those in Christian congregations who lack assurance of their salvation? Notice that in the text here the question centers on doubt about the standing of these claimants. The essential concern figures with Christians who lack assurance. They wonder, “Do I belong?” They are bothered by fears and anxieties, plagued by a strange sense that the Christ in whom they’ve trusted may cast them out at the last. What should such people do? Could we claim that Ezra 2 provides an answer? Like these folks of unproven descent, they should stay among the people of God, join in their worship, share in their life, keep their place there until God sheds more light on their case.

V. The Generosity that Should Mark Us – Ezra 2:68-69

The gift of the heads of households consisted of 61,000 darics (=1,133 lbs. of gold) and 5,000 minas (=6,300 lbs. of silver). The numbers in the Neh. 7 parallel differ somewhat. Note that the number of slaves (v. 65), in light of the overall number (v. 64), shows there was about one slave to every six freemen. Therefore, some of the returnees must have had substantial wealth, and, though there was reason to hold it back in view of the uncertain times, they instead gave generously. Here is sacrifice — a clear proof that mammon is not king (see Luke 12:33-34).

VI. Conclusion

Ezra 2 is only a “church roll” with names and numerals, and with some addresses. It is not titillating to read. But you could do worse than being like this “church:” here is a people with a passion for worship; some who don’t care whether they are recognized; a people who look back and see the strange twists of God’s providence in bringing them to himself; and a people who have a place for the uncertain and fearful of Christ’s flock.