

# Remember Whose You Are

*Ezra 2:1–70*

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## Archaeological Moment

On Wednesday evenings during our Bible studies, I often include what I call an “Archaeological Moment” — a brief look at a historical or archaeological find that sheds light on the biblical text. This morning, I want to share two of those finds, because both of them connect directly to what we have been reading in Ezra 1 and 2.

The first is the **Cyrus Cylinder**. Discovered in 1879 in the ruins of ancient Babylon, the Cyrus Cylinder is a clay artifact inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform. It records the decree of Cyrus the Great following his conquest of Babylon, in which he permitted the displaced peoples of the empire to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples. The decree closely parallels what we read in Ezra 1:1–4. In the inscription, Cyrus himself declares: *“I, Cyrus, returned to sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein, and I established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned them to their habitations.”* What was recorded in Scripture is confirmed in stone.

The second find is even more personal. The **Al-Yahudu Tablets** are a collection of over 250 cuneiform texts unearthed in Iraq, dating from the sixth and fifth centuries BC. They document the daily lives of Judean exiles living in Babylon. The name *Al-Yahudu* means “Judah-town,” and that is exactly what it was — a Jewish settlement in the heart of the empire. These tablets record names, trades, legal agreements, and labor records of the Jewish people during and after the exile. Two examples give us a sense of what life was like there.

A document dated 572 BC reads: *“Nabu-ēṭir and Aḥi-yama (My Brother is YHWH), son of Yahu-azār (YHWH has helped), Judean, have agreed: Aḥi-yama leases a plot of date palms from Nabu-ēṭir in Al-Yahudu. The term of lease is five years. The annual rent is 10 kur of barley. If the field is not cultivated, the rent remains due.”* A document from around 550 BC reads: *“Yashuv-Tzadik (The Righteous One Will Return), son of Nattanyahu, Judean, has fulfilled his corvée labor for the king’s canal project. He is registered in Al-Yahudu among the Judean laborers. His service is complete for this season.”*

Notice what is embedded in these names — names like *Ahi-yama*, “My Brother is YHWH,” and *Yashuv-Tzadik*, “The Righteous One Will Return.” These were not names chosen at random. They were confessions. Even in the heart of the Babylonian Empire, Jewish families were naming their children after the God who had not forgotten them, and after the hope that He would bring them home.

And that hope is precisely what God had promised through His prophet. In Jeremiah 29, God had spoken to the exiles:

*“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare... For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:4–10)*

The Al-Yahudu tablets show us that this is exactly what the people did. They planted. They leased fields. They worked. They prayed. They waited. And they named their children after the promise.

Now the return has arrived.

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## **The Census of the Returning Exiles**

Nearly 50,000 people — roughly a third of the Jewish population living in exile — set off on a thousand-mile journey home. The journey would have taken approximately four months. Ezra 2 tells us who they were.

I am not going to read all seventy verses of this chapter — it contains 125 names, and it is the longest chapter in the book of Ezra. But I want to read key portions that I want to draw your attention to.

*“Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.” (Ezra 2:1–2)*

A few notes on these names. Zerubbabel — whose name in Hebrew means “Born in Babylon” — is also called Sheshbazzar in Ezra 1:8, his Babylonian name. He is a descendant of David and will serve as governor of those who return. Jeshua is the high priest. The Nehemiah

mentioned here is not the Nehemiah of the book that bears his name — that Nehemiah had not yet been born. The Mordecai mentioned here is not the Mordecai of the book of Esther. The text then continues with family-by-family tallies: the sons of Parosh, 2,172; the sons of Shephatiah, 372; and so on through verse 20. Beginning at verse 21, the census shifts to list people not only by family but by hometown — the sons of Bethlehem, 123; the men of Netophah, 56 — a reminder that the connection to the land of Judah had not been forgotten.

Then at verse 36, the focus shifts to those connected to the temple:

*“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. The Levites... 74. The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139.” (Ezra 2:36–42)*

When you add up all those connected to the temple — priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants — the total comes to 5,222 people. Nearly one in five of those who returned identified themselves as belonging to the service and worship of the temple.

The census also includes a large company of servants numbering 7,337, along with their animals — 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys — and concludes with the freewill offerings brought to the house of God:

*“Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests’ garments.” (Ezra 2:68–69)*

In today’s dollars, that gold and silver would amount to roughly forty million dollars. And then the chapter closes quietly: *“Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.” (Ezra 2:70)*

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## **Where Is God at Work in This Passage?**

Because this is God’s Word, whenever we study it we ought to ask: where is God at work in this passage? What has His fingerprints on it?

The most obvious answer is the return itself. Jeremiah prophesied that the exiles would come back, and here they are — that was our focus last week in Ezra 1. Another answer is the forty

million dollars laid before the house of the Lord. Seventy years earlier, these people went into exile with nothing. Now 50,000 return with an offering of that magnitude. The Lord has been with them.

But there is a third place where I see God at work in this passage, and it is the one I want to focus on this morning. It is the miracle of identity. The people taken captive from Judah have maintained who they are — as the covenant people of God — even across seventy years of exile.

Look again at verse 1. Twice the word *captive* appears: “the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive.” God’s Word is stressing something there. These people were taken as captives and lived in captivity. Think about everything they lost.

They lost their nation. The Kingdom of Judah was destroyed — it simply ceased to exist. They lost their land. The promised land was at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant, and they had lived in it since the time of Joshua — roughly a thousand years. Now it was gone. They lost the temple — the place where the glory of God dwelt, where the high priest made atonement, where the visible presence of the covenant resided. There are 613 commandments in the Torah; 272 of them — nearly half — are directly connected to the temple. Without it, the full practice of the law was simply impossible. And beyond all of that, they lost their possessions, their communities, their livelihoods, loved ones, parents, children, their freedom — they lost everything.

And on top of all that loss, Babylon — like Assyria before it — had a deliberate policy of erasing the identity of conquered peoples. We see it plainly in the book of Daniel. The young men of Judah were given new Babylonian names: Daniel became Belteshazzar, Hananiah became Shadrach, Mishael became Meshach. They were educated for three years in Babylonian learning. They were pressed to adopt an unclean diet. They were commanded to bow before idols. They were forbidden to pray to the Lord. Everything was designed to make them forget who they were. And that is precisely why the book of Daniel is so beautiful — Daniel holds on to his identity as a man of the covenant through fiery furnaces and lions’ dens alike.

That same miracle — the miracle of preserved identity — is what I want us to see in Ezra 2.

Seventy years after the first deportation. Fifty years after the destruction of the temple. And yet: priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants come walking out of Babylon. Nearly twenty percent of the returning exiles identify themselves as connected to the care and worship of a temple that no longer exists.

Think carefully about what that means. Most of these people had never seen the temple. They had been born in exile. They had lived their entire lives in captivity, holding an identity tied to a place they had never visited, a worship they had never experienced, a role they had never yet fulfilled. Those few who might have seen the temple would have seen it as small children. And

yet here they are — priests who know they are priests, singers who know they were born to sing, gatekeepers who know their post.

Can you imagine the family table in Babylon? Gathered around a fire in Judah-town, an old grandfather beginning to speak: “*You belong to the house of Levi. You are a descendant of Asaph. Your great-grandfather stood at the gate of the temple of God.*” For two generations, under a foreign empire, with no visible reason to continue, they held on to who they were.

That is the miracle — not just the return to the land, but the return of a people who never stopped believing what God had said about them.

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## **Remember Whose You Are**

And it is this same miracle I pray for us today. Because we, too, are living in our own kind of Babylon. We have not been marched across a desert into a foreign empire — but we are, as 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11 describe us, exiles and sojourners in a world that is not our home. And the world around us is pressing identities onto us that differ from the one God has given.

Our world tells us: you are what you do — your career, your productivity. You are what you have — your house, your car, your savings. You are what you have achieved — your degrees, your awards. You are what has happened to you — your trauma, your failures. You are what you look like. You are your relationship status. You are your political affiliation. You are your ethnicity, your gender, your desires, what you consume, what you post, what you perform.

Our world tells us to look inward to define ourselves, outward to compare ourselves, and online to validate ourselves. It preaches that identity is something you must construct, defend, and constantly perform. We live in a time with more options than ever — and less clarity than ever. We can be anything, and yet many people feel like nothing.

That is why this ancient census matters more than we might think. It tells the story of a people who did not forget who they were — even in exile. They did not let Babylon rename them. They did not disappear into the empire. Their names, their tribes, their roles — all of it was preserved, because God had named them, and they believed it.

How did they do it? How did the exiles maintain their identity across two generations in Babylon? And how do we, as God’s people living in our own age of exile, receive and keep the identity He has given us? I want to share five truths about identity that we can see in the exiles 2,500 years ago, and that are just as true for us today.

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## 1. Core Identity Is Received, Not Invented

The first truth is the most radical one in our current cultural moment: we are not the authors of who we are. We are the recipients.

Our culture says the opposite. Look inward, discover your deepest desires, express them outward. *Be true to yourself. Follow your truth.* But that path is exhausting, and it is unstable — because what happens when your feelings shift, when your dreams fall apart, when the life you have built comes undone? If your identity is something you construct, it is only as strong as your ability to maintain it. And when you can no longer maintain it, when loss or suffering strips it away, you are left with nothing solid to stand on. It is building a house on sand.

That is exactly why the biblical view of identity is such good news. It is not something you achieve — it is something you receive. Given by your Creator. Rooted not in your performance but in His promise. In Christ, you are declared, called, and named — not by effort, but by grace.

We see this in Ezra 2. These people did not reinvent themselves as Persians. They returned with names and roles handed down — ultimately, not by their grandparents alone, but by God. Priests. Levites. Singers. Gatekeepers. Even without a temple, they knew who they were — because God had named them.

And if you are in Christ, the same God has spoken over you. You are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). You are a child of God (John 1:12). You are chosen and beloved (Colossians 3:12). You did not earn these names. They are gifts — freely, fully, finally — because of who Christ is and what He has done.

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## 2. Know Your Narrative

If our identity is received from God, the next question is: how do we remember it — especially when the pressures of life begin to wear us down?

The answer is that we must know the story we are part of. That is what Ezra 2 shows us. All those names and tribes are not merely census data — they are covenant reminders. They trace a story that runs back through David, through Moses, through Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. They are saying: you are not lost. You are part of something far bigger than Babylon.

God's people kept that story alive through the Word — through genealogies preserved, promises rehearsed, and Scriptures read aloud, even in exile. The temple was gone, but the Word kept speaking. And it still does.

One detail from the Al-Yahudu tablets is striking in this regard. As the seventy-year prophetic timeline began to draw near — as 536 BC approached — there was a measurable surge in

Yahwistic names among the Jewish population in Babylon. The proportion of names containing *Ya*, *Yahu*, or *Yama* — all forms of the divine name — rose from something like twenty-five percent of recorded names to over forty percent. People were naming their children after the God who had promised to bring them home. A revival of identity was taking place, rooted in the sure hope of return. The Word of God, working quietly over decades, was keeping them alive as a people.

Scripture does the same for us. In a world saturated with counter-stories — about success, beauty, status, and self — we need to be saturated in God’s story. This Book does not just tell us what to do; it tells us who we are. It reminds us of the God who created us, the Savior who redeems us, and the Spirit who now lives in us. Without it, we forget. We start living like Babylon. But when we return again and again to Scripture, we hear our Father say: *You are mine.*

What story is shaping your life?

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### **3. Know Your Tribe**

Another way God’s people sustained their identity in exile — and how we sustain it today — is by remaining embedded in the community of faith. Ezra 2 is not a list of isolated individuals. It is a record of families, clans, towns, and shared vocations. People are named in connection to others: sons of so-and-so, men of such-and-such a town, sons of the gatekeepers. Identity in the Bible is never a solo project — it is always communal.

No one returned from exile alone. They returned as a people. That challenges something deep in our modern mindset, which often tells us to find ourselves by separating from others, by striking out independently. But biblical identity does not work in isolation. We discover who we are in relationship with God and with His people.

That is why the church matters — not just attending, but belonging. Being known. Serving. Worshiping together. Bearing one another’s burdens. Peter writes to the scattered church using language that is thoroughly communal: “*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.*” (1 Peter 2:9) Every one of those identity markers is corporate. They are meant to be lived out together. So let me ask: who is your tribe? Are you walking with the people of God — or are you trying to live your Christian life disconnected from the body that Christ died to create?

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#### **4. Live Your Identity**

Identity is not only something you receive and remember — it is something you live. The people returning in Ezra 2 did not simply list their titles. They came prepared to inhabit their callings. The priests returned to offer sacrifice. The Levites returned to serve. The singers returned to lead worship. The gatekeepers returned to their posts. They were not just carrying names — they were prepared to live into them.

Jesus said, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (John 8:31–32) Abiding is not a feeling. It is a practice — the daily decision to live as who you truly are in Christ. Our habits are always forming us into someone. The question is whether they are forming us into the people God has declared us to be.

What are your habits shaping you into? Do your daily patterns reinforce your identity in Christ, or are they quietly pressing you into the image of the empire around you?

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#### **5. Walk Through Trials with Steadfast Hope**

Finally, if we are to hold fast to our identity as God’s people, we must learn to walk through trials without letting go of hope.

The people listed in Ezra 2 had walked through deep pain. Most of those who returned had been born in exile. Others had grown old longing for Jerusalem without ever seeing it rebuilt. These were families that had endured loss, displacement, and disappointment for two generations. And yet — they returned. Why? Because they still believed in God’s promise. They walked through trial with hope, and that hope sustained their identity when everything else had been stripped away.

We see it in those names — *Yashuv-Tzadik*, “The Righteous One Will Return.” They were confessing, even in their naming of children, that the promise was still real. The sure hope of return did not make the exile painless — but it kept them from losing themselves in it.

The same is true for us. Our confidence in the Lord shapes how we face disappointment, illness, uncertainty, and grief. Like the exiles, we walk through trials with our eyes fixed on what God has promised. We endure not because life is easy, but because our hope is anchored in someone who does not change.

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## **Come Home**

The people of Ezra 2 returned because their hearts were anchored in the promises of God. They did not let Babylon name them. They remembered who they were — and more than that, they remembered *whose* they were.

So must we. We live in a world that seeks to define us by our failures, our status, our image, or our wounds. But none of those things gets the final word. God does. And He has already spoken: *You are mine. You are a new creation. You are my child. You are my beloved.*

That is who you are.

So let me ask you this morning: Have you forgotten? Have you begun to believe what the world says about you? Have you let your past, your pain, or your performance define your identity? Then come home. Come back to the God who does not merely know your name — He gave it to you. Come back to the One who calls you His, not because of what you have done, but because of what Christ has done.

Come back to the Word, to the church, to the truth, to the hope that does not disappoint.

Remember whose you are.