Background Resources for Ezra 3

Date of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah

"The events narrated in Ezra cover almost a century. Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., but in 539 King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonian king, Nabonidus. By doing so, he took control of a vast empire, including the territory of the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles were free to return to their ancestral home. Ezra 1-6 covers the return of the first wave of exiles, who came with their leaders, Zerubbabel and the priest Jeshua in 538-535 B.C. These chapters continue the narrative up to the time when they rebuilt the temple at Jerusalem (516 B.C.), where Solomon's temple had stood until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Chapters 7-10 cover a time more than half a century later, beginning with Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem in 458 B.C. The book provides little information about the intervening period. The events of Ezra 1-6 span the years 537-515 B.C. and those of Ezra 7 through Nehemiah 13 span 458-433 B.C."

-ESV Study Bible

Ezra 3:2. Jeshua. Jeshua is the high priest in the early postexilic period. His grandfather, Seraiah, had been executed by Nebuchadnezzar when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:18–21; note that Ezra is also from the line of Seraiah, see 7:1). Judah's heir to the throne, Zerubbabel (see next entry), served as governor, but since Judah was still under Persian control, there were restrictions on the extent of his control (so as not to compete with the Persian king). Consequently, rule in the community was now divided between the governor and the high priest, giving the priest a more prominent role. Little is known about him except that he was one of the leaders who helped get the temple rebuilt. There are no contemporary extrabiblical references to him.

Ezra 3:2. Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the heir to the Davidic throne (grandson of Jehoiachin, see comments on 2 Kings 24) and served as governor of Judah under the Persian king Darius I. There was a significant amount of expectation surrounding him that had a messianic flavor to it. Undoubtedly some expected him to set up the promised kingdom and bring freedom from their slavery (to the Persians). While his duties were primarily secular, he is described in Ezra, along with the priest Jeshua, as the force behind the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Governing under the auspices of the Persian king, he was responsible for maintaining law and order, and for the collection of taxes. Though Zerubbabel is the last Davidic heir to serve in the role of governor, archaeologists have found a seal of Shelomith (listed as a daughter of Zerubbabel in 1 Chron 3:19), where she is designated as either a wife or an official of Elnathan, the governor who is thought to have succeeded Zerubbabel.[1]

Religious Calendar

Leviticus 23:1–44. Israel's religious calendar. Versions of Israel's festal calendar are found in Exodus 23:12–19; 34:18–26; Leviticus 23; Deuteronomy 16:1–17; and Numbers 28–29. Each has its own characteristics and emphases. In Leviticus a list of the sacrifices required throughout the year is intertwined with the festivals of sabbath, Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. These feasts mark the various stages in the agricultural year, celebrate harvests and give both credit and a sacrificial portion back to God, who has provided their bounty. Several also became related to historical events.[2]

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[1]Matthews, Victor Harold ; Chavalas, Mark W. ; Walton, John H.: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, S. Ezr 3:2

[2]Matthews, Victor Harold ; Chavalas, Mark W. ; Walton, John H.: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, S. Le 22:28-23:44

The Hebrew calendar, showing seasons and festivals with modern equivalents. (NBD p. 158)

	Month	Pre-exilic name	Post-exilic name	Modern equivalent	Season	Festivals
Rain	1	**ABIB** Ex. 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Dt. 16:1	**NISAN** Est. 3:7 Ne. 2:1	Mar.–Apr.	Spring Latter rains Barley harvest Flax harvest	14 Passover (Ex. 12:18; Lv. 23:5) 15–21 Unleavened Bread (Lv. 23:6) 16 Firstfruits (Lv. 23:10f.)
Dry	2	**ZIV** 1 Ki. 6:1, 37	**IYYAR**	Apr.–May	Dry season begins	14 Later Passover (Nu. 9:10–11)
	3		**SIVAN** Est. 8:9	May–June	Early figs ripen	6 Pentecost (Lv. 23:15ff.) Feast of Weeks Harvest
	4		**TAMMUZ**	June–July	Grape harvest	
	5		**AB**	July–Aug.	Olive harvest	
	6		**ELUL** Ne. 6:15	Aug.–Sept.	Dates and summer figs	
Rain	7	**ETHANIM** 1 Ki. 8:2	**TISHRI**	Sept.–Oct.	Early rains	1 Trumpets (Nu. 29:1; Lv. 23:24) 10 Day of Atonement (Lv. 16:29ff.; 23:27ff.) 15–21 Tabernacles (Lv. 23:34 ff.) 22 Solemn assembly (Lv. 23:36)
	8	**BUL** 1 Ki. 6:38	**MARCHESVAN**	Oct.–Nov.	Ploughing Winter figs	
	9		**CHISLEV** Ne. 1:1	Nov.–Dec.	Sowing	25 Dedication (1 Macc. 4:52f.; Jn. 10:22)
	10		**TEBETH** Est. 2:16	Dec.–Jan.	Rains (snow on high ground)	
Cold	11		**SHEBAT** Zc. 1:7	Jan.–Feb.	Almond blossom	
Rain	12		**ADAR** Est. 3:7	Feb.–Mar.	Citrus fruit harvest	

The Hebrew calendar, showing seasons and festivals with modern equivalents.[3]

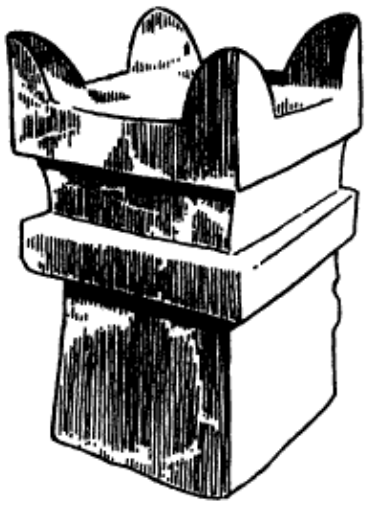
Ezra 3:3. morning and evening sacrifices. Maintaining the continual observance of the daily morning and evening sacrifices was a signal of complete compliance to the temple regimen. According to Exodus 29:38–42 and Numbers 28:3–8 (see comments on both contexts for additional information) this involved the sacrifice of a year-old lamb along with flour, oil and wine each morning and evening. On two other occasions the practice had had to be revived (by Joash in 2 Chron 24:14 and Hezekiah in 2 Chron 29:7, 27–29) after a period of neglect or suppression due to pressures from Assyria.[4]

Ezra 3:4 Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33–43). The final harvest of the year occurred in the autumn prior to the onset of the rainy season and marked the beginning of a new agricultural year (fifteenth day of the seventh month). At this time the last of the ripening grain and fruits were gathered and stored. The seven-day event was also known as the Feast of Ingathering (Ex 23:16) and was symbolized by the construction of booths decorated with greenery for the harvesters. The festival was tied into Israelite tradition as a commemoration of the wilderness wanderings. It was also the occasion for the dedication of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:65).[5]

Ezra 3:3, 6 (Leviticus 23:12–13). burnt, grain and drink offering. The burnt offering of the year-old lamb, a quantity twice the usual amount of grain, and a libation of wine constituted the three major products of Israel (sometimes with olive oil replacing or supplementing wine—see 2:1; Num 15:4–7). By combining them, the fertility provided by God will be directed toward all of their efforts in animal

[3]Wood, D. R. W. ; Marshall, I. Howard: *New Bible Dictionary*. 3rd ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1996, S. 158
[4]Matthews, Victor Harold ; Chavalas, Mark W. ; Walton, John H.: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, S. Ezr 3:3
[5]Matthews, Victor Harold ; Chavalas, Mark W. ; Walton, John H.: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, S. Le 23:44

husbandry and farming. The pleasing odor draws Yahweh's attention to the sacrifice (see Noah's sacrifice in Gen 8:20–21) and marks it as the properly prescribed thanksgiving ritual—not the feeding of a god as in Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions.[6]



ALTAR

Nothing is more prominent as a biblical image for worship and religious allegiance than the altar. It is no exaggeration to say that the most visible sign of one's devotion to the true God in the worship of the old covenant is the building of altars or traveling to them for acts of sacrifice or offering.

Altars in the Old Testament.

An altar in the Bible is always "built" or "made," whether of earthen brick, undressed rock, or wood perhaps overlaid with precious metal. It is a raised platform (three cubits, or about five feet high, in the tabernacle design of Ex 27:1; ten cubits, or about seventeen feet high in Solomon's temple, 2 Chron 4:1) on which fire is kindled. The very form suggests a table or brazier (Is 29:2). The top four corners of many Israelite and Canaanite altars rose to points called *"horns." They were set beneath the open sky, whether in a field, a high place or a temple court, where their smoke could ascend unhindered to heaven. Their deliberate construction is indicated by verbs associated with them: they are "established," "set up," "placed" and "arranged"; and in their repair they are "healed," "renewed" and "purified." In fact, from Sinai on, their design is specific (Ex 27:1–8). Thus Ahaz goes afoul of divine holy order in commanding that an altar be built according to his sketch of one he saw in Damascus (2 Kings 16:10), and Solomon's brazen altar has outgrown the Sinai specifications.

The story of altars in Israel's worship inclines toward one altar in one place of worship: the central sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple (2 Sam 24:18–25; 2 Chron 18:21–30). An altar built at Bethel (1 Kings 12:33) or another holy place is, in the run of the biblical narrative, bound for destruction (1 Kings 13:1–3; 2 Kings 23:15). Thus it is no surprise to find in the biblical text that the plural *altars* is nearly synonymous with pagan influence and is frequently accompanied by verbs of destruction. Although an altar may be built by Abraham or Joshua or David or Solomon, it is always the "altar of the LORD," dedicated to his worship alone. We get the sense of the altar as a focal point of life lived in covenant allegiance. Although Abraham erects a series of altars where he "called on the name of the LORD" and marked out the land of promise, the establishment of a central sanctuary defines a center in Israel's map of holy space. Other sanctuaries and their altars, sacred places and ancient traditions competing for the title of "center" are implicitly or explicitly destined for destruction and ultimately cannot stand.

Biblical altars convey a number of meanings, but the central one is always the place of slaughter, the place of blood sacrifice. The Hebrew word for altar (*mizbēaḥ*) comes from the word for slaughter (*zāḇaḥ*). Yet, there are biblical altars on which other sorts of offerings are made. Besides the central altar of sacrifice in the courtyard, the temple also contained two altars in the sanctuary: a gold altar for the offerings of incense, which represented the prayers of the people ascending to the Lord, and a table for the perpetual offering of the "bread of the presence." But those altars and the sacrifices presented on them were secondary in significance and location.

[6]Matthews, Victor Harold ; Chavalas, Mark W. ; Walton, John H.: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, S. Le 23:44

The chief officiants at the altar are the priests, who are assisted by the Levites. As holy representatives of Israel, they maintain the altar and its appliances, protecting its purity and the holy order of sacrifices. What is offered on this altar moves from Israelite family to male head to priest and to God. It is a place of holy interchange.

Israelite males present themselves, their offerings and their sacrifices by "going up" or "before" the altar, but the psalmist can speak of a joyous thanksgiving that takes them "around" the altar (Ps 26:6). "Going up" is particularly evocative of the ideal attitude for approaching an altar. In the spatial orientation of Scripture we can no more imagine "going down" to sacrifice (as if to a chthonic deity) than "going down" to Jerusalem. Biblical altars clearly lift our eyes upward. They follow the model of temples in the ancient Near East, which were constructed on high places, whether Mount Zion of Yahweh or the mythical Mount Zaphon of Baal. Whether constructed at five-foot height or on a raised platform, the altar thrusts the acts of worship upward toward the threshold of heaven. So in Ezekiel's visionary temple (Ezek 43:17) the altar reaches by gradations to the height of eleven cubits, or about nineteen feet. It is mounted by steps facing east, and the offerer moves from east to west, as if to reenter the gates of Eden (*see* Adam; Garden).

The central purpose of the altar is the blood sacrifice. In the OT the required sacrifice consisted of the blood of animals, which was either sprinkled against the altar or smeared on its horns, and the daily offering of lambs and doves at the altar continued into NT times. The first altar mentioned in the OT is the one Noah builds after the waters of the flood have receded (although the first offering to God is made by Cain and Abel, Gen 4:3–4). On it Noah offers a burnt offering, and the Lord, pleased with the sacrifice, makes his covenant with Noah, giving him and his descendants the right to eat the flesh of animals (Gen 8:20). From that point on, the eating of meat and the forming of covenants are nearly always associated with altars. The covenant between the Lord and the children of Israel is ratified when Moses sprinkles blood against the altar and the people (Gen 24:4–6), and the continuing covenant between the Lord and Israel is marked by the ongoing sacrifices at his altar.

Before the centralization of worship at the Jerusalem temple, there were many local altars. These were made either of earth or of unhewn stone in deliberate contrast to the golden idols of other nations (Ex 20:24–25). It is likely that every slaughtered animal was presented at some kind of altar. Later, when sacrifice was restricted to the single altar in the Jerusalem temple, that altar for burnt offering became the focus of Israelite worship. The bronze-covered acacia altar described in Exodus and the larger altars erected later were the scenes of the great moments in Israelite worship: the burnt offering every morning and evening, and the sin offerings and guilt offerings that removed impurity or made reparation for misdeeds. With the destruction of the temple and the loss of the altar of sacrifice, a great part of Israelite worship was made impossible.

Altars have several meanings beyond their association with blood sacrifice:

1-Monuments. In Genesis monuments are often made in the presence of God. Abraham and Isaac mark their encounters with the Lord by building altars (Gen 12:8; 26:25). In Joshua the Reubenites erect an altar on which no sacrifice will be offered as a sign of the unity of Israel (22:21–29).

2-Places of refuge. By clinging to the "horns of the altar," a fugitive might gain asylum unless his crime was willful murder (Ex 21:14). Joab, for example, seeks sanctuary at the altar, although Solomon does not respect it. The horns of the altar were symbols of both power and protection.

3-Table for a deity. The altar as a table for a deity is clearly evoked in only a few contexts, but these

OT OT. Old Testament
NT NT. New Testament

might simply reveal a significance that was broadly assumed. Ezekiel 41:22 speaks of the altar as "the table that is before the LORD," and the association is repeated in Malachi 1:7: "You place defiled food on my altar. But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible." In this vein we can understand the effect of Noah's sacrifice to the Lord on his newly built altar: the smell of burnt offerings was pleasing to the Lord (Gen 8:21).

New Testament Usage.

In the NT the altar remains the place of sacrifice, but the sacrifice presented at the altar changes radically. "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" are offered when Jesus is presented as an infant at the temple (Lk 2:24), but after that point the NT sees the altar as the scene of a very different sort of sacrifice.

Jesus invokes the altar and the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary as the two principal features of the holy place-a place that has been profaned. His focus is not on the animals offered according to the law but on the blood of those martyrs whose sacrifices prefigure his own, "from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary" (Lk 11:51; Mt 23:35). In Revelation the slaughter offered before the altar is again that of the suffering witnesses, not of the sacrificial beast. The souls of the martyrs "who had been slaughtered for the word of God" speak from under the altar (6:9). There seems, however, to be no altar in the New Jerusalem, just as there is no temple, for the Lamb is enthroned, and there is no need for a place of sacrifice.

In Hebrews, Jesus himself is identified with the altar, and his single sacrifice is contrasted with the repeated offerings at earlier altars: "We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tabernacle have no right to eat" (13:10). This passage is the culmination of the NT tendency to merge all the images of sacrifice into one in Jesus, who is the great high priest, the lamb of sacrifice, and here the altar as well. As altar, priest and sacrifice, Jesus unites all the images associated with biblical altars. He becomes the memorial of the new covenant, the place of sacrifice, and the place of asylum.[7]

[7]Ryken, Leland ; Wilhoit, Jim ; Longman, Tremper ; Duriez, Colin ; Penney, Douglas ; Reid, Daniel G.: *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998, S. 20