

**Supplemental Notes:**

*The Books  
of  
Ezra &  
Nehemiah*

*compiled  
by  
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## Acknowledgments

These notes have been assembled from speaking notes and related materials which had been compiled from a number of classic and contemporary commentaries and other sources detailed in the bibliography, as well as other articles and publications of Koinonia House. While we have attempted to include relevant endnotes and other references, we apologize for any errors or oversights.

The complete recordings of the sessions, as well as supporting diagrams, maps, etc., are also available in various audiovisual formats from the publisher.

## Audio Listing

### Ezra 1 - 3

Decree of Cyrus permits Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple; the altar is set up and sacrifice restored; the foundations of the Temple are laid.

### Ezra 4 - 7

Nehemiah's unselfish example; the rebuilding is opposed; the Temple is completed; Ezra is introduced.

### Ezra 8 - 10

Ezra sends for the Levites and Nethinim; Ezra proclaims a fast for the Lord's protection; God's people fail to separate from surrounding nations; reconciliation to God through confession and separation.

### Nehemiah 1 - 2

Nehemiah prays for Israel and makes his request of King Artaxerxes.

### Nehemiah 3 - 5

The rebuilding begins. A defense against a conspiracy; poverty and famine.

### Nehemiah 6 - 8

False rumors about Nehemiah; walls finished; a list of those who returned; the Law is read.

### Nehemiah 9 - 11

Ezra's prayer; the covenant signed; the repopulation of Jerusalem.

### Nehemiah 12 - 13

Establishment of priests and levites; dedication of the city walls; Nehemiah's reforms.

## Session 1

### The Book of Ezra

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (and Esther) cover about 100 years, closing the Old Testament historical books. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles closed with the Southern Kingdom (“Judah”) going into captivity. These post-exile books record the return from Babylon after its fall to the Persians under Cyrus, the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem, and the reestablishment of the national life.

Through the protection and help of three Persian kings (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes) and the leadership of such great and godly Jews as Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra, the second Temple was completed and true worship was restored in Jerusalem.

The first six chapters of the book cover events during the first two or three years of the reign of Cyrus (538–530 B.C.) and the first six years of the reign of Darius I (521–486 B.C.). The last four chapters (plus 4:7-23) record events during the first part of the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–423 B.C.).

(No mention is made of Cambyses (530–522 B.C.) or of Smerdis (522 B.C.), and only one verse (4:6) mentions Xerxes (486–465 B.C.). Thus, although eighty important years of Achaemenid Persian history are spanned by the Book of Ezra, practically nothing is said of the fifty-eight-year period between 515 B.C. and 457 B.C., during which time the Persians made two great but futile efforts to conquer Greece, and the events of the book of Esther occurred.)

As the scene opens in Ezra 1, the Jews have just seen the overthrow of the hated Babylonian Empire, in 539 B.C., by Cyrus the Persian. And Daniel has just been put into a place of honor by Darius the Mede, whom Cyrus appointed to rule over the Babylonian territories (Dan 5:30–6:3).

### Background: The Fall of Babylon

#### The Rise of Cyrus

Cyrus II (“the Great,” 559-530 B.C.) was the founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire that continued for two centuries until the time of Alexander the Great (331 B.C.). Cyrus’ father, Cambyses I (600-559 B.C.), was king of Anshan, a region in eastern Elam. His mother was Mandane,

a daughter of Astyages, king of Media (585 -550 B.C.) When Cambyses I died in 559 B.C., Cyrus inherited the throne of Anshan and, after unifying the Persian people, attacked his father-in-law, the weak and corrupt Astyages. The Median general Harpagus, whom Astyages had previously wronged, deserted the king and brought his army to the side of the young Cyrus. Astyages was soon captured and the Persians took the capital city of Ecbatana in 550 B.C. without a battle. (*This was also to be the result at Babylon 11 years later.*) Cyrus succeeded in welding the Medes and Persians into a unified nation. Moving swiftly to the west, he absorbed all the Median territories as far as the Halys River in Asia Minor.

When Croesus, the fabulously wealthy king of Lydia, refused to recognize the sovereignty of Medo-Persia, Cyrus defeated him in battle and took over his empire in 546 B.C. Seven years later, he was ready to launch the great assault against Babylon itself.

Babylon was in no position to resist a Medo-Persian invasion in the year 539 B.C. During the preceding fourteen years, Nabonidus the king had not so much as visited the capital city, leaving the administration of the metropolis to his profligate son, Belshazzar, to whom he also “entrusted the kingship.”<sup>1</sup> Nabonidus further weakened the empire by incurring the displeasure of the powerful Babylonian priesthood.

Toward the end of September, the armies of Cyrus, under the able command of Ugbaru, district governor of Gutium, attacked Opis on the Tigris River and defeated the Babylonians. This gave the Persians control of the vast canal system of Babylon.

On October 10, Sippar was taken without a battle and Nabonidus fled. Two days later, on October 12, 539 B.C., Ugbaru’s troops were able to enter Babylon *without a battle*. Herodotus describes how the Persians diverted the River Euphrates into a canal upriver so that the water level dropped “to the height of the middle of a man’s thigh,” which thus rendered the flood defenses useless and enabled the invaders to march through the river bed to enter by night.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Handwriting on the Wall

The famed incident of the “handwriting on the wall” (one of the many incidents in Daniel that continues as an idiom in our language today) is colorfully detailed in Daniel Chapter 5.

## God's Personal Letter to Cyrus

Cyrus was able to boast that the conquest was almost bloodless with no significant damage to the city. Daniel (who lived at least until the third year of Cyrus) presented Cyrus with the writings of Isaiah<sup>3</sup> that included a letter addressed to Cyrus by name, written 150 years earlier: Isaiah 44:27-45:7.

The famous Steele of Cyrus:

*...without any battle, he entered the town, sparing any calamity...I returned to sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a longtime...and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations.*

This cylinder, discovered by Hormuzd Rassam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, can presently be seen in the British Museum in London.

The Jews were actually encouraged by Cyrus to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple (2 Chr 36:22; Ezra 1:1-4). Furthermore, he gave them back the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Solomon's Temple and he contributed financially to the construction of their second temple. About 50,000 Jews responded to this royal proclamation and returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. A year later, on July 23, 537 B.C., the return of Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel got under way just seventy years after the captivity began, just as Jeremiah had predicted.

The foundations of the second Temple were laid by the spring of 536 B.C. It was a successor, Artaxerxes I (465 - 423 B.C.), who issued the specific decree concerning the rebuilding of the *walls* of Jerusalem. This decree is the trigger for one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Bible: the famous "Seventy Sevens" of Daniel 9.

## The Decline of Babylon: The Achaemenids

Cyrus claimed the title "King of Babylon" and made his son Cambyses to act as his viceroy in Babylon in 538 B.C. Things remained peaceful until his death in 522 B.C.

In the reign of Darius II (521-486 B.C.) a further return of exiles to Jerusalem was allowed. His rule did not go unchallenged and several local Babylonians controlled the city for varying periods, usually taking the

throne-name of "Nebuchadnezzar" to bolster their claims. Thus Nidintu-Bel ("Nebuchadnezzar III") held sway October-December 522 B.C. Araka ("Nebuchadnezzar IV") was put to death November 27, 521 B.C. Darius introduced a rigid royal control with local administrative reforms aimed at curbing corruption and establishing a courier system between Babylon and other capitals. He built himself a palace (*Apadana*), a house for his crown prince, and an arsenal.

In the fourth year of Xerxes (485-465 B.C.) the Babylonians made another attempt to gain their independence. Bel-shimanni and Shamash-eriba claimed the throne in 482 and this revolt was suppressed with much cruelty and damage to Babylon. On his visit in 460 B.C., Herodotus reported that the city was virtually intact, however. Xerxes and his successors (Artaxerxes I - Darius III, 464-332) had little to spare for Babylon amid their lengthy and expensive wars with Greece. Irrigation work was neglected and the diversion of trade to the main Persian road from Sardis to Susa aided the decline of the city's influence.

## The Rise of Greece

On October 1, 331 B.C. Alexander (III, "the Great") was welcomed by the Babylonians when he entered the city after his victory over the Medes at Gaugamela. He was proclaimed king and on his return from the east nine years later he planned extensive renovations including the creation of a port for the city large enough for 1000 warships. Though the site of Esagila was cleared, work ceased on Alexander's ambitious plans at his death in Babylon on June 13, 323 B.C. The career of Alexander is detailed in Daniel 8; his successors, in Daniel 11.

His four key generals divided it among themselves: Cassander took over Greece and Macedonia; Lysimachus took Thrace and Bithynia; Seleucus took Syria, Babylonia, and portions all the way to India; Ptolemy took Egypt, Palestine, and Arabia. The subsequent struggles among his generals did not leave the city unscathed. Seleucus, who claimed the title of king in 305 B.C. was acknowledged from 311 when all documents were dated by his "era." The foundation of a new rival capital city, Selucia, on the River Tigris expedited the decline of the ancient metropolis. The dispersal of Jews from Babylon is reported by Josephus.<sup>4</sup>

## Atrophy and Decay

The city subsequently underwent a gradual decay, even though the ruins remained occupied. Documents on clay from a school for priests

in the city continued at least until A.D. 100 Early in the first century A.D. a colony of merchants from Palmyra were still trying to make a go of it.

## God's Personal Letter to Cyrus (Isaiah 44:27-45:12)

### Chapter 44:

27] That saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers:

Dry up thy rivers: the method used to conquer Babylon.

28] That saith of Cyrus, [He is] my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.

Cyrus is predicted by name. Also study Josiah in 1 Kgs 13:2 written 300 years before his birth, and Dan 11 300 years before its events.

My shepherd: Cf. Ezra 1:2-4. When Isaiah wrote this Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed. Yet, here he notes that even the foundation will be rebuilt (implying at the time of writing that it will be destroyed).

### Chapter 45:

1] Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut;

“Anointed”: used for a Gentile king! Subdued nations - 46 nations (among which were the Medes, Babylonians, Lydians, Carians, Caunians, Lysians, Bactrians, Sacae, Parthians, Hyracanians, Chorasmians, Sogdians, Arians of Herat, Zarangians, Arachosians, Satagydians, Gandarians).

“Loose the loins of kings” - Cf. Dan 5:6.

“Gates not being shut” - was the key to their battleless victory.

“Two-leaved gates” - the double gates of Babylon.

4] For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me.

Written 150 years before and calls Cyrus by name, and outlines tactics used to conquer city. History records Cyrus' response: he reversed the policies of his predecessors by releasing the captives to go to their own homelands (see Ezra, Nehemiah for study of those who return to build

Temple). See *Daniel's Seventy Weeks* for details on the prophecy starting with decree to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem.

6] That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that [there is] none beside me. I [am] the LORD, and [there is] none else.

None other. In contrast to Zend-Avesta (Zoroustrian dualism - as in *Star Wars*, etc.).

7] I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these [things].

Gen 1:4 separated light from darkness. “Evil”—עָוֶן—means “adversity,” calamity. The consequences of sin. God didn't create sin (Hab 1:13; 2 Tim 2:13; Titus 1:2; Jas 1:13; 1 Jn 1:5), but he assures the consequences of sin.

8] Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together; I the LORD have created it.

“drop down” or distill. Sounds like a description of a black hole!

9] Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! [Let] the potsherd [strive] with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?

Israel is warned not to question God (Cf Jer 18:1-10; Rom 9:20, 21; Ps 2:9).

11] Thus saith the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me.

God uses His authentication of His message by describing things yet to happen, prophecy. Precisely, right 100% of the time!

12] I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, [even] my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded.

“stretched out the heavens” - like a curtain, space-time curvilinear domain. (See *Stretching the Heavens* for further information about the universe and 10 dimensions.)

## Ezra 1-3

Josephus,<sup>5</sup> Jerome,<sup>6</sup> and the Talmud<sup>7</sup> considered the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah as one. Also the Hebrew Bible has the books together as a

single work. However, there is evidence that the two books were originally separate. The lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are basically the same. This would militate against the idea that the two books were originally one, for it would seem strange to repeat the same list in one volume. The name Ezra for the title of the first work comes from the major person in the second half of the book, who also appears in Chapters 8 and 12 of the Book of Nehemiah.

(The name of the Book of Ezra is complicated by the way the Septuagint named some of its books. In the Septuagint the name Esdras (Ezra) refers to a number of books. First Esdras (also called Esdras A) is an apocryphal book. Second Esdras (Esdras B) contains the canonical Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, sometimes Nehemiah is called Esdras C (or G if one accurately reflects the third Heb. letter, which is *gimel*). The Apocrypha has still another Esdras, alternately called II Esdras or IV Esdras.)

## Canonicity

The Book of Ezra has been accepted as canonical since before the time of the Septuagint (ca. 200 B.C.), which may have been only about 250 years after the book was written. Few scholars in modern times have therefore questioned the canonicity of the Book of Ezra. Though Ezra is not referred to in the book as having written it, he has long been supposed to be the book's author. Internal evidence points to this fact for in 7:27-9:15 the author refers to himself in the first person. Hebrew tradition also has considered Ezra the author. He was a priest and a scribe of the Law (7:21).

Undoubtedly Ezra had documents at his disposal for the historical sections in chapters 1-6. Many Bible students have noted similarities between the style of Ezra and the style of 1 and 2 Chronicles. Therefore some suppose that Ezra was the author of all three.

The Book of Ezra covers two distinct time periods. Chapters 1-6 cover the 23 years from the edict of Cyrus to the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (538-515 B.C.). Chapters 7-10 deal with the events after Ezra returned from Babylon (458 B.C.). (The two exceptions are 4:6, which refers to an event in the reign of Xerxes (485-465) and verses 7-23, which parenthetically include a letter written later during the reign of Artaxerxes (464-424).)

The time of writing of the completed book could not have been earlier than about 450 B.C. (when the events recorded in 10:17-44 took place). Ezra was a contemporary of Nehemiah (Neh 8:1-9; 12:36).

## Historical Setting

The setting of the book is the postexilic era when the faithful Israelites were returning from Babylon to Judah so that they could reestablish their temple worship. In all the books written during the postexilic period the temple and temple worship are vital subjects. (These include 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—all except Esther, in which the people were unfaithful to the command of the Lord given through Isaiah and Jeremiah to return to the land after the Captivity.)

The people who returned to the land of promise were publicly acknowledging that they believed God would reestablish the nation and usher in a time of kingdom blessing. There were three returns from Babylon to the land of Israel (in 538, 458, and 444 B.C.), just as there had been three deportations from the land to Babylon (605, 597, and 586 B.C.).

The first return was led by Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6; Hag.; Zech.) in 538 B.C. The rebuilding of the temple was of vital importance for this group. The second return was under Ezra (Ezra 7-10) in 458 B.C. The people needed reforming; they needed to return to their covenant obligations. The third return was led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C. Nehemiah's concerns were to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and, as in Ezra's time, to lead the people back to obedience to the Lord.

The Book of Malachi was probably written in Nehemiah's time. The events in the Book of Esther occurred between the events recorded in Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.

## The Text

Nearly a fourth of the Book of Ezra was written in Aramaic; the rest was written in Hebrew. The Aramaic sections (67 of 280 verses) are 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26. The material in these verses was mainly copied from official correspondence for which Aramaic was the standard language (*lingua franca*) of the day.

## Ezra 1

- 1] Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and *put it* also in writing, saying,

Cyrus, the king of the extensive Persian realm, drafted a proclamation that allowed the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild their temple. Cyrus made the proclamation in his first year (538 B.C.). This was the first year of his reign over Babylon, but he had been king over other territories for more than 20 years. He had been in power since 559 when he became the king of Anshan. Then he became king of Medo-Persia about 550 B.C. He conquered Babylon in October 539, and became the king of Babylon, a title of honor denoting the highest position in the civilized world.

As is evidenced from Cyrus' attitude concerning the God of Israel (whom he did not worship) he was not a true believer in YHWH. Cyrus' concern was to establish strong buffer states around his empire which would be loyal to him. Also by having his subject peoples resettled in their own countries he hoped to have the gods in various parts of his empire praying for him to his gods Bel and Nebo.

The fulfilling of Jeremiah's words (Jer 29:10; cf. Jer 25:11-12) was totally God's doing. It was in 605 that Jeremiah had prophesied the seventy-year captivity of Judah (Jer 25:12; cf. 25:1). And it was this prophecy that caused Daniel to pray for the deliverance of his people in the year of Babylon's fall (Dan 9:2). The seventy years of Jewish captivity in Babylon were about to end.

The edict came about because the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus. The Hebrew words translated "stirred [up] the spirit" were a favorite expression of Biblical writers in the postexilic period (Ezra 1:5; 1 Chr 5:26; 2 Chr 21:16, "aroused"; 36:22; Jer 51:11; Hag 1:14). This shows the sovereign hand of God behind the events of history. This decree was filed in Ecbatana, where Darius I discovered it twenty years later (Ezra 6:2).

- 2] Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah.

"The God of heaven" (v. 2) is also the God of Israel who Cyrus said was in Jerusalem. "The God of heaven" is a title of God used 9 times in Ezra (1:2; 5:11-12; 6:9-10; 7:12, 21, 23 [twice])—more than in any other Bible book—and 10 times in other exilic and postexilic books (2 Chr 36:23; Neh 1:4-5; 2:4, 20; Dan 2:18-19, 28, 37, 44). Elsewhere in the Old Testament that phrase occurs only four times (Gen 24:3, 7; Ps 136:26; Jn 1:9). It points to God's sovereignty. He is the One who made heaven (Gen 14:19, 22; 2 Chr 2:12; Ps 115:15), who is in heaven (Deut 4:39; 1 Kgs 8:30, 39, 43, 49; Ecc 5:2), and who reigns from His throne in heaven (Isa 66:1). Though Cyrus

was a monarch over an extensive empire, YHWH is far greater for He rules from heaven.

- 3] Who *is there* among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he *is* the God,) which *is* in Jerusalem.

Cyrus' decree is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:23. Also the decree was filed in Ecbatana, where Darius I found it about 520-518 B.C. (Ezra 6:1-5). God had promised the Jewish remnant that He would raise up Cyrus as His servant to restore the fortunes of His people (Isa 44:28; 45:1, 13). Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, the Prophet Isaiah referred to Cyrus by name about 150 years before the king made his decree. Josephus wrote that Cyrus was shown the prophecy in Isaiah 44:28 and wanted to fulfill it.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis in Ezra 1:2-3 on the temple sets the tone for this and other postexilic books. The temple was of utmost importance in the life of the people of Israel. Without the temple there could be no sacrificial system, which was the nation's lifeblood in its relationship to God.

- 4] And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that *is* in Jerusalem.

Cyrus' edict also instructed the returnees' neighbors in Persia to give them the equivalent of money (silver and gold), material goods, livestock, and freewill offerings (cf. v. 6). The freewill offerings were for the temple and the other gifts were for the people themselves. This is reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt when God miraculously took the nation out of bondage and had the Egyptians aid them with gifts of silver, gold, and clothing (Ex 3:22; 11:2; 12:35). Now God was effecting a new "Exodus," again bringing His people who had been in bondage back into the land of promise, much as He had done under Moses and Joshua. The people had been in bondage to Babylon because of their failure to keep their covenantal obligations, which Moses had given them during the first Exodus. Once more God was miraculously working in the life of the nation.

- 5] Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all *them* whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which *is* in Jerusalem.

The religious leaders (priests and Levites) along with the heads of the two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) that had been taken into exile by the

Babylonians spearheaded the return to Israel to rebuild the temple, the house of the LORD. The Jews who returned totaled 49,897 (2:64-65).

- 6] And all they that *were* about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all *that* was willingly offered.

The neighbors of the returnees obeyed the king's decree by contributing to the effort.

- 7] Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

Even Cyrus contributed to the return by giving back the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD.

- 8] Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

*Mithredath* is a Persian name, and the word for treasurer (*gizbar*) is also Persian.

- 9] And this *is* the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives,  
10] Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second *sort* four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand.

These were the dishes, pans, bowls, and other articles Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Jerusalem temple in 605 B.C. (Dan 1:2), in 597 B.C. (2 Kgs 24:13), and in 586 B.C. (2 Kgs 25:14-15; Jer 27:16; 52:18-19; cf. Ezra 5:14; 6:5; Dan 5:2-3) and placed in a temple in Babylon, perhaps the Esagila temple built in honor of the god Marduk.

- 11] All the vessels of gold and of silver *were* five thousand and four hundred. All *these* did Sheshbazzar bring up with *them* of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

In Ezra 1:9-10 the articles total 2,499 but in verse 11 the total number of gold and silver items was 5,400. Why the difference? Surely Ezra would not be so foolish as to make a major mistake such as that when he so carefully wrote the rest of the book under the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Even if one were to assume (as do many critics) that a redactor brought together in verses 9-11 two variant traditions, it would seem likely that Ezra would try to reconcile them in some way. It seems better to suppose

Ezra first listed some of the items, perhaps the bigger and more valuable ones (vv. 9-10), then referred to the total number of items both the larger and more valuable and the smaller and less significant (v. 11). Another problem pertains to Sheshbazzar (v. 11), who was called the prince of Judah (v. 8). Four views about his identity are suggested:

1) Some feel that Sheshbazzar was a Persian name for Zerubbabel. Both are said to have laid the foundation of the temple (3:8-10; 5:16). Zerubbabel, which means "begotten in Babel," and was a grandson of King Jehoiachin who had been deported to Babylon but had been released from confinement (2 Kgs 25:27-30) (Jeconiah; 1 Chr 3:17-19) and an ancestor of Joseph (Mt 1:12). Zerubbabel's relationship to Jehoiachin would explain the title "the prince of Judah." The fact that 1 Chr 3:19 calls him the son of Pedaiah instead of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2) suggests that Shealtiel died childless and Pedaiah contracted a levirate marriage with his brother's widow.

If Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar were two names of the same person, it is strange that he was never again referred to by the name Sheshbazzar except in Ezra 5:15-16.

2) A second view is that this man was a Jew who was appointed governor by Cyrus but who died shortly after arriving in Palestine and was replaced by Zerubbabel. Though plausible, no solid evidence exists for this view.

3) A third view is that Sheshbazzar was the Shenazzar in 1 Chr 3:17, and therefore was Zerubbabel's uncle.

4) A fourth view is that Sheshbazzar was a Persian official who was sent to oversee the use of the king's money and to make sure the king's wishes were carried out. It has been suggested that because Sheshbazzar was a Persian official the returnees later referred to him (Ezra 5:15-16) to support their claim of legitimacy for their building project.

## Ezra 2

- 1] Now these *are* the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city;

The list is divided into several parts. All of the people of the province (i.e., of Judah) returned to their hometowns (v. 1).



- 2] Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

Ezra first recorded the 11 civil and religious leaders who were prominent. [Nehemiah 7:7 records 12 names rather than 11 (cf. Ezra 2:2). (Three names have different spellings. In verse 2 Seraiah, Reelaiah, and Rehum are probably the same persons as Azariah, Raamiah, and Nehum, respectively, in Neh 7:7.) Nahamani's name, not in Ezra's list, may have been dropped out by an early scribal error in the copying of the original manuscripts. It is likely that 12 men would have originally been listed as symbolic heads of the 12-tribe nation (cf. 12 male goats offered for the 12 tribes of Israel, Ezra 6:17).]

Jeshua was the high priest; his name is spelled Joshua in the Books of Haggai and Zechariah. He was a grandson of Seraiah (cf. 1 Chr 6:14 with Hag 1:1), a priest whom Nebuchadnezzar killed at Riblah (2 Kgs 25:18-21).

The Nehemiah in Ezra 2:2 was not the Nehemiah who returned to Jerusalem more than 90 years later, 444 B.C. Nor was the Mordecai here Esther's cousin (Esther 2:5-7), who lived in Susa about 60 years after the Jews' first return. Then Ezra listed people by their 18 families and clans, totaling 15,604 (2:3-20).

- 3] The children of Parosh, two thousand an hundred seventy and two.  
4] The children of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy and two.  
5] The children of Arah, seven hundred seventy and five.  
6] The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua *and* Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve.  
7] The children of Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four.  
8] The children of Zattu, nine hundred forty and five.  
9] The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and threescore.  
10] The children of Bani, six hundred forty and two.  
11] The children of Bebai, six hundred twenty and three.  
12] The children of Azgad, a thousand two hundred twenty and two.  
13] The children of Adonikam, six hundred sixty and six.  
14] The children of Bigvai, two thousand fifty and six.  
15] The children of Adin, four hundred fifty and four.  
16] The children of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety and eight.  
17] The children of Bezai, three hundred twenty and three.  
18] The children of Jorah, an hundred and twelve.  
19] The children of Hashum, two hundred twenty and three.  
20] The children of Gibbar, ninety and five.

Next came a listing of inhabitants (totaling 8,540) from 21 towns and villages (vv. 21-35).

- 21] The children of Bethlehem, an hundred twenty and three.  
22] The men of Netophah, fifty and six.  
23] The men of Anathoth, an hundred twenty and eight.  
24] The children of Azmaveth, forty and two.  
25] The children of Kirjatharim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty and three.  
26] The children of Ramah and Gaba, six hundred twenty and one.  
27] The men of Michmas, an hundred twenty and two.  
28] The men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty and three.  
29] The children of Nebo, fifty and two.  
30] The children of Magbish, an hundred fifty and six.  
31] The children of the other Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four.  
32] The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty.  
33] The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty and five.  
34] The children of Jericho, three hundred forty and five.  
35] The children of Senaah, three thousand and six hundred and thirty.  
36] The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy and three.

Then the priests (4,289 of them) were listed (vv. 36-39), followed by 341 Levites which included singers and gatekeepers (vv. 40-42).

- 37] The children of Immer, a thousand fifty and two.  
38] The children of Pashur, a thousand two hundred forty and seven.  
39] The children of Harim, a thousand and seventeen.  
40] The Levites: the children of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the children of Hodaviah, seventy and four.  
41] The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred twenty and eight.  
42] The children of the porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, *in* all an hundred thirty and nine.

The temple servants (vv. 43-54) and descendants of the royal servants (vv. 55-58) totaled 392.

- 43] The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth,

The Nethinims were probably descendants of the Gibeonites, whom Joshua made subject to taskwork (Josh 9).

- 44] The children of Keros, the children of Siaha, the children of Padon,  
45] The children of Lebanah, the children of Hagabah, the children of Akkub,  
46] The children of Hagab, the children of Shalmal, the children of Hanan,  
47] The children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, the children of Reaiah,  
48] The children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, the children of Gazzam,  
49] The children of Uzza, the children of Paseah, the children of Besai,

- 50] The children of Asnah, the children of Mehunim, the children of Nephusim,  
 51] The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur,  
 52] The children of Bazluth, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha,  
 53] The children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Thamah,  
 54] The children of Neziah, the children of Hatipha.  
 55] The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Peruda,  
 56] The children of Jaalah, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel,  
 57] The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Ami.  
 58] All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants, *were* three hundred ninety and two.  
 59] And these *were* they which went up from Telmelah, Telharsa, Cherub, Addan, and Immer: but they could not shew their father's house, and their seed, whether they *were* of Israel:  
 60] The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two.  
 61] And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai; which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name:  
 62] These sought their register *among* those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood.  
 63] And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.

The 652 returnees who could not clearly trace their ancestry (vv. 59-63) were listed last.

“The Tirshatha”: This was a Persian title, possibly meaning “his excellency.” It here refers to the governor, Zerubbabel. In Neh 8:9 the same title is applied to Nehemiah.

The priests who could not delineate their genealogies were not allowed by the governor (possibly a reference to Sheshbazzar [cf. comments on 1:8] or to Zerubbabel) to eat the most sacred food till a priest was ministering with the Urim and Thummim. The Urim and Thummim are designated as part of the high priest's ceremonial dress. (cf. Ex 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21; Deut 33:8; 1 Sam 28:6; Neh 7:65). They were used in some way to determine the will of God. But it seems that God's will could no longer be determined in this way after the departure of the Shekinah glory in 592 B.C. (Ezek 8–11).

Though this list of names and locations seems unnecessary to some modern readers, it would have been of great encouragement to the original readers as they saw their own families and towns represented.

- 64] The whole congregation together *was* forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,  
 65] Beside their servants and their maids, of whom *there were* seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and *there were* among them two hundred singing men and singing women.  
 66] Their horses *were* seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five;  
 67] Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; *their asses*, six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

When added together the numbers in verses 2-42, 58, and 60 which list the returnees come to 29,829 (including the 11 prominent men listed in v. 2). However, the total in verses 64-65—the whole company—is 49,897. The larger number may include women and children. *It may also include Jews from the 10 Northern tribes who might have joined the remnant of the two Southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin (cf. 1:5).* It may also have included the priests who could not delineate their genealogies (2:61-62).

Ezra's grand total of 49,897 is very close to Nehemiah's total of 49,942 (Neh 7:66-67). Nehemiah's extra 45 people are in the singers (Ezra had 200 but Nehemiah referred to 245). This may have been a scribal error, an error not in the original manuscripts but in the numerous copyings of the text in its transmission. A scribe, in copying Nehemiah 7:67, may have inadvertently picked up the 245 in verse 68, in reference to mules, and inserted that number for the 200 singers. This kind of error may also account for several variations in the other numbers in these lists. Even the animals were counted—a total of 8,136, most of them donkeys, commonly used for riding.

The journey from Babylon to Israel was about 900 miles and took about four months (cf. 7:8-9), but Ezra did not state how long the return trip took. His focus was not on the people's hardships but on their task of rebuilding the temple.

- 68] And *some* of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which *is* at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place:  
 69] They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments.

When the returnees arrived back in Palestine at the house of the LORD (i.e., at its location site) they gave of their possessions according to their ability.

The list of precious metals and materials differs from the corresponding list in Nehemiah 7:70-72. Ezra's 61,000 drachmas of gold are 41,000 in Nehemiah. Ezra recorded 5,000 minas of silver while Nehemiah referred to 4,200. Ezra mentioned 100 priestly garments whereas Nehemiah recorded 597. These differences were probably early scribal errors.

- 70] So the priests, and the Levites, and *some* of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

After the Babylonian captivity, the terms "Jew" and "Israelite" are used interchangeably. Ezra calls the returning remnant "Jews" 8 times and "Israel" 40 times. (Ezra also speaks of "all Israel": Ezra 2:70; 3:11; 8:35; 10:25, et al.) Nehemiah uses the term "Jews" 11 times and "Israel" 22 times. Nehemiah too speaks of "all Israel" being back in the land (Neh 12:47). The remnant that returned from Babylon is represented as "the nation" (Mal 1:1, et al.).

### Ezra 3

- 1] And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel *were* in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.

The first task facing the people was the rebuilding of the altar of burnt offering, directly east of where the temple building itself would be located. This was essential for reestablishing the sacrificial system which set these people apart as a nation and which was used by God as a means for atoning for their sins.

The seventh month may refer to the seventh month after the people left Babylon or to the seventh month after they arrived in Jerusalem. This was in September-October.

In years past, the seventh month had been a great month religiously for Israel. Three religious festivals were held in the seventh month: the Feast of Trumpets on the 1st day (Lev 23:23-25), the Day of Atonement on the 10th day (Lev 23:26-32), and the Feast of Tabernacles on days 15-21 (Lev 23:33-36, 39-43; Num 29:12-39; cf. Ezra 3:4). [See our briefing package, *The Feasts of Israel* for a detailed discussion.]

- 2] Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as *it is* written in the law of Moses the man of God.

The words in v.1, The people assembled as one man, suggest they all agreed that the building project must begin. The men who headed up the constructing of the altar were Jeshua, the religious leader (a descendant of Aaron), and Zerubbabel, the civil leader (a descendant of David), along with fellow priests (other descendants of Aaron) and associates (other descendants of David). They built the altar so that they could offer sacrifices in accordance with what was written in the Law of Moses.

It was imperative that the returnees would come back to the Mosaic Covenant. Because their forefathers had left the covenant, the nation had been driven into Captivity. The former exiles did not want to make that same mistake.

- 3] And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear *was* upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, *even* burnt offerings morning and evening.
- 4] They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as *it is* written, and *offered* the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required;
- 5] And afterward *offered* the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD.
- 6] From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not *yet* laid.

Even though the returnees had fear of the peoples around them, foreigners who had been deported by the Assyrian Empire into Palestine, they built the altar, and offered burnt offerings on it (cf. Lev 1; 6:8-13), starting on the first day of the month (Ezra 3:6). These were the first sacrifices made there in 50 years—since 586 B.C. when the temple was torn down. Other sacrifices were offered in connection with all the appointed feasts, including, for example, the Feast of Tabernacles on days 15-21 of that seventh month (cf. Lev 23:33-36, 39-43; Num 29:12-39). The sacrifices showed that the people wanted to be responsive to the Law of God.

- 7] They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia.
- 8] Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD.

There was a period of preparation for building the temple foundation for the work did not begin till the second month of the second year after their arrival (May-June 536, exactly 70 years after the first deportation in 605).

Why this delay of seven months after the altar was built? Because they had to get organized and secure the building materials. The wood (cedar logs) came from Lebanon, shipped along the coast to Joppa and then carried overland to Jerusalem. Lebanon was well known for its cedar forests and its fine woodworkers. For the first temple, 430 years earlier (in 966 B.C.), Solomon had received much of his building materials (cedar, pine, and alnum logs) and craftsmen from Lebanon (1 Kgs 5:1-10, 18; 2 Chr 2:1-16).

Solomon began his project in the second month (May-June; 1 Kgs 6:1), the same month this rebuilding began under Zerubbabel. Since Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon were under the Persian Empire, Cyrus had to authorize this transaction (cf. Ezra 6:3-4), in which the logs, as in Solomon's time, were paid for by money, food, drink, and oil.

Whereas twenty-five was the minimum age for tabernacle service for Levites (Num 8:24; 4:3), the age was only twenty for temple service (1 Chr 23:24; 2 Chr 31:17). There were 24,000 Levites appointed to oversee the work of Solomon's Temple (1 Chr 23:4), whereas now there were only 341 altogether! (Ezra 2:40-42)

- 9] Then stood Jeshua *with* his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, *with* their sons and their brethren the Levites.

Zerubbabel appointed the Levites as supervisors of the construction project. Centuries earlier Levites were involved in the tabernacle construction (Ex 38:21) and in caring for and transporting it (Num 1:50-51; 3:21-37). Now they were involved in the temple construction. Three Levite groups of supervisors were mentioned (Ezra 3:9)—Jeshua and his family, Kadmiel (cf. 2:40) and his family, and the family of Henadad.

- 10] And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel.

Nothing is mentioned about the actual process of laying the temple foundation or the length of time involved. This is because the focus was on the results of this project on that community of people who had braved the rugged conditions. They were following the command of

Cyrus but, more importantly, they were following the command of their God with whom they were in covenant. As the foundation was laid the people were careful to follow in the traditions of their forefathers who had been rightly related to God under the Mosaic Covenant.

- 11] And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because *he is* good, for his mercy *endureth* for ever toward Israel. 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.

As the priests and the Levites led the dedication service for the temple's foundations, they did the things that were prescribed by David. The order followed was the same as when David brought the ark to Jerusalem. At that time priests blew trumpets and Asaph sounded cymbals (1 Chr 16:5-6). Here the priests blew trumpets and sons (descendants) of Asaph played the cymbals.

The order was also similar to the time when the ark was brought to the temple in Solomon's day (2 Chr 5:12-13), when Asaph and others played cymbals, harps, and lyres; and the priests blew trumpets.

"...sang together": *One to another* (KJV), antiphonally. The very psalm sung on this occasion (cf. Ps 136:1) suggests that they were thinking in terms of Jeremiah's great prophecy (Jer 33:11). This song of praise is highly significant for by it the religious leaders were acknowledging that YHWH had again established His loving protection over the nation. The word "mercy" (*hesed*) is God's covenantal loyal love which exists forever with His people Israel. Now that the temple worship was being reestablished, the people again recognized the commitment of God's unending covenantal love.

- 12] But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, *who were* ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:  
13] So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

In contrast with the joy many people experienced on that occasion, a few of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple (destroyed 50 years earlier in 586 B.C.) were discouraged. Sixteen years later (in 520 B.C.) the same emotion of discouragement again hit the builders of the temple (Hag 2:1-9).

The two sounds, the joy and the weeping (from sadness), mingled together and were so loud that they were heard far away.

\* \* \*

## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Why was the Captivity 70 years? What does this teach us about God?
- 2) List the major kings and prophets of this period.
- 3) Summarize the three deportations to Babylon, and the three returns.
- 4) Why was the “handwriting on the wall” in Daniel 5 difficult to decipher?
- 5) Which details of the career of Cyrus a fulfillment of prophetic Scriptures?
- 6) List the critical decrees of secular history and their impact on our Biblical perspectives.

## Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Is our own suffering (necessarily) a punishment for sin? List the reasons that Christians may be having troubles.
- 2) What is the *prophetic* significance of the Cyrus Cylinder presently on display in the British Museum in London?
- 3) When was Solomon’s temple dedicated? When was Ezra’s temple dedicated? What is the significance of John 10:22?

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Summarize the timeline from the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians to the Babylonian captivity, the Book of Esther, and the rise of the Greek empire.

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Ezra 4-10, and Haggai 1, 2.

### Notes:

1. “Verse Account of Nabonidus,” James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 313.
2. Herodotus 1.191.
3. Josephus, *Antiquities XI*, i.2.
4. Josephus, *Antiquities XVIII*, ix 6-9
5. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1. 8.
6. Jerome, *Preface to the Commentary on Galatians*.
7. *Baba Bathra*, 15a.
8. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 11. 1. 1

## Session 2 Ezra 4 - 7

### The Rebuilding Opposed

Ezra did not record all the events in those 21 years (from 536) till the temple was finished (in 515). That is because he was making a theological point that the temple of the Lord was completed *despite* opposition that might have stopped any other project.

The temple was the basis for the postexilic community’s fellowship with God. Not till the temple was built could the people really live in accord with the covenant.

Ezra’s account of this interim period differs in tone from Haggai’s account of opposition (from 520 to 518). Ezra did not dwell on the sinful condition of the people as they lived in the land as did Haggai (Hag 1). Ezra’s account focused on *external* pressures from the surrounding peoples, whereas Haggai focused on the *internal* attitudes of the people who valued material possessions above spiritual things (Hag 1:4-6).

## Ezra 4

- 1] Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel;

These two tribes are mentioned in particular because they now constituted the majority of the nation, and it was largely in their old territories that the remnant now lived.

- 2] Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye *do*; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither.

Isaiah had prophesied that the northern ten tribes would cease to be a distinct people within sixty-five years. Since he prophesied this in 734 B.C. (Isa 7:8), it was fulfilled by 669 B.C., within the reign of the Assyrian king, Esar-haddon (680–668 B.C.), who was responsible for transplanting foreigners into Samaria (2 Kgs 17:24). Some people, however, had been displaced into Samaria earlier by the Assyrian kings Sargon II (722-705) and Sennacherib (705-681).

Judah and Benjamin’s enemies were also appealing on the basis of the fact that they, like the Jews, were a “displaced people,” having been brought in from the outside. In a sense they were downplaying the nation of Israel’s “roots” in the land. Does this have a contemporary ring to it? Satan’s tactics haven’t changed! These foreigners intermarried with Israelites, and it was their descendants who now approached Zerubbabel saying, “We seek your God, as ye do. This proposal was the more dangerous since it came under the guise of true religion (2 Cor 11:15; cf. 2 Cor 6:17).

The “enemies” (called “the peoples around them,” Ezra 4:4) were the descendants of these mixed peoples and the forefathers of the New Testament Samaritans. These people in Ezra’s day claimed that they worshiped the same God, that is, YHWH, the God of Israel. But they had a syncretistic form of worship; they worshiped both YHWH *and others* (2 Kgs 17:29, 32-34, 41). Therefore their statement (Ezra 4:2) was not fully accurate and was apparently made to mislead the leadership of the returned band.

The enemies used two methods of opposition to try to keep the temple from being built. First they offered to help in the construction process, thereby hoping to infiltrate the ranks and sidetrack the building project. [Be alert to this tactic your own ministerial efforts!] When that did not work, they frightened the builders (perhaps with threats on their lives) and even hired counselors to frustrate them (vv. 4-5).

- 3] But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but

we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

The response by the governmental side (Zerubbabel) and the religious side (Jeshua) was decisive and immediate. They had two reasons for not wanting to be sidetracked by this offer of help. First, the temple was for the LORD the God of Israel, who was not the god these people worshiped. Second, they had been commissioned by King Cyrus himself to undertake the building project and therefore had every right to carry it out on their own.

- 4] Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building,

This rebuff brought on the second form of opposition. As already stated, the enemies tried to discourage the workers and make them afraid. The prophet Jeremiah was accused of doing this in his day (Jer 38:4). These Samaritans revealed their true character when, after further rejections, they build their own temple on Mount Gerizim (Jn 4:20-22).

- 5] And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

This policy of harassment continued on till the reign of Darius, king of Persia, who ruled from 521 to 486. This includes the remaining years of Cyrus (535–530 B.C.), the reign of Cambyses (530–522 B.C.), the short reign of Smerdis (522 B.C.), and until the second year of Darius I (521/520 B.C.). It was during his reign, in 515, that the temple was completed. (The account of the building program under Darius is resumed in Ezra 4:24 after a parenthesis in verses 6-23.)

## Parenthetical Letters

These letters to and from Artaxerxes are out of place chronologically, but they follow here logically to show that the opposition Ezra had begun to describe (vv. 1-5) continued on for many years—to 485 B.C., the year Xerxes began to reign (v. 6) and on into the days of Artaxerxes (464-424). Artaxerxes was the king who was reigning during the events recorded in chapters 7-10. The letters may have been written at the time of Ezra’s return (458 B.C.). Therefore the letters were written nearly 80 years later than the account into which they were placed. Ezra was not being deceptive by placing the letters here in his book since he clearly dated them by the ruler under which they were written. Anyone familiar with the history of that part of the world at that time (as were the inhabitants of Israel when the Book of Ezra was written) would have clearly seen what Ezra was logically doing.

- 6] And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they *unto him* an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Opposition continued during the time of Xerxes. Xerxes, also known as Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther, ruled from 485 to 465.

“An accusation”: The same root word in Hebrew as for Satan, “the accuser” (1 Chr 21:1; Job 1:6). Ezra recorded nothing of the nature or results of the accusation except that it apparently kept the Israelites from working on building projects. This verbal opposition in Xerxes’ reign is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. This verse sets the stage for the following letter which was written in the reign of Persia’s next king.

- 7] And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter *was* written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue.

Opposition against the Jews was strong during the time of Artaxerxes. The focus of the narrative is on two letters written during his reign (464-424). Because the enemies’ letter and the king’s reply brought the work on the city walls and foundations to a halt, it seems logical that the letter was written before the return of Nehemiah, for under Nehemiah the building projects resumed and were completed.

Though the letter was composed by people who spoke a northwest Semitic dialect (like Hebrew) it was written in the Aramaic language (the trade language of the day). It was in square Aramaic script rather than in the slanted Hebrew type of script or in cuneiform signs. Ezra 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26 are in Aramaic. Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel were probably men from Samaria.

- 8] Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:

Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary were probably Persians who were persuaded to write the letter.

- 9] Then *wrote* Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, *and* the Elamites,

In their introduction Rehum and Shimshai tried to point out to King Artaxerxes that the participants in this opposition were from various parts of the world.

- 10] And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest *that are* on this side the river, and at such a time.

Their complaint was not merely from a single isolated group. Judges and officials from various parts of the Persian Empire and people who had been deported to Samaria under the reign of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal 200 years earlier were opposed to the work. Ashurbanipal (669-626) continued the deporting done by his father Esarhaddon (4:2).

- 11] This *is* the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, *even* unto Artaxerxes the king; Thy servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time.

The writers of the letter (cf. This is a copy of the letter; v. 23; 5:6; 7:11) identified with the Persian king by noting that they were his servants. The letter itself is recorded in 4:12-16.

- 12] Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls *thereof*, and joined the foundations.

The opponents noted that the Jews were restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. Their opposition was obviously not against the rebuilding of the temple, for it had been completed in 515 B.C. The opposition was against an attempt to begin rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem which the opponents called that rebellious and wicked city (cf. vv. 15, 19).

- 13] Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up *again*, *then* will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and *so* thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings.

The apparent reason for the complaint was that if the city was allowed to be fortified, then Jerusalem and the territory which Jerusalem would control would no longer pay taxes or tribute money to the crown. This would dishonor the king.

- 14] Now because we have maintenance from *the king’s* palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king’s dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king;

Therefore the complainers felt it was their patriotic duty to tell the king what was happening so that he could search the records and see that Jerusalem was a rebellious city, which is why it was destroyed.

- 15] That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city *is* a rebellious city, and

hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed.

- 16] We certify the king that, if this city be builded *again*, and the walls thereof set up, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river.

The letter added that if the city of Jerusalem was fortified then the Jews would take back all the territory they had previously occupied and the Persian king would have no territory left in Trans-Euphrates. They claimed he would lose a huge portion of his empire.

- 17] *Then* sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and *to* Shimshai the scribe, and *to* the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and *unto* the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time.  
18] The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me.  
19] And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and *that* rebellion and sedition have been made therein.  
20] There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all *countries* beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them.

The king did search the archives and found that Jerusalem had been powerful at one time. What an encouragement this must have been to Ezra's original readers to recall the years of David and Solomon and to know that even a pagan king acknowledged the sovereignty of their empire centered at Jerusalem.

- 21] Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until *another* commandment shall be given from me.

In his reply the king actually strengthened the position of the Israelites by leaving open the possibility that their work might resume later by his permission. This final clause left the door open for the king to change his mind, as we find in Nehemiah 2! Truly this was providential, for the laws of the Medes and Persians changed not! This, of course, did happen under the leadership of Nehemiah. It was the subsequent decree to permit building the walls that triggered the Angel Gabriel's famous prophecy in Daniel 9:25.

- 22] Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?  
23] Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter *was* read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power.

The king commanded that the building projects stop "until I so order."

It is clear that the Samaritans took full advantage of this decree, and even went to the extreme of partially destroying the walls that had been built, and burning the gates. It was news of this disaster that so shocked Nehemiah and forced him into mourning and prayer (Neh 1:3, 4). We may thus date this decree at about 446 B.C. This was the same king who later (445 B.C.) changed this edict and allowed Nehemiah to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 2:1-9). However, the immediate result was a forced cessation of the building activity because the enemies used force to back up a legal document from the Persian king.

- 24] Then ceased the work of the house of God which *is* at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The narrative now picks up where it left off after verse 5 (vv. 6-23 are a lengthy parenthesis). The result of the opposition during Cyrus' reign was that work on the temple was suspended until the second year of Darius (520 B.C.), some 18 years after the people had returned to the land for the purpose of rebuilding the house of God.

## Ezra 5

This section includes certain historical events under the reign of Darius, and also helps us understand that the temple rebuilding was sovereignly ordained by God and carried out through pagan rulers, this time Darius I (521-486).

- 1] Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that *were* in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, *even* unto them.

The work on the temple had been stopped (4:1-5, 24), from 535 to 520 B.C. Now under the influence of two important prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, it was resumed. The preaching of these two men is recorded in the Biblical books bearing their respective names. Haggai prophesied from August to December 520 B.C., and Zechariah prophesied for two years beginning in October-November 520.

They were helping by exhorting and encouraging (cf. 6:14; Hag 1:8; 2:4; Zech 4:7-9). They were vitally concerned with the building of the temple because they realized that their nation could never fulfill the obligations of the Mosaic Covenant till the temple worship was reinstated. Both of these prophets placed the blame for the hard times the nation experienced during this period on the people's lack of obedience in not rebuilding the temple.



(However, Ezra did not deal with that question in his book. He stressed the outside opposition which was also a factor in slowing the work.)

- 2] Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which *is* at Jerusalem: and with them *were* the prophets of God helping them.

The building process itself was spearheaded by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the civil and religious leaders, respectively.

- 3] At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?

But as soon as the work was resumed, another effort (cf. 4:1-5) was made to stop it. Israel's leaders came into direct conflict with the duly established local authorities who were responsible to the Persian crown.

In a Babylonian record dated 502 B.C. the name Tattenai and his office as governor of Trans-Euphrates are mentioned. Syria-Palestine was under him, an area including but much larger than Israel. Shethar-Bozenai was probably an assistant to Tattenai. It would have been Tattenai's responsibility, on hearing of this building activity in his territory, to investigate it.

- 4] Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building?

Major political unrest was seething at the beginning of Darius' reign. Possibly Tattenai thought the temple-building project in Jerusalem would grow into a full-scale rebellion against the empire. The group of officials asked Zerubbabel and Jeshua who authorized the project (the word structure is lit., "wooden structure"), and asked for the names of the people responsible for it (cf. 5:9-10).

- 5] But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this *matter*.

But despite this challenge, the work did not stop because the eye of their God was watching over them (cf. "God was over them," v. 1). Occurring frequently in Ezra and Nehemiah are the words "the *hand* of the LORD was on him" and similar expressions (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18). God was providentially caring for them (by His "eye") and blessing them

(by His "hand"). Clearly God was at work in spite of this opposition because through it the project was eventually given help.

- 6] The copy of the letter that Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and his companions the Apharsachites, which *were* on this side the river, sent unto Darius the king:

Ezra recorded the letter (cf. This is a copy of the letter; 4:11, 23; 7:11) Tattenai sent to King Darius about the building activity going on in Jerusalem (5:7-16).

- 7] They sent a letter unto him, wherein was written thus; Unto Darius the king, all peace.  
8] Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands.

Tattenai began his letter by noting that work was being done on the temple of the great God in Jerusalem. (This does not mean that Tattenai believed YHWH of Israel was the supreme God. Most likely he meant that the God to whom the Jews were building the temple was the major God of the area. In the ancient Near East there was a highly developed belief in local deities.)

Tattenai noted that large stones and timbers (cf. 6:4; 1 Kgs 6:36) were being used in the work and that the Jews were working with diligence and were making rapid progress.

- 9] Then asked we those elders, *and* said unto them thus, Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls?  
10] We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that *were* the chief of them.

He added that he had asked who authorized the work (cf. Ezra 5:3) and that he had asked for the names of those who were leading the building program (cf. v. 4).

- 11] And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up.

Tattenai's letter then included the Jews' answers to his questions (vv. 11-16). Zerubbabel and Jeshua called themselves servants of the God of heaven and earth, not servants of Persia! The true God, YHWH, was superior to Darius' god, Ahura Mazda, whom Darius called "the god of

heaven.” Years earlier Israel had a great king, Solomon, and had had a beautiful temple. It was a prominent structure in the ancient world.

- 12] But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon.

But because of sin (our fathers angered the God of heaven), God handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar. The Jews knew why the temple was destroyed and the people deported. In God’s promise/threat (Deut 28) He said that the people would be taken into captivity if they did not live according to the covenant He instituted with them as they were ready to enter the land of promise.

Not only was Nebuchadnezzar involved in the fall of Jerusalem; God Himself was responsible! Nebuchadnezzar was merely an agent of God’s anger on His people (cf. “My servant Nebuchadnezzar” in Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10)—an anger which was designed to purify the nation so that some would return to the land as a believing remnant. The Exile did not mean that YHWH was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar’s gods.

- 13] But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon *the same* king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God.
- 14] And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that *was* in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto *one*, whose name *was* Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor;

In response to Tattenai Zerubbabel and Jeshua stated that Cyrus had allowed a remnant to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and even gave them articles which had been taken from Solomon’s temple (cf. 1:2-4, 7-11).

- 15] And said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that *is* in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place.
- 16] Then came the same Sheshbazzar, *and* laid the foundation of the house of God which *is* in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and *yet* it is not finished.

The letter-writers also recounted the fact that Cyrus gave Sheshbazzar the task of carrying out the king’s command—to return the articles and to build another temple in the city. Sheshbazzar was mentioned to show Tattenai that the building program was legal. Thus it seems likely that Sheshbazzar was a Persian official whose name carried some weight with

Tattenai. [Are Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel the same person? Many think so because Sheshbazzar laid the temple foundations, and so did Zerubbabel (3:8-10). However, this is not absolute proof that the two men were identical. Sheshbazzar could have been responsible, as the king’s representative, to see that the work was begun, and Zerubbabel the Jewish leader who completed the task.]

- 17] Now therefore, if *it seem* good to the king, let there be search made in the king’s treasure house, which *is* there at Babylon, whether it be *so*, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.

Tattenai and the officials asked that the king research the records in Babylon (cf. 6:1-2) to find out if what the Jews had said about a decree from Cyrus was true. That such records were carefully kept is attested by archeology.

## Ezra 6

- 1] Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.
- 2] And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that *is* in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein *was* a record thus written:

Tattenai had requested that Babylon’s archives be searched for the document (5:17) but it was not found there. Instead the scroll (of papyrus or leather) was found in Achmetha (Ecbatana), (modern Hamadan), 300 miles northeast of Babylon and capital of Media. It is a tribute to the efficiency of the Persian administration that records were safely filed in an elaborate network of archives centering in Babylon and reaching to branch libraries as far distant as Achmetha (Ecbatana), capital of the old Median empire. The scroll was in Ecbatana, because that is where Cyrus had spent the summer of 538, when he issued the decree.

- 3] In the first year of Cyrus the king *the same* Cyrus the king made a decree *concerning* the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, *and* the breadth thereof threescore cubits;

The porch of Solomon’s Temple was twice this height (2 Chr 3:4).

- 4] *With* three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king’s house:
- 5] And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which *is* at Jerusalem, and brought

unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which *is* at Jerusalem, *every one* to his place, and place *them* in the house of God.

This Ecbatana record was an official “minute” with three details that the verbal and written proclamation (1:1-4) apparently did not contain:

- 1) The temple was to be 90 feet high and 90 feet wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers (cf. 5:8; 1 Kgs 6:36).
  - 2) The project was to be financed by funds from the royal treasury. This shows the earnestness of Cyrus’ repatriation program.
  - 3) The returned gold and silver articles were to be put in their places in the temple.
- 6] Now *therefore*, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which *are* beyond the river, be ye far from thence:

King Darius then gave three instructions to Tattenai and his associates:

- 1) He told them to leave the Jews alone and not interfere with the building of the temple (vv. 6-7). The words “be ye far from thence” were a common Aramaic legal statement. This was to be in accord with the edict of the great King Cyrus.
- 7] Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.
- 8] Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king’s goods, *even* of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered.
- 2) Tax money was to be used to help finance the project and animals were to be supplied daily so that sacrifices could be made at the altar of the new temple along with food items for the offerings (vv. 8-10). Flour (from wheat), salt, and oil were to be used in the grain offerings (Lev 2:1-2, 7, 13), and wine for drink offerings (Lev 23:13) on feast days.
- 9] And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which *are* at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:
- 10] That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.
- 11] Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

Keil cites Herodotus (III. 159) as saying that Darius impaled 3,000 Babylonians after conquering their city. Therefore this was no idle threat!

- 12] And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter *and* to destroy this house of God which *is* at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.
- 3) Anyone who disobeyed the edict was to suffer a horrible fate (Ezra 6:11-12). He was to be impaled on a beam taken from his own house, and his house was to be demolished. [Execution by impaling was practiced in the Assyrian and Persian Empires. Crucifixion was invented by the Persians. (Haman wasn’t “hanged” as is commonly translated; he was crucified.)]

Darius wanted no disturbance in this part of his vast kingdom. The pagan king acknowledged that God had caused His name to dwell at Jerusalem. Darius probably thought of YHWH as a local deity (cf. comments on 5:6-10), whereas Ezra, in recording that statement, knew of the covenantal significance in YHWH’s name dwelling in Jerusalem.

*So Tattenai’s inquiry backfired.* Instead of stopping the temple work, he had to let it proceed and even had to help pay for it out of his revenues!

Darius’ curse on anyone who would destroy the temple was fulfilled in:

- a) Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated it in 167 B.C., and died insane three years later;
- b) Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), who added extensively to the temple to glorify himself, and who had domestic trouble and died of disease; and
- c) the Romans, who destroyed the temple in A.D. 70, and later had their empire destroyed.

## The Temple Completed

- 13] Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily.

Tattenai, to his credit, carried out the instructions of Darius, and did so with diligence (cf. 5:8; 6:12; 7:21, 23).

- 14] And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished *it*, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

The work was done by the Jewish elders who were encouraged by the preaching of the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah (cf. 5:1).

Ezra noted that the ultimate decree for the building of the temple was from God Himself. God worked through the commands of the pagan Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. Workers, prophets, kings, and God were all involved. (Artaxerxes had nothing to do with building the temple; apparently his name was added to round out the account, for he had decreed the building of Jerusalem's *walls* (Neh 2:1, 8). He also helped provide for sacrifices at the temple (Ezra 7:12-17). Some have suggested that Artaxerxes' name may have been added by an early scribe but there is no textual evidence of that. Actually in the Hebrew the words "the temple" are not in 6:14. It reads literally, They finished their building, thus speaking in general terms of the total reconstruction of Jerusalem under the decrees of the three kings. But verse 15 specifically mentions the temple.)

- 15] And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

The temple was completed in Adar (February-March) of 515—21 years after the work started in 536, and 4 1/2 years after Haggai began his prophesying. This was 70 years after the temple had been destroyed on August 12, 586.

- 16] And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy,  
17] And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

After the temple was finished, it was then dedicated. The comparatively small number of animals sacrificed (100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 male lambs, and 12 male goats) contrasted sharply with the tremendous amount sacrificed by Solomon at the dedication of the first temple (22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats; 1 Kgs 8:63). This points up the comparative poverty of the postexilic community.

The 12 goats for the sin offering show that the postexilic community still envisioned a unified Israel consisting of all 12 tribes even though only 2 had survived with any strength.

- 18] And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which *is* at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

The leaders of the sacrificial system—the priests and the Levites—were installed according to the Book of Moses, that is, according to that portion of the Law in which the legal system is described—in parts of Leviticus and Numbers (Lev 8; Num 3:5-10; 8:5-14).

One of the motifs of Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles is that the postexilic community was under the leadership of godly men who were steeped in the Scriptures and attempted to do everything according to the Law. This shows that they had learned from the Exile that God's people suffer if they do not live up to their covenantal obligations.

- 19] And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth *day* of the first month.

Beginning with verse 19 the text is again in Hebrew (4:8-6:18 are in Aramaic). On the 14th day of the first month (April 21, 515 B.C.) the Passover was celebrated. The temple had been completed in the 12th month (Adar; v. 15) and fittingly, in the very next month, the Passover was reinaugurated. This was the first time in 70 years that the people partook of this feast which commemorated their forefathers' release from Egyptian bondage (cf. Ex 12:1-14; Lev 23:5).

- 20] For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them *were* pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.  
21] And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat,

The Israelite returnees ate the Passover with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors. This second group might have been: a) Gentiles living in Judah (cf. Num. 9:14), or more likely b) Jews who had remained in the land and had defiled themselves by practices that went against the Law, and then repented of those sins, thereby "separating" themselves.

- 22] And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread was on days 15-21 of the first month, immediately after the Passover (cf. Lev 23:6-8). The reference to Darius as the king of Assyria is not an anachronism (though the Assyrian Empire had ended in 609 B.C.) for the Persian Empire included what was once Assyria.

Perhaps this title was a grim reminder that Assyria's harsh tactics were now ended. She was the first to deport Israelites from their land; but now a contingent of Jews was settled back in their land. This eight-day celebration (the Passover, Ezra 6:19, and the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, v. 22), 900 years after the first Passover, signaled the end of the Exile for a remnant of the nation was once again back in fellowship with YHWH. Since the temple worship was restored, it was important for people who wanted to be in fellowship with God and live according to the covenantal obligations to be in the place where the sacrificial system was being practiced.

The people had seen firsthand that God works through history, for He had caused pagan kings to issue decrees which let them return to the land of promise (much as He had caused Egypt's Pharaoh to release Israel). The original readers of Ezra's book would rejoice in that fact and would be encouraged to participate fully in the temple worship, which had been reestablished at such great cost.

## The Second Return and Reform under Ezra, Ch. 7-10

[The Book of Esther occurred between Ezra 6 & 7.]

### Ezra Introduced. 7:1-10.

Ezra's family connections and personal characteristics, as well as a brief summary of his great journey, are now set forth.

## Ezra 7

These chapters describe a second return of exiles from Babylon, this time under Ezra in 458 B.C. (7:7). Here Ezra often wrote in the first person ("I" and "we"). Ezra, a priest who knew the Scriptures, knew the importance of having the people back where the sacrificial system was being practiced.

The events which transpire in this section of the narrative occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes who was introduced earlier in the book (4:8-23; 6:14). The return occurred in the king's seventh year, which was 458 B.C.

- 1] Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

"Now after these things": Between chapters 6 and 7, 58 years intervene, during which time the events of the Book of Esther occurred. This might explain Artaxerxes' favorable attitude toward Ezra. Ezra the son of Seraiah.

Seraiah was high priest in 586 B.C. (2 Kgs 25:18). But Ezra must have descended from a younger son of Seraiah, because he is not called "son of Jozadak," as Jeshua is (Ezra 3:2; 1 Chr 6:14); and therefore his immediate ancestors were not in the high-priestly line.

The temple was completed in 515 B.C. in the reign of Darius I. After Darius' death in 486 his son Xerxes ruled for 20 years (485-465). Since Xerxes was the Ahasuerus mentioned in the Book of Esther, the events of that book occurred between Ezra 6 and 7. Then Xerxes' son Artaxerxes ruled from 464 to 424. From 515 to 458 (Artaxerxes' seventh year; 7:7) was 57 years.

- 2] The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub,  
 3] The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth,  
 4] The son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki,  
 5] The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

Ezra's lineage is traced back to Aaron, the first priest. This list is abbreviated, for it does not name every generation. Between Azariah and Meraioth (v. 3) six names appear in the genealogy in 1 Chr 6:7-10. Since Seraiah was the high priest when Jerusalem fell in 586 (2 Kgs 25:18), Ezra may have been his great-grandson. Because of his priestly ancestry, Ezra, like the priests, had authority to teach (cf. Lev 10:11; Ezra 7:10).

- 6] This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he *was* a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

Ezra was a teacher well-versed in the Law of Moses. סופר *sowpher*: a broad word that means, a "recorder, scribe, secretary, or writer" (e.g., 2 Sam 8:17; Est 3:12; 8:9; Ps 45:1). The word also referred to a learned man who could read and write (e.g., *Jehudi* in Jer 36:23) and a learned man who could teach what he read in God's Law. Ezra was called a "Scribe" or "teacher" four times (Ezra 7:6, 11-12, 21; cf. v. 25). And he was called "Ezra the scribe" six times in Nehemiah (8:1, 4, 9, 13; 12:26, 36).

Ezra had the blessing of the pagan King Artaxerxes as well as the blessing of the covenant God of Israel.

A few years later Nehemiah had an official position before the king (Neh 1:11), but Ezra held no such position. Because of the king's favor Ezra was promised that he could have whatever he wanted. Rather than ask for something personal, Ezra used the monarch's favor to advance the cause of God and His people. For the first of eight times in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, mention is made of God's hand being on Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18).

- 7] And there went up *some* of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

Not much is said here about the trip from Babylon to Jerusalem or the preparations for it. These few verses are a summary of the journey that is detailed in the rest of Chapter 7 and in Chapter 8. Returning with Ezra were groups of people corresponding to the groups in Zerubbabel's return (Ch. 2).

- 8] And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which *was* in the seventh year of the king.  
9] For upon the first *day* of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first *day* of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

The trip back to the land took exactly four months, from the first to the fifth months, from Nisan 1 (March-April) to Av 1 (July-August). The good hand of God was on Ezra because he devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching it.

- 10] For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Ezra was inwardly determined toward doing three things: studying God's Law, obeying it, and teaching it to others—an inviolable order for a successful ministry!

- 11] Now this *is* the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, *even* a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel.

Artaxerxes wrote a letter in Aramaic to Ezra, giving him permission to take Jewish volunteers, silver and gold, and temple vessels back to Jerusalem. Also, he made ample provision for temple supplies and ministers, and gave Ezra authority to appoint magistrates and judges.

- 12] Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect *peace*, and at such a time.

No reason for the decree was given. It can be surmised that Ezra had asked for permission to take a group back and that this decree was the official granting of his request. The decree was sent to Ezra personally.

- 13] I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and *of* his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee.

Artaxerxes listed certain freedoms the people were to have as they journeyed to and lived in Israel. He gave them permission to go to Jerusalem.

- 14] Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which *is* in thine hand;

Artaxerxes' supreme court (cf. Est 1:14; Herodotus III, 84). "To enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem: "It seems that Ezra held a position at the Persian court corresponding to that of Secretary of State for Jewish affairs.

- 15] And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation *is* in Jerusalem,  
16] And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which *is* in Jerusalem:

He gave them silver and gold to take with them and he allowed them to get more in Babylon (vv. 15-16, 20).

- 17] That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which *is* in Jerusalem.

He said that they could offer sacrifices on the altar at the temple.

- 18] And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God.

They were also given freedom to make their own decisions.

- 19] The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, *those* deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem.

20] And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow *it* out of the king's treasure house.

They could take back the utensils of worship for the temple. (Apparently not all of them had been carried back with Zerubbabel; cf. 1:7-11.)

21] And I, *even* I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which *are* beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily,

22] Unto an hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing *how much*.

They could have whatever else they needed for the temple up to a certain limit. The wheat, oil, and salt were for use in the grain offerings (cf. 6:9; Lev 2:1-2, 7, 13), and the wine was for drink offerings (cf. Ezra 6:9; Lev 12:13). As noted in the NIV margin, the amounts were enormous: 100 talents (3 3/4 tons) of silver, 100 cors (600 bushels) of wheat, 100 baths (600 gallons) of wine, 100 baths of olive oil, and salt without limit.

23] Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?

24] Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

The priests and Levites were not to be taxed.

25] And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that *is* in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that *are* beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know *them* not.

Uninstructed Jews were to be taught the Scriptures. Ezra doubtless suggested to Artaxerxes what the decree should include. The latter provision, in particular, coincided with the scribe's life aim (v. 10).

26] And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether *it be* unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

In return for granting these privileges the king was to receive some benefits from the expedition. He wanted to avoid uprisings or feelings of anger against him (v. 23) and to have order in that part of his empire (vv. 25-26).

Ezra was responsible to administer justice to all the people of the area, that is, to all who knew the laws of his God—the Jewish people. Ezra also was to administer the judicial system by handing out punishment to any who would not obey (v. 26).

27] Blessed *be* the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put *such a thing* as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which *is* in Jerusalem:

Ezra's response to the king's decree shows what kind of man he was. He praised the LORD for what was being done under him. By calling YHWH the God of our fathers he linked himself with the godly line that had been concerned with proper sacrificial worship. He also noted that God had given this idea to the king (put it into the king's heart). Ezra added that the purpose of all this was to bring honor to the house of the LORD. The privileges granted by Artaxerxes were for God's glory, not Ezra's.

28] And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God *was* upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

Ezra also said that God's mercy was shown to him in front of all the king's pagan advisers and officials.

חֶסֶד *cheshed*: mercy, kindness, lovingkindness, goodness, kindly, merciful, good favour. It refers to more than love; it means covenantal love, love borne out of loyalty to a commitment.

Because Ezra saw that God was working through him (the hand of the LORD my God was on me; cf. Ezra 7:6, 9; 8:18, 22, 31), he began the task of selecting people to make the difficult trip. This probably was difficult and must have involved much personal contact and persuasion. But he was successful in enlisting leading men to go with him.

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## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Contrast Ezra's account of his period with Haggai's of the same period. How are they different? Why?
- 2) List the several ways that the opposition attempted to thwart the program of God.

## Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Why was the Temple so significant to the Jewish life? Contrast that with the role of the church buildings today.
- 2) What are the possible implications of different forms of opposition to Christian projects today?

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Explore the concept of “Ten Lost Tribes,” and summarize the Scriptures which indicate that this is a myth. Why is this view hazardous to a Biblical perspective?

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Ezra 8–10.

## Session 3 Ezra 8 – 10

### The Second Return

In the seventh year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, 458 B.C., just 58 years after the completion of the temple, Ezra led a group of some 1,500 men and their families back to Palestine.

In Ezra’s day, Palestine was part of a larger governmental unit, the satrapy of Abarhahara, and was ruled by a Persian subgovernor. Times had been difficult in Judah. To reconstruct the agricultural base for their economy, the people had scattered from Jerusalem and had built smaller communities throughout the land. Even the Levites, dedicated to temple service, had built homes and cleared land.

The walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt, and the people had begun to intermarry with the pagans of the land. This last act was a serious breach of Old Testament Law, which insisted that God’s people maintain a separate identity. This was a very practical law: history demonstrates over and over again that when the Israelites intermarried with pagans,

the sure outcome was the introduction of idolatry. Ezra was no political reformer. He was, however, a teacher, “for Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (7:10). There was no doubt in Ezra’s mind that a fresh start for God’s people could be found only in a return to God’s Word.

## Ezra 8

- 1] These *are* now the chief of their fathers, and *this is* the genealogy of them that went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king.

This list consists of the major men (family heads) who returned as well as the numbers of those who accompanied them. Most of the people listed were related to the families who had returned previously under Zerubbabel (538 B.C.) 80 years earlier (Ch. 2).

- 2] Of the sons of Phinehas; Gershom: of the sons of Ithamar; Daniel: of the sons of David; Hattush.
- 3] Of the sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty.

Many of the family names in 8:3c-14 are mentioned in 2:3-15. Gershom was a descendant of Phinehas, son of Aaron’s third son Eleazar (Ex 6:25), and Daniel was descended from Ithamar, Aaron’s fourth son (Ex 6:23). The total number of men who returned was 1,514 including 18 heads of families and 1,496 other men. With the 258 Levites assembled later (Ezra 8:15-20) the number came to 1,772. With women and children, the group may have totaled between 4,000 and 5,000. Even so, this group was much smaller than the near-50,000 on the first return (2:64-65).

- 4] Of the sons of Pahathmoab; Elihoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him two hundred males.
- 5] Of the sons of Shechaniah; the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males.
- 6] Of the sons also of Adin; Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males.
- 7] And of the sons of Elam; Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males.
- 8] And of the sons of Shephatiah; Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him fourscore males.
- 9] Of the sons of Joab; Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males.
- 10] And of the sons of Shelomith; the son of Josiphiah, and with him an hundred and threescore males.
- 11] And of the sons of Bebai; Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty and eight males.



- 12] And of the sons of Azgad; Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him an hundred and ten males.
- 13] And of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names *are* these, Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them threescore males.
- 14] Of the sons also of Bigvai; Uthai, and Zabbud, and with them seventy males.
- 15] And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi.

Levites were to function as teachers of the Law (cf. Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10). Therefore they were to have an extremely important role in the reestablished community. The people desperately needed to understand the importance of the Law as they faced their situation as returnees from exile. The Levites would have a difficult time in the new land for they were to be involved in the disciplined ministry of temple service.

Perhaps that is why none were present when Ezra and his group were ready to depart from the canal of Ahava (cf. Ezra 8:21, 31), whose location is unknown. This canal may have been a tributary of the Euphrates River. Even Zerubbabel had comparatively few Levites on his return (733 [2:40-58], less than 1.5% of the 49,897 [2:64-65]).

- 16] Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Elnathan, men of understanding.
- 17] And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, *and* to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God.

Therefore Ezra sent nine leaders and two men of learning to secure some Levites and temple servants from the man Iddo. Ezra told the messengers what to say, which seems to indicate that this was a delicate task which needed to have some weight behind the message. The 11 messengers were sent to Casiphia, whose location is no longer known.

- 18] And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren, eighteen;
- 19] And Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty;
- 20] Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name.

The men were able to secure 38 Levites from two families—18 from Sherebiah’s family and 20 from Jeshaiiah’s relatives—as well as 220 temple servants. Only then was Ezra ready to start on the important journey. Without the Levite teachers of the Law and people to serve at the temple all would be lost and the trip futile.

- 21] Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

First, spiritual preparation was made for the journey. Ezra was concerned with matters pertaining to God’s people. So Ezra proclaimed a fast in preparation for the journey. He wanted the assembled group thereby to humble themselves before God in order to ask Him for a safe journey for themselves, their children, and their possessions. Being humble before God shows one’s spiritual dependence, his acknowledgment that God is in total control.

- 22] For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God *is* upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath *is* against all them that forsake him.
- 23] So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us.

Ezra did not want to ask for military protection (soldiers and horsemen) because he had already publicly announced that God would take care of the people as they returned. In contrast, Nehemiah readily accepted a military escort on his way back to the land (Neh 2:9).

- 24] Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them,
- 25] And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, *even* the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel *there* present, had offered:
- 26] I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, *and* of gold an hundred talents;
- 27] Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.

Next, physical preparation was made for the journey. Ezra divided the silver, gold, and articles among 24 of the key men in the group. These items were gifts for the temple, given by Persian officials and by nonreturning Israelites. They included 25 tons of silver, silver articles weighing 3 3/4 tons, 3 3/4 tons of gold, 20 bowls of gold that weighed about 19 pounds, and two expensive bronze objects.

All this would be valued at many millions of dollars today. No wonder Ezra was concerned about the people's safety (v. 21).

- 28] And I said unto them, *Ye are* holy unto the LORD; the vessels *are* holy also; and the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers.
- 29] Watch ye, and keep *them*, until ye weigh *them* before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.
- 30] So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring *them* to Jerusalem unto the house of our God.

Ezra charged these key men with the responsibility of getting the precious metals and valuables back to Jerusalem safely. In his charge he said that these material possessions were consecrated to the LORD and that the silver and gold were freely given by God's people. He emphasized the need for guarding the money and articles carefully by noting that they would all be weighed on arrival to be sure none had disappeared. The priests and Levites accepted the responsibility of taking the metals and utensils to Jerusalem.

- 31] Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth *day* of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way.
- 32] And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days.
- 33] Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him *was* Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them *was* Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, Levites;
- 34] By number *and* by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time.

Only a few statements were made about the journey and the arrival. The group left Babylon on the 1st day of the first month (7:9) and they left the Ahava Canal on the 12th of the same month. Since they were at the canal three days (8:15), the site of their canal encampment was about nine days' travel from Babylon, perhaps 100-130 miles away.

The total journey was about 900 miles and must have been difficult for a group without a military escort. However, Ezra was content merely to relate that the hand of our God was on us (cf. 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22) and that the Lord granted the returnees protection. On arriving in Jerusalem, after a three-day rest, everything was turned over to the priests and Levites and weighed (vv. 33-34). Several of these temple officials are also mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah: Meremoth (Neh 3:4, 21), Jozabad (Neh 11:16), and Binnui (Neh 3:24).

- 35] *Also* the children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats *for* a sin offering: all *this was* a burnt offering unto the LORD.
- 36] And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

Then the exiles offered sacrifices to God. The four kinds of animals—bulls (apparently one for each tribe of Israel), rams, lambs, and goats—were the same as those offered at the temple dedication (6:17), but now the number was smaller. A copy of the king's edict was given to the surrounding officials (royal satraps and governors), who were to carry out his wishes under Ezra's leadership. This caused the surrounding peoples to assist the Jewish postexilic community. The section ends in an interesting climax—God's good hand was so evident on His people that even surrounding peoples helped them in the sacrificial system, the means of fellowship with God.

## Ezra 9

### The Reform in the Land (Ch. 9-10)

In contrast with the high point of God's blessing on the people at the end of the previous section (8:36), this section opens with a statement about the severe sin into which the people of the postexilic community had fallen. The reason the people were back in the land was so that they would be able to worship God according to the ways of their forefathers under the Law. However, when the people returned to the land they still had a tendency to wander away from the words of God that had been written by Moses.

When Ezra arrived in Judah he found that the people of Israel had not kept themselves separate from the peoples of the land, but had begun to intermarry with them. Not only was intermarriage commonplace, but the spiritual and political leaders in Judah were the worst offenders!

Deeply shaken, Ezra tore his clothing and his hair—a sign in that time of intense grief and/or anger—and slumped down before the temple. At evening he rose, then fell on his knees and prayed. Ezra's prayer was a prayer of confession. And as he wept aloud, a large crowd gathered. They too began to weep bitterly! The Spirit of God was using the anguish of Ezra to touch the hearts of His people. Revival was about to break out!

- 1] Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, *doing* according to their abominations, *even* of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.
- 2] For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of *those* lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.

Ezra's return had a profound effect on the people of Israel. The man who was devoted to the accurate teaching of the Law became the focal point of a major reform. This occurred less than five months after his arrival (cf. 7:9 with 10:9).

The leaders came to me suggests that these were men who had previously returned to the land under Zerubbabel and had established themselves as leaders and had looked into the problem. Ezra's return may have pricked their consciences as they reflected on the Law of God. They realized that something had to be done about the situation if the nation was to enjoy fellowship with the Lord. Outward sacrifice was fine, but only if it was accompanied by an inward conformity to the Word of God (Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8). The Jewish leaders reported to Ezra that some Israelites had been involved with their pagan neighbors' detestable practices (cf. Ezra 9:11, 14) which meant they had married Gentiles.

One of God's major prohibitions was that His people were not to marry outside the community of believers (Ex 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-4). This was not because of racial difference, for the peoples of the surrounding areas were of the same Semitic race. The reason was strictly religious. If God's people married outside Israel they would be tempted (as was Solomon; 1 Kgs 11:3-5) to get caught up in pagan idolatrous worship. Intermarrying with people who did not worship Yahweh was symptomatic of the way the people forsook other aspects of God's Law. If they would break this aspect of the Law in the most intimate of human relationships then they would probably also break the Law in other less intimate human relationships.

The peoples listed in Ezra 9:1 were many of those God had warned about centuries before (Deut. 7:1), as well as the surrounding nations of Ammon, Moab, and Egypt. Unfortunately some religious and civil leaders had been in the forefront of this evil practice.

- 3] And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.

- 4] Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

Ezra's response was typical of the response of godly people in the Old Testament when they found out about sin. Tearing his tunic and cloak was a sign of mourning (cf. Num 14:6; Josh 7:6; Est 4:1; Job 1:20), and pulling hair from his head and beard was a sign of unusual grief or of intense anger (Isa 22:12). He was appalled because of the people's sin (Ezra 9:3; cf. v. 4). Ezra knew that it was for just this sort of sin that his nation had gone into captivity (cf. v. 7). Perhaps he was afraid they would go into captivity again (cf. v. 8).

- 5] And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God,

The evening sacrifice was around 3 P.M. Ezra's physical position (on his knees with his hands spread out to the LORD) showed that he was throwing himself on the mercy of God. Ezra knew that the nation was guilty (vv. 6-7; cf. vv. 13, 15) so he assumed a position of begging before the Lord. There was no excuse for the people's actions. Ezra's prayer was made at the temple with weeping (10:1).

- 6] And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over *our* head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.
- 7] Since the days of our fathers *have we been* in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, *and* our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as *it is* this day.

Ezra confessed the continuing problem of sin among the people of the nation. He reacted to the sin with embarrassment, using terms such as ashamed and disgraced. He felt embarrassed because it was for guilt like this that the nation had gone into captivity in the first place at the hand of foreign kings (viz., Sargon II and Nebuchadnezzar). The Captivity was to be a method of purifying the people and reestablishing a close relationship between them and God. Apparently the Exile had not accomplished its purpose because of the people's tendency to stray from their covenantal obligations. Like a flood their sins, Ezra said, had engulfed them for their sins were higher than their heads.

- 8] And now for a little space grace hath been *shewed* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

- 9] For we *were* bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

Ezra acknowledged the grace of God in allowing the people to return to the land. He reminded God and himself that it was the Lord's graciousness that allowed the kings of Persia to grant the Jews freedom to return to the land of promise to rebuild the temple. But now they were back in bondage—bondage to sin.

- 10] And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments,  
11] Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness.  
12] Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave *it* for an inheritance to your children for ever.

Ezra then confessed the men's present sin of intermarriage. Ezra asked, What can we say after this? By this question he was acknowledging that the nation had no excuse before God (cf. v. 6). No explanation was given for the leaders' disobedience. They had broken God's commands to remain pure before Him, and to separate from the corruption and detestable practices (cf. vv. 1, 14) in the land. They had directly disobeyed the clear Word of God. Foreign marriages contaminated Israel, fostered the foreigners' prosperity, weakened Israel spiritually, and decreased her opportunity to enjoy the land's crops.

- 13] And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and hast given us *such* deliverance as this;  
14] Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldst not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed *us*, so that *there should be* no remnant nor escaping?

The conclusion Ezra reached was that God would be totally just in destroying them in His anger so that no remnant would be left (cf. "remnant" in vv. 8, 13, 15). They deserved even greater punishment than God was giving them (cf. v. 6). In a nutshell, Ezra was describing the position of all mankind before God. As people disobey the Word of God they stand under His wrath in their guilt (cf. "guilt" in vv. 6-7, 13, 15; cf. Jn 16:8; Jas 2:10).

- 15] O LORD God of Israel, thou *art* righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as *it is* this day: behold, we *are* before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

Ezra's prayer included no specific request; he simply threw himself on God's mercy. By this he concluded his prayer in the same way he began. He acknowledged that no one in the entire community was worthy to stand before the righteous God. In his prayer Ezra affirmed several attributes of God: grace (v. 8), kindness (v. 9), anger (v. 14), and righteousness (v. 15). Ezra was asking God to be merciful on the basis of His loyal love for the nation.

## Ezra 10

- 1] Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.  
2] And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, *one* of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing.  
3] Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.  
4] Arise; for *this matter belongeth* unto thee: we also *will be* with thee: be of good courage, and do *it*.

Many people acknowledged that something had to be done about the situation. Apparently this sin had gone on and had been tolerated for some time. Children were born to some of those who had intermarried (vv. 3, 44). No doubt some devout Jews were grieved because of this sin in the community. Perhaps they were afraid to speak up or had tried and were rebuffed. In any case, now that some of the leaders were joining Ezra in bemoaning the sin, these righteous people joined in the mourning and began to demand that something be done. A large crowd of Israelites gathered with Ezra and wept bitterly.

One man, Shecaniah, spoke for all the people who were weeping. He acknowledged the unfaithfulness of the nation but he felt that there was still hope for Israel. He suggested that the people covenant before God to divorce the foreign women and send them away along with the children they had borne. This was to be done according to the Law. Shecaniah promised Ezra that the people would stand behind him in such

a decision. Shecaniah was calling on the nation to do something distasteful and difficult, something that could cause bitter division between family members and friends. However, he appealed on the basis of the Law of God which was supposed to be the people's rule of life. The Law also was a safeguard for this situation, for an Israelite could marry a woman from outside the nation if she had become Jewish in faith. Perhaps that is why each marriage was investigated thoroughly (vv. 16-19)—to see if any women had become Jewish proselytes.

Though divorce was not the norm, it may have been preferable in this situation because the mixed marriages, if continued, would lead the nation away from true worship of Yahweh. Eventually they would destroy the nation. On the other hand some Bible students believe this plan was not in accord with God's desires (cf. Mal 2:16). Do two "wrongs" make one "right"? Perhaps Ezra wrongly followed Shecaniah's advice in requiring these divorces. However, no specific support for this view is indicated in Ezra 10.

- 5] Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware.
- 6] Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and *when* he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.
- 7] And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem;
- 8] And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

The people's sincerity in their confession and repentance was shown by the fact that they took an oath before God. Taking an oath was not a light matter; it bound the oath-taker to do what he had promised. If he did not, he would be punished.

Ezra withdrew to fast and mourn by himself. Jehohanan was the same as Johanan (Neh 12:23). He was the grandson of Eliashab (Neh 12:10-11), who was the high priest (Neh 13:28). Hence, son of Eliashab (Ezra 10:6) means "grandson of Eliashab" ("son" in Heb. often means a grandson or even a later descendant). A proclamation was sent out to all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. Anyone who did not come would lose his property and would be expelled from the assembly of the exiles. In effect such a person would no longer have any legal rights. Ezra had this

authority to send out a proclamation with threat of punishment, because of the edict of the king (cf. 7:26).

- 9] Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It *was* the ninth month, on the twentieth *day* of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of *this* matter, and for the great rain.
- 10] And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel.
- 11] Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

The square to the east of the temple could accommodate thousands of people. The temple area was always the center of action in the Book of Ezra. On the appointed day (three days after the proclamation, in November-December 457) as the people were gathering, a rainstorm was in progress. This was the rainy season (v. 13). However, because of the oath (v. 5) and because of the threat of punishment the meeting went on as scheduled. The people were distressed out of fear of God's wrath and over concern about their families being separated. As Ezra addressed the group, he cited their sin of unfaithfulness, pronounced their guilt, and challenged them to acknowledge their sin and do something about it by becoming separate from their foreign wives.

- 12] Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.
- 13] But the people *are* many, and *it is* a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither *is this* a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed in this thing.
- 14] Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us.
- 15] Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this *matter*: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them.

The people responded that they agreed, but that the matter would take some time because of the large number of people involved and because of the rain. (In fact, it took three months; vv. 16-17.) Someone suggested that each man who had married a foreign woman should make an appointment with the elders and judges of his hometown so that the matter could be settled locally. This was a good suggestion because the elders and judges of each town would know the individuals involved. They would know whether the women involved were worshippers of the

Lord or were still involved in pagan worship. Four leaders opposed the plan, though it is not clear why. Perhaps they wanted to take care of the matter right away; or perhaps they did not want to take care of it at all. At least one of them, Meshullam, was guilty (v. 29).

- 16] And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, *with* certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by *their* names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter.
- 17] And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.

In just 11 days the examining began (cf. vv. 9, 16). It took three months for all the marriages to be examined, from the first day of the 10th month (December-January 457) to the first day of the 1st month of the next year (March-April 456). Obviously the problem was widespread and could not be settled in a day (v. 13). Each case was judged individually so that justice would be done. By this action the community was not saying that divorce was good. It was a matter of following God's Law about the need for religious purity in the nation (Ex 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-4). Ezra wrote nothing about what happened to these foreign women or their children. Presumably they returned to their pagan countries.

- 18] And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: *namely*, of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah.

Ezra concluded his account by listing the offenders in the foreign marriages. Involved in this serious sin were 17 priests (vv. 18-22) and ten Levites including a singer and three gatekeepers (vv. 23-24), and 84 others from around the nation (vv. 25-43). As the leaders had said (9:1), some priests and Levites were guilty. The guilty priests each offered a ram as a guilt offering in accord with Leviticus 5:14-15. The family names in Ezra 10:25-43 correspond closely to those in 2:3-20. Some of these had children by these marriages (10:44). This was a grievous separation from God's covenant. Unfortunately the people would again slip into the same kind of sin only one generation later (Neh 13:23-28). The narrative ends abruptly at this point. The message of the book is complete. In order for the people to be back in fellowship with the Lord it was absolutely necessary for them to have proper temple worship (Ezra 1-6) and to live according to God's Word (chaps. 7-10).

- 19] And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and *being* guilty, *they offered* a ram of the flock for their trespass.

- 20] And of the sons of Immer; Hanani, and Zebadiah.
- 21] And of the sons of Harim; Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and Uzziyah.
- 22] And of the sons of Pashur; Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasah.
- 23] Also of the Levites; Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah, (the same *is* Kelita,) Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer.
- 24] Of the singers also; Eliashib: and of the porters; Shallum, and Telem, and Uri.
- 25] Moreover of Israel: of the sons of Parosh; Ramiah, and Jeziah, and Malchiah, and Miamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah.
- 26] And of the sons of Elam; Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Eliah.
- 27] And of the sons of Zattu; Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and Zabad, and Aziza.
- 28] Of the sons also of Bebai; Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, *and* Athlai.
- 29] And of the sons of Bani; Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, and Ramoth.
- 30] And of the sons of Pahathmoab; Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, and Binnui, and Manasseh.
- 31] And *of* the sons of Harim; Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchiah, Shemaiah, Shimeon,
- 32] Benjamin, Malluch, *and* Shemariah.
- 33] Of the sons of Hashum; Mattenai, Mattathah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, *and* Shimei.
- 34] Of the sons of Bani; Maadai, Amram, and Uel,
- 35] Benaiah, Bedeiah, Chelluh,
- 36] Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,
- 37] Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasau,
- 38] And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei,
- 39] And Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah,
- 40] Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai,
- 41] Azareel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah,
- 42] Shallum, Amariah, *and* Joseph.
- 43] Of the sons of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadau, and Joel, Benaiah.
- 44] All these had taken strange wives: and *some* of them had wives by whom they had children.

\* \* \*

## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) List usage of "Judah" and "Israel" and describe the distinctives implied.
- 2) Outline Ezra's prayer. How did the people respond?

## Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) What traits are evident in Ezra’s life, and how are they applicable to our own?
- 2) What were the primary duties of the Levites? How did this impact the responsibilities of the parents (Deut 6, et al.)?
- 3) How does the prohibition of intermarrying in the OT impact our lives today?
- 4) How does the actions in this segment of Scripture impact our views of divorce?

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Summarize the commands to remain separate in the Scripture. How are they, if at all, relevant today? Why are they *not* relevant to our understanding of Genesis 6?

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Nehemiah 1 & 2.

## Session 4 Nehemiah 1 - 2

God had promised Israel that if they obeyed Him, He would bless them as a nation. If they did not, then He would judge them and cause them to be taken into captivity (Deut 28). As happened so frequently among many of Israel’s leaders, a good beginning had an unfortunate ending. Solomon sinned against God, particularly by marrying many foreign wives and worshiping their false gods (1 Kgs 11:1-5). So the kingdom was split in 931 B.C. The 10 Northern tribes were initially ruled by Jeroboam, and the Southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) were ruled at first by Rehoboam.

Both kingdoms, however, continued to be characterized by idolatry and immorality. And as God had forewarned, His hand of judgment fell on all Israel because of their sin. The Northern Kingdom fell first and the

people were taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The Babylonians brought about the fall of the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C.

The Israelites of the Northern Kingdom were absorbed into Assyria and eventually into other cultures. However, the people of the Southern Kingdom remained intact in Babylon, and after the power of Babylon was broken by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C., many Jews returned to their homeland. In 538 B.C. the first group returned to Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1-2:2). Over a period of years and tremendous opposition from the Samaritans, the returnees eventually succeeded in rebuilding the temple in 515 B.C.

A number of years later—in 458 B.C.—a second group of Jews returned, led by Ezra (Ezra 7:1-10). Arriving on the scene, they found the Jews in Israel in a state of spiritual and moral degradation. They had intermarried with the unbelieving peoples of the surrounding nations and were participating in their pagan practices. However, through Ezra’s faithful teaching ministry, the majority of these people turned from their sins and once again followed God’s will for their lives.

In 445 B.C., 14 years after Ezra’s return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah also returned and God used him to guide Judah in rebuilding the city’s walls and in reordering the people’s social and economic lives. The decree that authorized Nehemiah was the decree that Gabriel had announced to Daniel which would trigger the most astonishing prophecy in the Old Testament: The Seventy “Weeks” of Daniel, Chapter 9.

Artaxerxes I, whom Nehemiah served as cupbearer, was the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who took Esther to be his queen. The Feast of Purim (Est 9:20-32) was instituted on March 8, 473 B.C., only eight years before Artaxerxes I became king. In the spring of 457 B.C., Ezra led an expedition of Jews back to Jerusalem with the blessing of Artaxerxes; and by the following spring, he had completed the examination of those in Judea who had married foreign women (see notes on Ezra 10).

One of the by-products of the revival under Ezra seems to have been an effort on the part of the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This in turn provoked the wrath of Rehum and Shimshai, who wrote an accusation against them to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-16). The king commanded the work to cease until a further decree should be issued (Ezra 4:21). Rehum and Shimshai, upon receiving this decree from the king, hurried to Jerusalem and “made them to cease by force and power,” presumably breaking down the wall that had been started and burning the gates (Ezra

4:23; Neh 1:3). It was the news of this fresh disaster that shocked Nehemiah and brought him to his knees before God.

The Book of Nehemiah covers a period of at least twenty years, from December, 445 B.C., to about 425 B.C., when Nehemiah returned from Babylon to cleanse Jerusalem, and the province, of various evils that had crept in during his absence since 432 B.C. The careers of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, as may be seen in Neh 8:1-9 and 12:26. It is quite probable that Malachi prophesied during the governorship of Nehemiah, for many of the evils he denounced are found to be prominent in the Book of Nehemiah.

It must be said, in conclusion, that no portion of the Old Testament provides us with a greater incentive to dedicated, discerning zeal for the work of God than the Book of Nehemiah. The example of Nehemiah's passion for the truth of God's Word, whatever the cost or consequences, is an example sorely needed in the present hour. May the prayerful study of this book lead more of God's people today to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."

## Nehemiah 1

- 1] The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,

Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah: This distinguishes him from others of the same name (Ezra 2:2; Neh 3:16), though nothing further is known of his father, nor do we know his tribe.

"In the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year": This was December, 445 B.C., the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (2:1).

"In Shushan the palace": In 478 B.C., Esther became Xerxes' queen in this palace (Est 2:8-18); and in 550 B.C., Daniel was carried there in a vision (Dan 8:2).

While serving at the Persian winter palace, Nehemiah one day received a report from several men who had come from Judah. One of them was his own brother, Hanani; later Nehemiah appointed him to a high position in Jerusalem (7:2).

- 2] That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and *certain* men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.
- 3] And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

The report instantly depressed Nehemiah. It pertained to his people and their land. The Jews in Judah (a province of Persia) were greatly troubled and disgraced, and Jerusalem's wall was broken down and its gates had been burned. (Six gates were later repaired, 3:1, 3, 6, 13-15.) This left the city defenseless against enemy attacks. The people had been rebuilding the walls (Ezra 4:12) but were stopped by Artaxerxes who was pressured by some Samaritans and Rehum, the commanding officer, who may have been a Persian responsible to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:17-23).

Because of Nehemiah's position in the king's court, he must have been aware of Rehum's initial letter and Artaxerxes' subsequent response. However, he had probably not received word as to the results of the letter, though no doubt he feared for his brothers in Jerusalem. It is with this prior knowledge that he received the disappointing report from Jerusalem with a sense of deep regret and despair.

- 4] And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,

His praying was continual ("day and night," Neh 1:6). Fasting, though not a requirement of the Law except on the annual Day of Atonement, often evidenced one's distraught condition (cf. 2 Sam 12:16; 1 Kgs 21:27; Ezra 8:23).

- 5] And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:

Nehemiah faced a situation he knew he could not solve by himself. But he also knew that with God all things are possible (cf. Jer 32:17). Nehemiah began his prayer by acknowledging that fact: O LORD, God of heaven (cf. Neh. 1:4), the great and awesome God (cf. 4:14; 9:32).

"LORD" (Yahweh) speaks of His covenant relationship to Israel; "God of heaven" refers to His sovereignty; "great and terrible (awesome)" are mindful of His power and majesty. Surely such a God could answer Nehemiah's prayer.



- 6] Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

In this prayer of confession of the sins of the people of Israel, Nehemiah included himself. As the Prophet Daniel had prayed almost 100 years before (Dan 9:4-6) and as Ezra had prayed (Ezra 9:6-15), Nehemiah acknowledged that he shared the responsibility for Israel's disobedience to God's laws. He placed himself and Israel in a submissive attitude under the Lord by calling himself God's servant (cf. Neh 1:10-11) and by calling them His servants (cf. vv. 10-11; also note "thy servant Moses," vv. 7-8).

- 7] We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.
- 8] Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, *If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:*
- 9] But *if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.*
- 10] Now these *are* thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.
- 11] O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

Humanly speaking only one person could make it possible for Nehemiah to help the Jews in Jerusalem—the king he served. Years earlier, Artaxerxes had issued a decree to stop the construction work in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21), and he was the only one who could reverse that order. That is why Nehemiah prayed specifically, Give Your servant (cf. v. 6) success today by granting him favor (lit., "compassion") in the presence of this man. Nehemiah was referring of course to King Artaxerxes (cf. 2:1). A favorable relationship with the king could open the door for his petition.

As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah was responsible for tasting the wine before serving it to the king to be sure it was not poisoned. Nehemiah therefore had frequent access to the king. "The cupbearer in later Achaemenid times was to exercise even more influence than the commander-in-chief."<sup>1</sup>

## Nehemiah 2

- 1] And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, *that wine was before him:* and I took up the wine, and gave *it* unto the king. Now I had not been *beforetime* sad in his presence.

Four months went by before Nehemiah's opportunity came—from Kislev (1:1, November-December) to Nisan (March-April). Although this was the first month, it was still Artaxerxes' twentieth year (cf. 1:1), because his official year began in the seventh month—Tishri (October).

Wine was before him: This was probably a private banquet, for the queen was present (v. 6).

- 2] Wherefore the king said unto me, Why *is* thy countenance sad, seeing thou *art* not sick? this *is* nothing *else* but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,

As Nehemiah was going about his usual duties the king noticed something different about Nehemiah's countenance. He was sad. The king was immediately curious about Nehemiah's state of depression, since this was the first time he had seen his cupbearer dejected. The king asked a pointed question, Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill?

- 3] And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, *lieth* waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?

Nehemiah was careful in replying. In fact he was even afraid. A servant was never to let his negative emotions show before the king, for it might suggest dissatisfaction with the king. To do so might jeopardize his position or even his life. Nehemiah had reason to fear, for being sad in the king's presence was a serious offense in Persia (cf. Est 4:2).

Also Nehemiah knew that his request was a bold one. As already stated, a few years earlier this king had stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem and now Nehemiah was going to ask that the order be reversed. The cupbearer was risking his life! But his response was wise, no doubt reflecting the fact that he had been thinking about this opportunity, should it come, for a number of months.

In Nehemiah's response he avoided naming Jerusalem, perhaps so that he would not touch a sensitive political nerve in the king. He appealed to the king's sense of respect—his sense of "rightness" regarding

proper respect for the dead. Nehemiah said the city where his ancestors were buried was in ruins and the gates had been burned (cf. 1:3). This was a sad state of affairs for the Jewish city. Seventy years before (in 515 B.C.), the temple had been rebuilt. The year was now 445; yet the city itself still needed much rebuilding.

- 4] Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Artaxerxes' heart responded to Nehemiah's statements. So he asked Nehemiah what the king might do about the situation.

- 5] And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.

With Judea being a Persian province, the cupbearer may have reasoned that perhaps the king would now be sensitive to Jerusalem's condition. Doubtless Nehemiah knew of the recent decree of Ezr 4:21, with the possibility left open for a further decree concerning Jerusalem. He now asked the king to reverse the first decree.

Speaking with courtesy (If it pleases the king; cf. 2:7; this appears elsewhere only in Est 1:19; 3:9; 5:4, 8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13) and humility (your servant), Nehemiah asked the king to send him to the city in Judah where his ancestors were buried so that he might rebuild the city. Again the cupbearer avoided mentioning Jerusalem specifically.

- 6] And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

The fact that the queen was seated there suggests this was a private gathering, since it was not customary for queens to appear at formal banquets. This was Damaspia. Remembering Esther's testimony, she probably influenced Artaxerxes to favor the request of this Jew. The king then asked Nehemiah when he would return. *This question indicated that the king would give him permission.*

Nehemiah responded immediately with a specific time frame, again indicating forethought on his part. Possibly a short time, later extended; for he remained in Jerusalem twelve years (5:14), and then returned to the king for several years (13:6).

- 7] Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;

Nehemiah then asked for the biggest favor yet. Knowing he would face opposition from his enemies, he requested letters of permission from the king to allow him to pass through the various provinces in the Trans-Euphrates, the large area west of the Euphrates River.

- 8] And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which *appertained* to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.

Nehemiah knew he would need access to timber for rebuilding the gates and the wall and other parts of the city. This was the castle that protected the Temple and overlooked the northwest corner of its courts. (Hananiah was the governor of this castle (Neh 7:2). Hyrcanus I (134–104 B.C.) built an acropolis here,<sup>2</sup> and still later Herod rebuilt it and named it *Antonia*.) The fact that Nehemiah knew the name of the man in charge of the king's forest near Jerusalem may indicate that he had done some careful research.

Artaxerxes' permission to rebuild the city of Jerusalem is the decree Daniel had prophesied 95 years earlier in 539 B.C. This decree was issued on March 14, 445 B.C. The definitive study was published by Sir Robert Anderson in his famous book, *The Coming Prince*, in 1894. (See our briefing, *Daniel's 70 Weeks*, or our *Expositional Commentary on Daniel* for a complete discussion of this amazing prophecy which demonstrates the deity of Christ, and lays out the outline of the events precedent to the Second Coming.)

- 9] Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.

The journey to Jerusalem, even though Nehemiah probably took the shortest route possible, would have taken at least two months. Ezra's trip, 14 years earlier, took four to five months (Ezra 7:8-9). On the way Nehemiah showed the governors of the provinces the king's letters of authorization. Also the king even provided a military escort for him! Nehemiah's official position called for a military escort (see notes on Ezr 8:22). These soldiers remained in Jerusalem for his protection (Neh 4:23).

- 10] When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.

But as soon as Nehemiah arrived, he began to face opposition. When Sanballat the Horonite (perhaps meaning he was from Beth-Horon about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem) and his associate Tobiah, from Ammon, heard that Nehemiah had arrived on the scene to help Israel, they were very displeased. Immediately they began to plan how to stop Nehemiah from achieving his goal.

Perhaps they were hoping to gain control of Judah. In fact in the Elephantine papyri written in 407 B.C., 37 years after this event, Sanballat was called “governor of Samaria.” But Nehemiah’s motivation remained undaunted. He knew that God had brought him to this moment in Israel’s history and he was about to tackle a project that others, for almost 100 years before him, had been unable to complete.

- 11] So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.  
12] And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I *any* man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither *was there any* beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.

Nehemiah knew there was no way he could share with the people in Jerusalem what God led him to accomplish without first doing some research and planning. After taking time (three days), presumably to think, pray, and get acquainted with some people there, he took a few men into his confidence, men he could trust.

- 13] And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

Then he made a careful survey of the walls to analyze the problem he faced. He did so at night, apparently to avoid letting others know his plans before they were firmly fixed in his mind. During these night hours he gained perspective and, as outlined in chapter 3, developed an effective plan to accomplish the task he had come to Jerusalem to perform.

- 14] Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king’s pool: but *there was* no place for the beast *that was* under me to pass.

In his nighttime inspection he rode his horse or mule from the Valley Gate in the southwest wall east to the Jackal Well, the site of which is unknown, and to the Dung Gate in the southeast part of the city. Possibly this is the same as the Potsherd Gate (Jer 19:2).

The Fountain Gate was north of the Dung Gate on the eastern wall. The King’s Pool may be the same as the Pool of Siloam which was near the King’s Garden (Neh 3:15), or the King’s Pool may have been south of the Pool of Siloam.

- 15] Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and *so* returned.

Apparently the rubble there kept him from proceeding on his mount so he went up the valley (probably the Kidron Valley east of the city). Either he went all round the entire wall or, more likely, he retraced his steps from the eastern wall. He went back into the city at his starting place, the Valley Gate.

- 16] And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told *it* to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

After Nehemiah had completed his secret survey and was satisfied that he had developed a workable plan, the time had come to reveal to the Jews why he was in Jerusalem.

- 17] Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that *we are* in, how Jerusalem *lieth* waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

“Them” = “Jews [i.e., common people], priests, nobles, officials,” in v. 16. First he challenged them to notice their deplorable circumstances, which had brought them trouble and disgrace (cf. 1:3). Then he challenged them to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and followed his challenge with a personal testimony as to how God’s gracious hand (cf. 2:8) had granted him favor before King Artaxerxes.

- 18] Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king’s words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for *this* good *work*.

When Nehemiah gave his challenge, the people’s negative feelings became positive. Despair turned to hope. They responded and began the rebuilding process. This was August 1, 444 B.C., for the wall was finished fifty-two days later, on September 21 (Neh 6:15).

- 19] But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard *it*, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What *is* this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?

Apparently word spread quickly regarding the Jews' response to Nehemiah's challenge. As soon as their enemies heard the news they stepped up their efforts to hinder the process. They used every demoralizing technique they knew, beginning with ridicule and the suggestion that they were rebels. Joining Sanballat and Tobiah (cf. v. 10) was Geshem (cf. 6:1-2, 6) the Arab.

- 20] Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

But Nehemiah was ready for their insidious attack. He affirmed that the God of heaven (cf. 1:4-5; 2:4) would enable them to succeed. The Jews, God's servants, would rebuild, but the three opponents had no share or claim (present) or historic right (past) to the city.

Once again Nehemiah brought the task—both in the eyes of Judah and his enemies—into clear focus. Their dependence was not to be on their abilities, human resources, or personal genius. Their hope was in the God of heaven! Nehemiah exhibited many characteristics necessary for effective leadership. Donald K. Campbell lists 21 such factors:<sup>3</sup>

1. He established a reasonable and attainable goal.
2. He had a sense of mission.
3. He was willing to get involved.
4. He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal.
5. He patiently waited for God's timing.
6. He showed respect to his superior.
7. He prayed at crucial times.
8. He made his request with tact and graciousness.
9. He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance.
10. He went through proper channels.
11. He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan.
12. He investigated the situation firsthand.
13. He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem.
14. He identified himself as one with the people.
15. He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal.
16. He assured them God was in the project.
17. He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles.
18. He displayed God's confidence in facing obstacles.
19. He did not argue with opponents.
20. He was not discouraged by opposition.
21. He courageously used the authority of his position.

## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) What peculiarity of the Persian legal system is essential to understanding Daniel 6, Ezra 4:21, Esther 8, and Nehemiah 2?
- 2) How does the permission that Nehemiah gained from Artaxerxes impact our understanding of Daniel 9:25?
- 3) Summarize the specific ways the enemies of Israel harassed and obstructed progress in both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

## Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Contrast the attitudes of Xerxes (“Ahasuerus” of Esther) and Artaxerxes (of Nehemiah).
- 2) Explore the various leadership qualities of Nehemiah, and their relevance to the Body of Christ today.

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) Thoroughly explore the background and details of Daniel 9:24-27, and its relation to Luke 19.
- 2) Contrast the genealogies of Mordecai and Haman in the Book of Esther.

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Nehemiah 3, 4, & 5.

### Notes:

1. A. T. Olmstead, *The History of the Persian Empire*, p. 217.
2. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.11.4.
3. Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, p. 23.

## Session 5

### Nehemiah 3 – 5

A task as enormous as rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, especially under adverse conditions, called for unusual organizational effort. The uniqueness of Nehemiah's plan is evident in this chapter. Several aspects of his delegation of the work are evident.

He assigned everyone a specific place to work. This coordination stands out in the phrases "next to him," "next to them," "next to that," "the next section," "beside him," and "beyond them," which occur 28 times in this chapter. Assignments were made near people's houses (vv. 21, 23-24, 26, 28-30).

Commuters also had a part. Men whose homes were outside of Jerusalem—in Jericho (v. 2), Tekoa (vv. 5, 27), Gibeon (v. 7), and Mizpah (v. 7)—were assigned to sections of the wall where there were few homes.

Assignments were also made by vocation. For example, the high priest and his fellow priests were assigned to rebuild the Sheep Gate (v. 1). This was of particular interest to them, because animals were brought through that gate to the temple for sacrifice. Other priests are mentioned in verses 22, 28. Other workers whose vocations are listed include goldsmiths (vv. 8, 31-32), perfume-makers (v. 8), district and half-district rulers (vv. 9-12, 14-19), Levites (v. 17), and merchants (vv. 31-32). Even one man's daughters were involved (v. 12).

### Nehemiah 3

- 1] Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel.
- 2] And next unto him builded the men of Jericho. And next to them builded Zaccur the son of Imri.

Nehemiah's account of the repairs begins with the Sheep Gate at the northeast of the wall, and proceeds counterclockwise. The Sheep Gate is known to have been in that location because it was near the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:2), which archeologists have located in that area.

Eliashib the high priest (cf. Neh 13:4) was a grandson of Jeshua (12:10), the high priest in Zerubbabel's day (Ezra 3:2). Eliashib and other priests

(cf. Neh 3:22) repaired and dedicated the Sheep Gate and then repaired the walls to the Tower of the Meah ("Hundred") and the Tower of Hananel (also mentioned in 12:39; Jer 31:38; Zech 14:10). They were between the Sheep Gate and the Fish Gate.

- 3] But the fish gate did the sons of Hassenaah build, who *also* laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof.

The Fish Gate may have been the gate through which the people of Tyre brought fish they sold (13:16).

- 4] And next unto them repaired Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz. And next unto them repaired Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabeel. And next unto them repaired Zadok the son of Baana.

Meremoth, a priest's son (cf. Ezra 8:33), also worked on a second section (Neh 3:21), as did Meshullam (v. 30), whose daughter was married to Tobiah's son (6:18).

- 5] And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord.

The men of Tekoa, Amos' hometown (Amos 1:1) about 12 miles south of Jerusalem, repaired a section. Though the nobles of Tekoa did not help in the project, others from Tekoa took on another section, on the east wall (Neh 3:27).

- 6] Moreover the old gate repaired Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah; they laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, and the locks thereof, and the bars thereof.
- 7] And next unto them repaired Melatiah the Gibeonite, and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon, and of Mizpah, unto the throne of the governor on this side the river.

Gibeon and Mizpah were a few miles northwest of Jerusalem. (Meronoth's site is unknown.) Somewhat surprisingly, those towns were under the governor of Trans-Euphrates (cf. 2:9). The exact sites of those gates and of the Tower of the Ovens (3:11) is not known, but the tower may have been near the ovens in the street of the bakers (Jer 37:21).

- 8] Next unto him repaired Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, of the goldsmiths. Next unto him also repaired Hananiah the son of *one of* the apothecaries, and they fortified Jerusalem unto the broad wall.

A goldsmith and a perfume-maker (Neh 3:8) took on a different line of work when they went into construction labor.

- 9] And next unto them repaired Rephaiah the son of Hur, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem.
- 10] And next unto them repaired Jedaiah the son of Harumaph, even over against his house. And next unto him repaired Hattush the son of Hashabniah.
- 11] Malchijah the son of Harim, and Hashub the son of Pahathmoab, repaired the other piece, and the tower of the furnaces.
- 12] And next unto him repaired Shallum the son of Haloheh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and his daughters.

Even rulers of Jerusalem's districts and half-districts (vv. 9, 12; cf. vv. 14-15) took up tools for the building project.

- 13] The valley gate repaired Hanun, and the inhabitants of Zanoah; they built it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof, and a thousand cubits on the wall unto the dung gate.
- 14] But the dung gate repaired Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part of Bethhaccerem; he built it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof.

The Valley Gate was where Nehemiah's nighttime inspection tour began and ended (2:13, 15). The Dung Gate was so named because it led to the Hinnom Valley south of the city where refuse was dumped.

- 15] But the gate of the fountain repaired Shallun the son of Colhozeh, the ruler of part of Mizpah; he built it, and covered it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof, and the wall of the pool of Siloah by the king's garden, and unto the stairs that go down from the city of David.
- 16] After him repaired Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, the ruler of the half part of Bethzur, unto *the place* over against the sepulchres of David, and to the pool that was made, and unto the house of the mighty.

The Fountain Gate was on the east wall, north of the Dung Gate. The Pool of Siloam was near the King's Garden, near which Zedekiah, Judah's last king, had gone in his attempt to escape from Jerusalem while the Babylonians were conquering the city (Jer 39:4).

The tombs of David refer to those of David and his descendants, the kings of Judah. David was buried in this area, "the city of David" (1 Kgs 2:10). The artificial pool may be the King's Pool (Neh 2:14) or perhaps the "lower pool" (Isa 22:9). The House of the Heroes may have been the barracks of David's select soldiers, or "mighty men" (2 Sam 23:8).

- 17] After him repaired the Levites, Rehum the son of Bani. Next unto him repaired Hashabiah, the ruler of the half part of Keilah, in his part.
- 18] After him repaired their brethren, Bavai the son of Henadad, the ruler of the half part of Keilah.

- 19] And next to him repaired Ezer the son of Jeshua, the ruler of Mizpah, another piece over against the going up to the armoury at the turning *of the wall*.

The armory is another point near the eastern wall. The angle was apparently some turn in the wall. Another angle is mentioned in verses 24-25.

- 20] After him Baruch the son of Zabbai earnestly repaired the other piece, from the turning *of the wall* unto the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest.
- 21] After him repaired Meremoth the son of Urijah the son of Koz another piece, from the door of the house of Eliashib even to the end of the house of Eliashib.

Meremoth (v. 21) repaired two sections (cf. v. 4), as did the Tekoites (vv. 5, 27). Priests (v. 22; cf. v. 1) and Levites (v. 17) were involved in the repair work, closer to the temple than to other parts of the wall.

- 22] And after him repaired the priests, the men of the plain.
- 23] After him repaired Benjamin and Hashub over against their house. After him repaired Azariah the son of Maaseiah the son of Ananiah by his house.
- 24] After him repaired Binnui the son of Henadad another piece, from the house of Azariah unto the turning *of the wall*, even unto the corner.
- 25] Palal the son of Uzai, over against the turning *of the wall*, and the tower which lieth out from the king's high house, that *was* by the court of the prison. After him Pedaiiah the son of Parosh.

The tower (v. 25) was near the palace, presumably the palace built by Solomon (1 Kgs 7:1-8). The court of the guard may have been part of Solomon's great courtyard near his palace (1 Kgs 7:9-12). The hill of Ophel (Neh 3:26) was the area between the city of David and the temple mount. Understandably the temple servants lived near the temple area.

- 26] Moreover the Nethinims dwelt in Ophel, unto *the place* over against the water gate toward the east, and the tower that lieth out.
- 27] After them the Tekoites repaired another piece, over against the great tower that lieth out, even unto the wall of Ophel.

Private houses were some of the points of reference: the house of Eliashib the high priest (vv. 20-21; cf. v. 1), Benjamin and Hashub's house (v. 23), and Azariah's house (vv. 23-24). Other houses were mentioned later including the priests' houses (v. 28), Zadok's house (v. 29), Meshullam's house (v. 30), and "the house of the temple servants and the merchants" (v. 31).

- 28] From above the horse gate repaired the priests, every one over against his house.

The Horse Gate (v. 28) on the east wall may have been where horses entered the palace area. The East Gate (v. 29) was directly east of the temple area. Malkijah (v. 31) is the third man by this name in this chapter (see vv. 11, 14). His wall repairs extended south to the house of the temple servants, who are mentioned in verse 26 as living on the hill of Ophel. Merchants also lived in that area near the temple servants. The Inspection Gate was at the northeast corner of the wall (cf. the corner in v. 24).

- 29] After them repaired Zadok the son of Immer over against his house. After him repaired also Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah, the keeper of the east gate.
- 30] After him repaired Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, another piece. After him repaired Meshullam the son of Berechiah over against his chamber.
- 31] After him repaired Malchiah the goldsmith's son unto the place of the Nethinims, and of the merchants, over against the gate Miphkad, and to the going up of the corner.
- 32] And between the going up of the corner unto the sheep gate repaired the goldsmiths and the merchants.

The room above the corner was a room on the wall whose purpose is not known. The Sheep Gate brings the reader back to the starting point (v. 1).

## Nehemiah 4

### Nehemiah's Reactions to Opposition

Chapter 3 might give the impression that once Nehemiah had carefully assigned everyone to a particular section of the wall, from that time on everything progressed smoothly. Not so! God's work seldom goes forward without opposition.

- 1] But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.

"Jews": After the Babylonian captivity, the terms "Jew" and "Israelite" are used interchangeably. Ezra calls the returning remnant "Jews" 8 times and "Israel" 40 times. (Ezra also speaks of "all Israel": Ezra 2:70; 3:11; 8:35; 10:25, et al.) Nehemiah uses the term "Jew" 11 times and "Israel" 22 times. Nehemiah too speaks of "all Israel" being back in the land (Neh 12:47). The remnant that returned from Babylon is represented as "the nation" (Mal 1:1, et al.).

The same is true in the New Testament. Our Lord is said to have offered Himself to the nation, "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:5-

6; 15:24). Tribes other than Judah are mentioned specifically in the NT as being represented in the land. Anna knew her tribal identity was of the tribe of Asher (Lk 2:36). Paul knew he was of the tribe of Benjamin, a "Jew" and an "Israelite" (Rom 11:1). The New Testament speaks of "Israel" 75 times and uses the word "Jew" 174 times. At the Feast of Pentecost Peter cries, "Ye men of Judea" (Acts 2:14), "ye men of Israel..." (Acts 2:22), and "All the house of Israel" (Acts 2:36). [An Addendum on "the Myth of the Ten Lost Tribes" has been appended on the last session.]

- 2] And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?
- 3] Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.

As noted earlier (2:10) Sanballat was displeased when he heard that Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem to help the Jews. Sanballat, however, did not know of God's interest in His people.

Sanballat's displeasure turned to intense anger (4:1; cf. v. 7). So with his associates, including Tobiah (2:19; 4:3; also cf. v. 7; 6:1, 12, 14) and Geshem (2:19), and in the presence of Samaritan soldiers, Sanballat ridiculed the Jews. He accused them of rebelling against King Artaxerxes (2:19) and by a series of questions he suggested they were incapable of completing the project (4:2). Calling them feeble he asked if they would offer sacrifices. That is, could they possibly complete the walls so that they could then give sacrifices of thanksgiving?

The question about finishing in a day suggests that the Jews did not know what they were undertaking. And how, Sanballat asked, could they use burned, weakened bricks from the heaps of debris? Tobiah the Ammonite (cf. 2:19), standing nearby, also tried to discourage the Jews. Ridiculing them, he said they were so inept in their work that a fox, weighing only a few pounds, would break it down by merely climbing up on it.

- 4] Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:
- 5] And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.

Prayer was a distinct and consistent part of Nehemiah's approach to problem-solving. When faced with Sanballat's demoralizing attack, he

immediately asked God for help: Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Like some of the imprecatory prayers in which the psalmists invoked God's condemnation on His enemies, Nehemiah's prayer in this instance was severe and condemning. He prayed that Sanballat and his cohorts would be taken captive and that they would be judged for their sins.

How should a Christian interpret this kind of praying, especially in view of what Jesus Christ said about praying for one's enemies? (Mt 5:44; cf. Rom. 12:14, 20) Several facts need to be noted:

- 1) In opposing the Jews, Sanballat and company were actually opposing God.
  - 2) God had already pronounced judgment on Israel's enemies. Nehemiah was praying according to God's will—that God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Josh 1:5).
  - 3) Nehemiah was praying that God would bring about what He had promised Abraham regarding those who curse His people (Gen 12:3).
  - 4) Vengeance belongs to God, not to Nehemiah or other believers (cf. Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19).
- 6] So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.

After praying, Nehemiah and the Jews *continued with the work*. Some Christians pray and then wait for things to happen, but not Nehemiah! As in all his efforts, he blended the divine perspective with the human. He faced Sanballat's opposition with *both* prayer and hard work. Once he committed the problem to the Lord, he trusted God to help them achieve their goal. And while praying and trusting, they rebuilt the wall to half its height.

At this juncture their task was half completed. Sanballat and Tobiah's efforts at demoralizing the Jews failed. The Jews rose above their enemies' attempts at discouragement. Because the people worked so diligently and enthusiastically (with all their heart), they were able to complete half the job in a surprisingly short period of time.

Nehemiah wrote later (6:15) that the entire task was completed in 52 days (about eight weeks of 6 days each), so possibly this halfway point took about four weeks.

*Well begun is half done.* — Ben Franklin

- 7] But it came to pass, *that* when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, *and* that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth,
- 8] And conspired all of them together to come *and* to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.
- 9] Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.

The Jewish workers' rapid progress naturally increased the threat to their enemies, who became very angry (cf. v. 1). So they decided to take more overt and corporate action. Joining Sanballat and the Samaritans from the north, Tobiah and the Ammonites from the east, Geshem (cf. 2:19) and the Arabs from the south, were men from Ashdod, a Philistine city, from the west. They all plotted together to attack Jerusalem, apparently from all sides.

The corporate strategy of Judah's enemies was met by a corporate response. Again the people (we) prayed for help, and then added action to their prayers by posting a guard round the clock to meet this threat.

- 10] And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and *there is* much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.
- 11] And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease.
- 12] And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us *they will be upon you*.

However, the problem was not automatically solved. In fact the builders faced some new problems. They were physically and psychologically exhausted and the work seemed endless (v. 10). Furthermore they faced the threat of a secret attack (v. 11) which Nehemiah knew was not idle talk (v. 12).

- 13] Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, *and* on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows.
- 14] And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, *which is* great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.
- 15] And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.



Nehemiah established a new strategy to meet the threat of enemy infiltration. He positioned some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall with swords, spears, and bows.

This must have been a difficult decision for Nehemiah. To place *whole* families together—including women and children—put tremendous pressure on fathers particularly. In case of outright attack, they would have no choice but to stay and fight for and with their family members. But Nehemiah knew it was the only decision he could make if they were to survive and succeed in rebuilding the walls.

Obviously fear gripped these people. So Nehemiah gathered them together and charged them to face the situation courageously (don't be afraid) and to remember the great and awesome Lord (cf. 1:5) who was on their side, and to fight to save their families. When their enemies heard that their plot had been discovered, they did not attack and the people resumed their construction work.

- 16] And it came to pass from that time forth, *that* the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers *were* behind all the house of Judah.
- 17] They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, *every one* with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other *hand* held a weapon.
- 18] For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and *so* builded. And he that sounded the trumpet *was* by me.

As the Jews continued their work they were more cautious. Nehemiah had half the men work while the other half guarded them with spears, shields, bows, and armor.

The officers in Jerusalem, who apparently had not yet been given responsibilities in the project, were enlisted to stand guard behind the workers. As some workers carried materials, presumably bricks and mortar, they each did so with one hand, while holding a weapon (probably a spear or sword) in the other. Each of the wall-workers (masons) worked with both hands but had his sword at his side. Though this arrangement meant fewer bricklayers were on the job, the work was well defended!

- 19] And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work *is* great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another.
- 20] In what place *therefore* ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us.

In addition Nehemiah stationed a trumpeter next to him—a man who would follow Nehemiah everywhere he went as he supervised the work. In case of an attack, the trumpet blast would rally the people to the place of attack. Again Nehemiah encouraged the people (cf. 2:20; 4:14), this time stating that their God would fight for them.

- 21] So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.
- 22] Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labour on the day.
- 23] So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, *saving that* every one put them off for washing.

The people worked diligently, from early morning till nighttime. Those living outside the city did not even return to their homes. Venturing outside Jerusalem at night would have been a dangerous risk. Through each night some workers stood guard, knowing the city was vulnerable to attack even then. They did not even take off their clothes to clean up after work; they kept a diligent watch at all times.

## Nehemiah 5

### Nehemiah's Handling of Internal Problems

Some say the events in this chapter happened after the wall was completed. It is argued:

- a) that calling a large assembly (v. 7) would have endangered the city, leaving it almost defenseless, and
- b) that Nehemiah would not have been appointed governor till after the wall was completed.

However, verse 16 suggests that the “wall work” was continuing.

- 1] And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews.
- 2] For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, *are* many: therefore we take up corn *for them*, that we may eat, and live.
- 3] *Some* also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.
- 4] There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, *and that upon* our lands and vineyards.
- 5] Yet now our flesh *is* as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children:

and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and *some* of our daughters are brought unto bondage *already*: neither *is it* in our power *to redeem them*; for other men have our lands and vineyards.

Up to this point Nehemiah's challenges as a spiritual leader focused primarily on those outside of Judah. But before the walls were finally rebuilt, he encountered the most difficult and intense kind of problem almost every spiritual leader has to face sometime—problems within. For Nehemiah, those problems centered not on Sanballat, Tobiah, or Geshem but on his own people, the Jews. There were four such difficulties:

First, the people face a food shortage. They said they needed to get grain for food to keep themselves and their families alive (v. 2). The work on the wall hindered their tending their crops. And this crop failure was called a famine.

Second, others had grain (buying it from others), but to get it they had to mortgage their fields vineyards, and homes (v. 3).

Third, others, not wanting to mortgage their property, had to borrow money from their Jewish brothers to pay property taxes to King Artaxerxes (v. 4). This problem was compounded by the fact that they were charged exorbitant interest rates by their own Jewish brothers.

This led to a fourth problem. To repay their creditors they had to sell their children into slavery (v. 5; cf. Ex. 21:2-11; Deut. 15:12-18). This of course left them in a hopeless state.

All these difficulties created an internal crisis in Judah. And they meant “double trouble” for Nehemiah. Not only were their enemies a constant threat to their security and state of well-being, but now many Jews were actually taking advantage of other Jews. Morale, which was already low (Neh. 4:10-12) because of external pressures, physical exhaustion, and fear, now took another plunge because of these internal problems.

- 6] And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.  
7] Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them.

Nehemiah's initial response to all this was deep anger. His intense emotion was directed at certain people's selfishness, greed, and insensitivity. Some people were hurting and suffering, and those who should

have been the most compassionate (the nobles and officials) were most guilty of exploitation. Though Nehemiah's anger was certainly righteous indignation, he did not take immediate action. Spending time reflecting on the problem enabled him to cool down, to see the facts in proper perspective, and to decide on a course of action (v. 7a).

- 8] And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing *to answer*.  
9] Also I said, *It is* not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?

After regaining his emotional equilibrium, Nehemiah confronted the situation head on. First, he rebuked those who were violating God's command not to charge their own people interest (cf. Ex 22:25; Lev 25:35-38; Deut 23:19-20). Money could be loaned (Deut 15:7-8) but not to gain interest from another person's distresses.

Second, calling a large meeting, Nehemiah pointed out the inconsistencies of their behavior compared with what he and others in exile had done personally to help their brothers. He and others had already purchased (redeemed) some indentured Jews who were sold to foreigners (cf. Lev 25:47-55). But now the opposite was happening; Jews were selling their fellow Jews *into* slavery.

Also God's reputation was at stake. This immoral and unethical behavior was bringing reproach on the One who had delivered their country from both Egyptian bondage and Babylonian Captivity. So he exhorted them to live in the fear of God (i.e., to trust, obey, and serve Him) and thus avoid the reproach of their Gentile enemies.

- 10] I likewise, *and* my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury.  
11] Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them.

Nehemiah's final action was intensely personal. He referred to his own example and that of others who were already helping those in need by lending them money and grain. He was already doing something about the problem. So he was not asking the people to do something he was not exemplifying in his own life. Some Bible translations and commentaries suggest that Nehemiah was admitting his own guilt of charging interest on his loans. This, however, seems inconsistent with his high

leadership qualities and his charge to the nobles and officials about their guilt (v. 7). Nehemiah then asked those guilty of exploitation to return what they had taken from others. Mortgaged fields, vineyards, olive groves (the groves are mentioned here for the first time; they were not referred to in vv. 3-5), and houses were to be returned (perhaps with the income made from the grain, new wine, and oil from those fields), charging interest (usury) was to stop, and the interest received from the loans was to be returned. The interest was a 100th part, that is, one percent a month. He emphasized the urgency of this exhortation by asking them to act immediately.

- 12] Then said they, We will restore *them*, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise.
- 13] Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise.

No doubt Nehemiah was pleased when the people responded to his exhortations. But knowing that words are cheap and easy to say on the spur of the moment under public pressure, he made the guilty leaders (nobles and officials; cf. v. 7) take another step—to take an oath affirming that they would do what they had said. The priests witnessed the oath-taking.

Nehemiah visualized for them the grave consequences that would come if they lied to God. Shaking out the folds of his robe (cf. Paul's action in Acts 18:6), which served as pockets, he asked that God similarly shake out of His house every person who failed to keep his oath. This gesture indicated rejection, something like shaking the dust off one's feet (Mt 10:14; Acts 13:51).

Presumably sometime while the city wall was being rebuilt, Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah. This was the highest position of leadership in the nation at that time.

[Later, as Nehemiah wrote this historical account of his years in Jerusalem, he evidently inserted these observations (vv. 14-19) about his perspective on that leadership position. Apparently he included these verses here in the narrative because of their relationship to the events described in verses 1-13.]

- 14] Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, *that is*, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor.
- 15] But the former governors that *had been* before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God.

Nehemiah served as Judah's governor for 12 years, from Artaxerxes' 20th year (444 B.C.) to his 32nd year (432 B.C.) This Hebrew word for governor is *peh#a~h* derived from the Akkadian word *pa~hatu*. (The word for governor in 7:65, 70; 8:9; 10:1 is a Persian word.) One of the "fringe benefits" of being governor was a food allowance, granted him by the Persian officials, perhaps for official entertaining of guests.

However, Nehemiah did not take advantage of what was rightfully his. In providing food for many Jews and in entertaining dignitaries from other nations (v. 17), he served food and wine out of his personal resources. This practice contrasted with the former governors, who charged the Jewish people 40 shekels (about one pound; cf. NIV marg.) of silver besides the food allowance of food and wine.

Even those governors' assistants took advantage of their position and oppressed the people, demanding their payments. Nehemiah's reverence for God kept him from placing a heartless burden on his fellow Jews. This is still another evidence of his sterling leadership qualities: compassion for those under him and refusal to use his privileges at the expense of others.

- 16] Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land: and all my servants *were* gathered thither unto the work.

As governor, Nehemiah could have loaned people money to pay their taxes, having them use their land as collateral. And then, when they could not pay back what they had borrowed, he could have applied the world's standard and taken their land.

He, along with other leaders in Judah, could have exploited the poor. But he did not acquire any land in this way, or by outright purchases. He was careful not to abuse his position as governor in any way, thereby jeopardizing the people's respect for him. In fact he continued working right along with the people in the construction project. He did not hesitate to get his hands dirty in this important building program, and

was never sidetracked by other interests. His motives were pure, and he never lost sight of God's calling in his life. He was in Jerusalem to help the people, not exploit them. He was there to exemplify God's Law, not violate it. He was there to rebuild the wall, not a personal empire.

- 17] Moreover *there were* at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that *are* about us.
- 18] Now *that* which was prepared *for me* daily *was* one ox *and* six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people.

Exactly who all the 150 Jews were for whom Nehemiah provided food is not known, though some of them were officials. The cost to supply one ox, six . . . sheep, and some poultry daily was no doubt great. Even so, Nehemiah willingly bore the cost out of his own pocket rather than place heavy demands on the people.

- 19] Think upon me, my God, for good, *according* to all that I have done for this people.

As a man of prayer, Nehemiah was in touch with God. He prayed that God would remember him (i.e., not fail to act on his behalf) because of his concern for the people. Seven times in his prayers recorded in this book Nehemiah asked God to remember (v. 19; 6:14 [twice]; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Remember me with favor is the same prayer he voiced at the end of the book (13:31).

## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) Make a sketch of Jerusalem during Nehemiah's day, and label the various gates referred to in the text. Note the specific areas known as Ophel, Zion, and the Temple area.
- 2) Who were the Nethinims? (Don't confuse them with the Nephilim!)
- 3) Summarize the various means that the enemies attempted to oppose and harass the rebuilding.
- 4) Summarize the internal management difficulties Nehemiah confronted and how he dealt with them.
- 5) List the lessons we can glean from Nehemiah's prayer life.

## Discussion Questions

("Where two people agree, one is redundant.")

- 1) Why is the precise location of the Temple significant in our day?
- 2) Discuss the use of the terms "Jew," "Israel," etc., and the topic of the "Ten Lost Tribes." Why is this view significant in our day?
- 3) List the principle means of opposition used by the enemies of God, and their lessons for us today.
- 4) It is often said that "we have met the enemy and it is us!" In what ways is the greatest challenge in God's work is ourselves? What lessons can we glean from Nehemiah?

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

Review the geography of Jerusalem, noting the location of the various valleys, etc. Identify the location of the moat north of the Temple area. Explore the alternative conjectures of the precise location of the Temple relative to the present Dome of the Rock. List the reasons that the Temple did *not* stand where the Dome of the Rock now sits.

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Nehemiah chapters 6, 7 and 8.

## Session 6 Nehemiah 6 - 8

It was only 12 years after Ezra's return that Nehemiah came to Judah. Nehemiah was a high official at the Persian court who, out of concern for Jerusalem, asked for and was given permission to serve as governor of that minor district. He served in Jerusalem 12 years, returned to Persia, and then came to Judah a second time to govern there.

Unlike Ezra the priest, Nehemiah exercised political power. Yet his colorful and decisive leadership dealt with more than restoring respectability to Jerusalem by rebuilding its walls. Nehemiah also committed himself to purifying the lifestyle of God's people and bringing them into conformity with God's Law.

It is striking to realize that even with Ezra in Judah, teaching the Word of God to the people, the Jews had drifted from full commitment. By Nehemiah's time intermarriage was again a problem, and doing business on the Sabbath Day was an established way of life. It was time for another fresh start for God's

In her days of greatness Israel never ranked in size with the empires and kingdoms of the Middle East. In Nehemiah's day this always-small land had shrunk even more; the district of Yehud (Judah) included only some 800 square miles! It extended north and south about 25 miles, and east and west about 32.

The tiny size of Judah and the plight of the exiles, who were surrounded on every side by hostile peoples, makes it easier for us to understand why Jewish morale so often ebbed, and why opposition from neighbors was usually all that was necessary to cause them to abandon a project.

Nehemiah's decision to live on this insignificant parcel of land rather than to continue in his important position in the capital of the great Persian Empire seems especially dramatic, and is a measure of this man's commitment to God.

## Nehemiah's Boldness

The people of Judah were discouraged about themselves and their future. Not Nehemiah! On his return to Judah he surveyed the tasks to be accomplished and laid his plans quietly (Neh. 2:11–16). (I don't know if he realized the significance of the timing with respect to Daniel 9:24–27!)

Nehemiah then boldly called the people of Israel to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem "and we will no longer be in disgrace." The response of the people was immediate—but so was the reaction of the Jewish opponents. They were greatly displeased that "someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites."

"Bold" seems to be the best word to use to describe Nehemiah's character. A catalog of the challenges he had to face, and his response to them, makes it clear that in spite of Judah's weakness Nehemiah was unimpressed by problems.

## Nehemiah 6

### Nehemiah's Response to Opposition Against Him

- 1] Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and *that* there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;)
- 2] That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in *some one* of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief.
- 3] And I sent messengers unto them, saying, *I am* doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?

When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem (cf. 2:19), and other enemies heard that the wall was completed and that the only thing remaining was to set the doors in the gates, those "wall opponents" again attempted to halt the work. This time they were more subtle; their sole object of attack was Nehemiah himself. By removing him from the scene or by at least destroying his credibility with the Jews, they reasoned that they might be able to defeat the work. Each of their three attacks on him was different, but each was designed to take his life or discredit his effectiveness as a leader.

This first attack was more subtle than the others. Sanballat and Geshem invited Nehemiah to meet with them in one of the villages on the plain of Ono. The plain of Ono was named after the town of that name (cf. 1 Chr 8:12; Ezra 2:33; Neh 7:37; 11:35). It was near Lod about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem, about 6 miles southeast of Joppa. As seen on the map "Postexilic Samaria and Judah," near Ezra 2, Ono was near the border of Samaria, Sanballat's home province. On the surface it appeared that Sanballat and his cohorts wanted to have a peace conference, but their hidden motive was to harm Nehemiah.

Nehemiah suspected foul play. Why would they want him a day's journey away from Jerusalem? Then he could not oversee the work, and by outnumbering him they might do him harm. Though he could not prove his enemies' motives at the moment, he chose a method that would eventually demonstrate whether they were sincere. He simply sent messengers to tell them he was involved in a great (important) project and could not leave it unsupervised. By responding in this way Nehemiah was not openly questioning their motives. In fact he was giving them an opportunity to prove their motives were sincere, if they had really wanted to make peace.

- 4] Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner.

Sanballat and Geshem's response tipped their hand. Rather than countering with an offer to meet with Nehemiah in Jerusalem, four times they sent . . . the same message and Nehemiah responded four times with his same refusal. Nehemiah could have impatiently attacked their motives on their third or fourth request. But he patiently waited it out till *they* revealed their motives. And this they did with their fifth response, which involved their second scheme.

- 5] Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand;  
6] Wherein *was* written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith *it, that* thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words.  
7] And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, *There is* a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together.

When Nehemiah's enemies realized he would not leave Jerusalem and meet with them, they tried another tactic. They put pressure on him, trying to force him to meet with them in the plain of Ono. Sanballat sent his servant to Nehemiah with an unsealed letter. The letter reported an alleged rumor that Nehemiah was trying to set himself up as the king of the Jews, which in turn would be a threat to Artaxerxes (the king).

This letter was insidious in several ways. First, the letter made it seem as if they had Nehemiah's welfare at heart. The letter implied that their reason for conferring with him was to protect him. Second, and more basic to their motive, they were attempting to get Nehemiah to respond out of fear. Third, the letter may have contained an element of truth. Possibly some well-meaning religious leader in Judah had interpreted Nehemiah's presence as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming Messiah-King.

- 8] Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.  
9] For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, *O God*, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah's bold response demonstrated his trust in God. He outrightly denied the accusation. He told his fellow workers that the letter was designed to frighten them into thinking their wall-building would bring Artaxerxes' wrath down on them. Then, as Nehemiah regularly did, he prayed, this time asking God for strength.

- 10] Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who *was* shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.

Persisting in their evil planning, Nehemiah's enemies then tried to destroy his credibility by luring him into the temple. They hired Shemaiah, a man "on the inside," to propose a solution to Nehemiah. Claiming to be a prophet, he purposely locked himself in his house, supposedly from some debility or ritual defilement, and sent word for Nehemiah to visit him. Perhaps Shemaiah devised an urgent situation that would arouse Nehemiah's curiosity.

Shemaiah must have been a man Nehemiah trusted, for it would have been illogical for him to meet secretly with someone he did not trust. When Nehemiah arrived, Shemaiah suggested they meet in the temple behind closed doors. He pretended to be protecting Nehemiah from would-be nighttime assassins.

- 11] And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who *is there*, that, *being* as I *am*, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.  
12] And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.  
13] Therefore *was* he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and *that* they might have *matter* for an evil report, that they might reproach me.  
14] My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.

Nehemiah discerned two flaws in Shemaiah's so-called prophecy. First, God would hardly ask Nehemiah to run when the project on the walls was nearing completion. Second, no true prophet would ask someone to violate God's Law. Only priests were allowed in the sanctuary (Num. 3:10; 18:7). If Nehemiah, not being a priest, entered the temple, he would have desecrated it and brought himself under God's judgment. He would not disobey God to try to gain safety from his enemies.

Nehemiah was convinced that Shemaiah was a false prophet, employed by Tobiah and Sanballat to trick him. If the governor had entered the temple and lived, his people would know he disregarded God's commands. Once again Nehemiah prayed, this time that God would remember (see comments on Neh. 5:19) his enemies and judge them for their evil scheming. In this imprecation he also included the Prophetess Noadiah, mentioned only here, who with other false prophets was seeking to intimidate him.

## Nehemiah's Completion of the Project

- 15] So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth *day of the month* Elul, in fifty and two days.
- 16] And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard *thereof*, and all the heathen that *were* about us saw *these things*, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.
- 17] Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters unto Tobiah, and *the letters* of Tobiah came unto them.
- 18] For *there were* many in Judah sworn unto him, because he *was* the son in law of Shechaniah the son of Arah; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.
- 19] Also they reported his good deeds before me, and uttered my words to him. *And* Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear.

The walls were completed in 52 days, on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Elul, which was about September 20. The project began in the last few days of July and continued through August and into September. The previous November-December (Kislev) was when Nehemiah first heard about the problem (1:1), and in March-April (Nisan) he presented his plan to the king (2:1). As stated earlier, the trip to Jerusalem took two or three months (April or May to June or July), as long as or longer than the building program itself.

The enemies' self-confidence dissipated as they saw that the work was done with God's help. Opposing Him, they were fighting a losing battle! One reason Tobiah the Ammonite (cf. 2:10, 19) was able to make some inroads into Judah was that he was related to the Jews in two ways (also cf. 13:4). His father-in-law was Shecaniah son of Arah (cf. Ezra 2:5), and his daughter-in-law was the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah, who worked on two sections of the wall (Neh 3:4, 30).

Many Jews were therefore loyalists to Tobiah, perhaps having trading contracts with him, and they kept telling Nehemiah good things about Tobiah. Yet Tobiah tried to intimidate the governor-builder with threatening letters.

## Nehemiah 7

- 1] Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed,

Besides repairing the walls, the builders repaired the gates. The last part of the project was setting the doors in the gates (cf. 6:1).

- 2] That I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he *was* a faithful man, and feared God above many.
- 3] And I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar *them*: and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one *to be* over against his house.

Hanani was Nehemiah's brother who had reported the Jerusalem problems to the cupbearer (1:2). Hananiah a man of integrity, had deep spiritual convictions. Nehemiah, knowing that his enemies were still around, ordered that security measures be maintained: the city gates were to be opened only a few hours each day; and citizens, probably many of whom had been wall-repairers, were to serve as guards.

- 4] Now the city *was* large and great: but the people *were* few therein, and the houses *were* not builded.
- 5] And my God put into mine heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first, and found written therein,
- 6] These *are* the children of the province, that went up out of the captivity, of those that had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and came again to Jerusalem and to Judah, every one unto his city;

Comparatively few people were residing in Jerusalem (v. 4) so Nehemiah wanted to populate it with people of pure Jewish descent (cf. 11:1-24). To register the present population Nehemiah began with the record of those who had returned with Zerubbabel and others (7:5-7). The list of names in verse 7 is almost identical with the list in Ezra 2:2, except that Nehemiah included Azariah and Nahamani.

- 7] Who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number, *I say*, of the men of the people of Israel *was this*;
- 8] The children of Parosh, two thousand an hundred seventy and two.
- 9] The children of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy and two.
- 10] The children of Arah, six hundred fifty and two.
- 11] The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand and eight hundred *and* eighteen.
- 12] The children of Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four.
- 13] The children of Zattu, eight hundred forty and five.
- 14] The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and threescore.
- 15] The children of Binnui, six hundred forty and eight.
- 16] The children of Bebai, six hundred twenty and eight.
- 17] The children of Azgad, two thousand three hundred twenty and two.
- 18] The children of Adonikam, six hundred threescore and seven.
- 19] The children of Bigvai, two thousand threescore and seven.

- 20] The children of Adin, six hundred fifty and five.  
 21] The children of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety and eight.  
 22] The children of Hashum, three hundred twenty and eight.  
 23] The children of Bezai, three hundred twenty and four.  
 24] The children of Hariph, an hundred and twelve.  
 25] The children of Gibeon, ninety and five.  
 26] The men of Bethlehem and Netophah, an hundred fourscore and eight.  
 27] The men of Anathoth, an hundred twenty and eight.  
 28] The men of Bethazmaveth, forty and two.  
 29] The men of Kirjathjearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty and three.  
 30] The men of Ramah and Geba, six hundred twenty and one.  
 31] The men of Michmas, an hundred and twenty and two.  
 32] The men of Bethel and Ai, an hundred twenty and three.  
 33] The men of the other Nebo, fifty and two.  
 34] The children of the other Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four.  
 35] The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty.  
 36] The children of Jericho, three hundred forty and five.  
 37] The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty and one.  
 38] The children of Senaah, three thousand nine hundred and thirty.  
 39] The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy and three.  
 40] The children of Immer, a thousand fifty and two.  
 41] The children of Pashur, a thousand two hundred forty and seven.  
 42] The children of Harim, a thousand and seventeen.  
 43] The Levites: the children of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, and of the children of Hodevah, seventy and four.  
 44] The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred forty and eight.  
 45] The porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, an hundred thirty and eight.  
 46] The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hashupha, the children of Tabbaoth,  
 47] The children of Keros, the children of Sia, the children of Padon,  
 48] The children of Lebana, the children of Hagaba, the children of Shalmi,  
 49] The children of Hanan, the children of Giddel, the children of Gahar,  
 50] The children of Reaiah, the children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda,  
 51] The children of Gazzam, the children of Uzza, the children of Phaseah,  
 52] The children of Besai, the children of Meunim, the children of Nephishesim,  
 53] The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur,  
 54] The children of Bazlith, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha,  
 55] The children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Tamah,  
 56] The children of Neziah, the children of Hatipha.  
 57] The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Perida,  
 58] The children of Jaala, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel,  
 59] The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Amon.

- 60] All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants, *were* three hundred ninety and two.  
 61] And these *were* they which went up *also* from Telmelah, Telharesha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer: but they could not shew their father's house, nor their seed, whether they *were* of Israel.  
 62] The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred forty and two.  
 63] And of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai, which took *one* of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite to wife, and was called after their name.  
 64] These sought their register *among* those that were reckoned by genealogy, but it was not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood.  
 65] And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood *up* a priest with Urim and Thummim.

Some scholars suggest that the list in Ezra 2 is that of the returnees before they departed from Babylon and that Nehemiah 7 gives the list of those who actually arrived in Jerusalem or the list of the community sometime after their arrival. The two chapters, however, give no indication of those differences.

The list included people by 18 families and clans (vv. 8-25) and a listing of inhabitants from 20 towns and villages. Then the priests (4,289 of them) were listed (Neh 7:39-42), followed by mention of 360 Levites which included singers and gatekeepers (vv. 43-45). The temple servants (vv. 46-56) and descendants of Solomon's servants (vv. 57-59) totaled 392 (v. 60). These were followed by reference to 642 returnees who could not trace their ancestries (vv. 61-62). Some of the priests could not clearly trace their genealogies so they were not allowed by the governor to eat the sacred food till a priest was ministering with the Urim and Thummim.

The groups enumerated in Nehemiah 7:8-62 total 31,089, whereas the groups enumerated in Ezra 2:3-60 total 29,818. The difference of 1,281 is seen in 19 of the 41 items. These variations may be copyists' errors or Ezra and Nehemiah may have had reasons for the different figures which were unstated and therefore unknown today.

- 66] The whole congregation together *was* forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,  
 67] Beside their manservants and their maidservants, of whom *there were* seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and they had two hundred forty and five singing men and singing women.  
 68] Their horses, seven hundred thirty and six: their mules, two hundred forty and five:



69] *Their* camels, four hundred thirty and five: six thousand seven hundred and twenty asses.

Nehemiah's grand total of 49,942 people is very close to Ezra's total of 49,897 (Ezra 2:64-65). The extra 45 in Nehemiah's total are the singers (Nehemiah had 245 whereas Ezra referred to 200). A scribe, in copying Nehemiah 7:67, might have inadvertently picked up the 245 in verse 68, in reference to mules, and inserted that number for the 200 singers. He then might have mistakenly omitted verse 68 (cf. NIV marg.). The total then was probably as Ezra recorded it—49,897.

But how does one account for the difference between the enumerated 31,089 and the 49,897—a difference of 18,808? The larger number may include women and children. Or it may include Jews from the Northern tribes who might have joined the remnant in Judah and Benjamin. It may also include the priests who could not delineate their genealogies (vv. 63-64). Nehemiah's enumeration even included the animals—a total of 8,136, most of them donkeys, used for riding. There was about one donkey available for every seven people.

70] And some of the chief of the fathers gave unto the work. The Tirshatha gave to the treasure a thousand drams of gold, fifty basons, five hundred and thirty priests' garments.

71] And *some* of the chief of the fathers gave to the treasure of the work twenty thousand drams of gold, and two thousand and two hundred pound of silver.

72] And *that* which the rest of the people gave *was* twenty thousand drams of gold, and two thousand pound of silver, and threescore and seven priests' garments.

Heads of the families and even the governor (see comments on v. 65) and the people gave large amounts of money and materials to begin the work of the temple. Nehemiah's 41,000 drachmas of gold are 61,000 in Ezra 2:69. Nehemiah referred to 4,200 minas of silver (totaling more than 21½ tons; cf. NIV marg.) whereas Ezra refers to 5,000 silver minas. The 597 priests' garments mentioned by Nehemiah are 100 in Ezra. Again these differences are probably caused by scribal errors in copying the manuscripts.

73] So the priests, and the Levites, and the porters, and the singers, and *some* of the people, and the Nethinims, and all Israel, dwelt in their cities; and when the seventh month came, the children of Israel *were* in their cities.

## Nehemiah 8

The success of this project led to a dramatic change in the attitude of the people of Judah. Their self-respect had been recovered by their victory

over their enemies; their awareness of God's presence had been stirred. Gathering together to celebrate and praise God, Nehemiah put forward Ezra the scribe "to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel" (8:1).

All the people gathered to hear as Ezra read and interpreted the words. (The interpretation was necessary because by this time the language of the people was Aramaic, not the classical Hebrew of the Old Testament documents. Ezra and the other teachers had to read in the original, translate, and explain.) This reading of the Law by Ezra took some seven days, and culminated on the eighth day with a worship service. The Jews recovered their sense of identity as God's people.

1] And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that *was* before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.

When the seventh month arrived the Israelites were settled in their towns (cf. 7:73a). The seventh month was September-October. Ezra had returned to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., 14 years before Nehemiah, also with the blessing of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7). His primary purpose in going to his homeland was to teach the Jews God's Law. In Ezra 7:6, 11-12, 21 he was called a teacher. Of course Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries (cf. Neh 12:33, 36).

When Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem, the moral and spiritual condition of the people was deplorable (Ezra 9:1-4; 10:2, 10). But as he prayerfully taught them God's Word, they began to respond to and to obey the laws of God. A few years later Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and challenged them to trust God to help them rebuild the walls. The effectiveness of Ezra's ministry is also reflected in the people's behavior after the walls were completed. The two-month building program was an interlude in Ezra's teaching, but apparently it helped motivate the people to want to know more of God's Law.

They themselves asked Ezra to continue his teaching ministry among them (Neh 8:1). This was the first day of the seventh month, the day which was to be the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24; Num. 29:1). Adults and children who were old enough to understand (Neh. 8:2-3) listened attentively all morning as Ezra faced west by the Water Gate (cf. v. 1).

2] And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

- 3] And he read therein before the street that *was* before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people *were attentive* unto the book of the law.
- 4] And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, *and* Meshullam.
- 5] And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:
- 6] And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with *their* faces to the ground.
- 7] Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people *stood* in their place.
- 8] So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused *them* to understand the reading.
- 9] And Nehemiah, which *is* the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day *is* holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.

Standing on a platform above the people Ezra read from the Law, while 13 men, perhaps priests (cf. v. 7), stood on the platform beside him. As he read, the people stood (v. 5). He then praised the LORD, the great God (cf. 1:5; 4:14).

The people's response to the reading of the Scriptures and to Ezra's praises must have been an emotional experience for this scribe and priest. Lifting their hands toward heaven they shouted Amen! Amen! in an expression of agreement with God's Word. Then they fell on their knees and bowed low as they worshiped the LORD (8:6).

Nehemiah did not explain exactly how Ezra and the Levites read and explained God's Law to this large crowd that may have numbered between 30,000 and 50,000 people (7:66-67). Possibly Ezra read sections of the Law in the presence of all the people (8:3), and then at certain times the Levites circulated among them and made it clear ("to make distinct or interpret," possibly means here "to translate" from Hebrew to Aramaic) and explained (gave the meaning of) what Ezra had read as the people stood in groups (vv. 7-8). The most gratifying thing that happened, of course, is that the people obeyed God's Word. What they heard touched their emotions, for they wept as they heard the Law (v.

9). Apparently they were remorseful over their past disobedience to the Law and contrite over their sins.

- 10] Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for *this day is* holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.
- 11] So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day *is* holy; neither be ye grieved.
- 12] And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.
- 13] And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law.
- 14] And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:
- 15] And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as *it is* written.

Nehemiah then encouraged the people to consider the day sacred and to eat, give to others in need, and rejoice in the LORD, their source of strength. Holiness and joy were to go together!

The next day the spiritual leaders—heads of families (i.e., heads of clans), priests and Levites—gathered to hear more of God's Word from Ezra. Another response of the people was their celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. The sequence in chapter 8 is striking: intellectual response to the Word (vv. 1-8), emotional response to the Word (vv. 9-12), and volitional response to the Word (vv. 13-18).

The spiritual leaders discovered this instruction about the feast in Leviticus 23:37-43. This was celebrated from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the seventh month (Tishri). Since they discovered these instructions on the second day of the seventh month (Neh 8:2, 13), the timing was perfect. They had exactly two weeks to prepare for it. So they had the people get branches from various kinds of trees (v. 15) and build booths (temporary shelters) in various places, including the square by the Gate of Ephraim. This recalled their days of wandering in the wilderness (Lev 23:43). Their celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was unmatched since the days of Joshua. When the altar was completed in 536 B.C. the people then celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4), but here the joy and involvement was much greater. Ezra read the Law during the Feast of

Tabernacles, because Moses had indicated that this was to be done every seven years (Deut 31:10-13).

### Supplemental Background:

## Feast of Booths (“Tabernacles”)

The Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, begins on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishri: 5 days (grace?) after Yom Kippur (Lev 23:33-44). It was one of the compulsory feasts (Deut 16:16) and participants construct temporary dwellings where they stay for 7 days + special sabbath. The booths are made with deliberate gaps in the sides and roof to commemorate the wilderness wanderings... (Feast = “rehearsal”) After the week, they leave these temporary dwellings for permanent housing (Hos 5:15-Hos 6:3; Zech 14:4,9,16).

### Myrtle

(Heb: *hadhac*; Grk: *mursine* (Isa 41:19; 55:13; Neh 8:15; Zech 1:8,10 f); also as a name in Hadassah in Est 2:7, the Jewish form of Esther): The myrtle, *Myrtus communis* (Natural Order *Myrtaceae*), is a very common indigenous shrub all over Palestine. On the bare hillsides it is a low bush, but under favorable conditions of moisture it attains a considerable height (compare Zech 1:8,10). It has dark green, scented leaves, delicate starry white flowers and dark-colored berries, which are eaten. It is mentioned as one of the choice plants of the land (Isa 41:19). “Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree; and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree” (Isa 55:13), is one of the prophetic pictures of God’s promised blessings. It was one of the trees used in the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh 8:15): “the branches of thick trees” are interpreted in the Talmud (Heb: *Cuk*. 3 4; Heb: *Yer Cuk*. 3, 53rd) as myrtle boughs; also the “thick trees” of Neh 8:15 as “wild myrtle.” Myrtle twigs, particularly those of the broadleafed variety, together with a palm branch and twigs of willow, are still used in the ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles. For many references to myrtle in Jewish writings see Jewish Encyclopedia, IX, 137.

### Thick Trees

Heb: *’ets ’abhoth* (Lev 23:40; Neh 8:15): One of the varieties of trees which the Israelites were directed to use at the Feast of Tabernacles; in the latter passage they are expressly directed to make booths with them. According to the Talmudic writings, the “thick trees” are myrtles (*Suk*. 12a; *Jer Suk*. iii, 53d), and further tradition has prescribed certain special

features as to the varieties of myrtle employed, without which they cannot be used in the ritual of the feast. In *Sirach* 14:18 “thick tree” represents Grk: *dendron dasu*, “leafy tree.”

### Procession

The procession involved four types of branches: the willow, the myrtle, the palm, and a citrus:

- The willow has no fragrance and no fruit.
- The myrtle has fragrance, but no fruit.
- The palm has no fragrance, but bears fruit.
- The citrus has both fragrance and bears fruit.

This sounds reminiscent of the four soils of the first “kingdom parable” of Matthew 13, doesn’t it? (Cf. Mt 13:3-9; 18-23; Rev 7:9.) Trees = men (Ps 1; Dan 4). [NT: Jn 7:2, 20, 37-39; from Rock (1 Cor 10; Rev 21:3-6; 38)] Sacrifices: 13 bulls, 2 rams, 14 lambs, 1 kid [13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7 (for 7 days) = 70.]

המוֹעֲדִים *HaMoshadim*, : “Appointed times” Cf. Gen 1:14. As an *equidistant letter sequence*, it appears only once in Genesis (statistical expectation: 5 times in the 78,064 letters of Genesis); at an interval of 70; it is centered on Genesis 1:14. Odds against this by unaided chance have been estimated at greater than *70,000,000 to one!*

52 sabbaths

- + 7 days of Passover (including its related feast days)
- + 1 *Shavuot*, Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)
- + 1 *Yom Teruah*, Feast of Trumpets
- + 1 *Yom Kippur*, Day of Atonement
- + 7 days of *Sukkot*, Feast of Tabernacles
- + 1 *Shimini Atzeret*, 8th Day of Assembly
- 70

(Cf. Gen 10, 70 nations; Talmud. Solomon dedicated the Temple on Feast of Tabernacles.)

- 16] So the people went forth, and brought *them*, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim.
- 17] And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.

18] Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day *was* a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.

\* \* \*

## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) How did Nehemiah deal with attacks against himself personally?
- 2) What are the implications for Christians today?

## Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) Discuss the problems of intermarriage between believers and non-believers in today’s world. What implications do these have for dating?
- 2) How should we deal with attempts to discredit our Christian brothers and sisters?
- 3) What lessons have you gleaned from these passages for yourself *personally*?

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) Review the seven Feasts of Israel in the Torah, with emphasis on the final 3. What are the *prophetic* characteristics of each of these final feasts of the ecclesiastical year?
- 2) Compile a list of reasons Christians encounter difficulties and problems. (Include the lessons from the NT Epistles in your review.)

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Nehemiah chapters 9, 10, and 11.

## Session 7 Nehemiah 9 - 11

The Word of God had a tremendous impact on the Restoration community: it pointed the people to their sin (8:9), led them to worship (8:12, 14), and gave them great joy (8:17). Now the Word led to their confession of sin.

## Nehemiah 9

- 1] Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them.

The Feast of Tabernacles concluded on the 22nd day of the month (see comments on 8:14). After one day’s interval, the 23rd, the people assembled on the 24th.

- 2] And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.

They separated from foreigners (cf. 10:28). Then they confessed their sins, evidenced by fasting (cf. comments on 1:4), wearing sackcloth (cf. Gen 37:24; Esth 4:1-4; Ps 30:11; 35:13; 69:11; Isa 22:12; 32:11; 37:1-2; Lam 2:10; Dan 9:3), a dark coarse cloth made from goats’ hair, and having dust on their heads (cf. Josh 7:6; 1 Sam 4:12; 2 Sam 1:2; 15:32; Job 2:12; Lam 2:10; Ezek 27:30). These were signs of mourning and grief.

- 3] And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God *one* fourth part of the day; and *another* fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God.

For about three hours the people again stood (cf. Neh 8:7) while the Law was read. Then for another three hours they confessed their sins and worshipped the LORD.

- 4] Then stood up upon the stairs, of the Levites, Jeshua, and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, *and* Chenani, and cried with a loud voice unto the LORD their God.
- 5] Then the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, *and* Pethahiah, said, Stand up *and* bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

Several Levites, some of whom were mentioned in 8:7, were involved in leading the people in their praise of the eternal God. Five of the eight

Levites in 9:4 are listed in the group of eight in verse 5 (Pethahiah is also mentioned in 11:24). These five may have been the same or different men. One group was involved in petition (v. 4) and the other in praise (v. 5). The stairs (lit., “ascent”) may have led to some part of the temple complex or they may refer to the platform mentioned in 8:4. The material in 9:5b-10:39 follows a normal covenant form:

preamble	(9:5b-6),
historical prologue	(9:7-37),
acceptance of the covenant	(9:38-10:29), and
the stipulations	(10:30-39).

The prayer in 9:5b-31 was voiced by the Levites on the people’s behalf. It rehearses major events in Israel’s history:

first stating God’s glory	(v. 5b),
uniqueness	(v. 6a), and
creation of the universe	(v. 6b).

- 6] Thou, *even* thou, *art* LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all *things* that *are* therein, the seas, and all that *is* therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.
- 7] Thou *art* the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham;

The Levites then spoke of God’s work with Abram—calling him from Ur (Gen 12:1) and making a covenant with him (Gen 15:4-21).

- 8] And foundest his heart faithful before thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Jebusites, and the Girgashites, to give *it*, *I say*, to his seed, and hast performed thy words; for thou *art* righteous:
- 9] And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;
- 10] And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as *it is* this day.
- 11] And thou didst divide the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors thou threwest into the deeps, as a stone into the mighty waters.
- 12] Moreover thou leddest them in the day by a cloudy pillar; and in the night by a pillar of fire, to give them light in the way wherein they should go.

Then they recounted God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Neh 9:9-12; cf. Ex 1-15), and the giving of the Law (Neh 9:13-14) and of manna (bread from heaven) and water (v. 15; cf. Ex 16-17).

- 13] Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:
- 14] And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant:
- 15] And gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which thou hadst sworn to give them.
- 16] But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments,

But the Israelites’ ancestors became disobedient and rebellious against God even to the point of worshiping a calf-idol (Neh 9:16-18; cf. Ex 32).

- 17] And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou *art* a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.
- 18] Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This *is* thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt, and had wrought great provocations;
- 19] Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go.

However, God was still gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (cf. Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). God continued to guide them, instruct them, and provide for them (Neh 9:19-21).

- 20] Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them, and witheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst.
- 21] Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, *so that* they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not.

He helped them conquer their enemies Sihon and Og (v. 22; cf. Num 21:21-35), and brought them into the Promised Land under Joshua (Neh 9:23-25). In all this they enjoyed God’s great goodness (cf. v. 35).

- 22] Moreover thou gavest them kingdoms and nations, and didst divide them into corners: so they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan.
- 23] Their children also multipliedst thou as the stars of heaven, and broughtest them into the land, concerning which thou hadst promised to their fathers, that they should go in to possess *it*.
- 24] So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with

their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would.

- 25] And they took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in thy great goodness.
- 26] Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations.

Again the people rebelled (cf. v. 17) so God gave them over to oppressors.

- 27] Therefore thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them: and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto thee, thou heardest *them* from heaven; and according to thy manifold mercies thou gavest them saviours, who saved them out of the hand of their enemies.
- 28] But after they had rest, they did evil again before thee: therefore leftest thou them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had the dominion over them: yet when they returned, and cried unto thee, thou heardest *them* from heaven; and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies;

But because of His great compassion He raised up deliverers, the Judges, who freed them (vv. 27-28).

- 29] And testifiedst against them, that thou mightest bring them again unto thy law: yet they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto thy commandments, but sinned against thy judgments, (which if a man do, he shall live in them;) and withdrew the shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear.
- 30] Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands.
- 31] Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou *art* a gracious and merciful God.

Through the centuries of Israel's sin (v. 29) God continued to be patient and to admonish them by the Holy Spirit through the prophets (v. 30). But as a result of their ongoing sinning they were taken into exile (vv. 30-31).

- 32] Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

In this concluding part of the Levites' prayer, they asked for relief, again acknowledging God's power, majesty (cf. 1:5; 4:14), and loyalty. Through-

out Israel's history she experienced hardship because of her disobedience. Assyria was the first great power after Egypt that menaced Israel and Judah, beginning in the ninth century, over 400 years before Nehemiah's time. Even while the Israelites were enjoying God's blessings (from His great goodness; cf. 9:25) in the land, they were still sinful.

- 33] Howbeit thou *art* just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:
- 34] Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.
- 35] For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.
- 36] Behold, we *are* servants this day, and *for* the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we *are* servants in it:
- 37] And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we *are* in great distress.

Now they were slaves in their own land! Being slaves meant that they had to pay taxes to Persia, and Judah's governmental leaders had to give the Persian kings tribute from the produce of the land. Nehemiah's prayer ended with a plaintive admission of their great distress.

- 38] And because of all this we make a sure *covenant*, and write *it*; and our princes, Levites, *and* priests, seal *unto it*.

## Nehemiah 10

The civil leaders, religious leaders (Levites and . . . priests), and all the people agreed to put their seals to a written agreement that they would obey the stipulations of the Mosaic Law (cf. v. 29).

- 1] Now those that sealed *were*, Nehemiah, the Tirshatha, the son of Hachaliah, and Zidkijah,

The list begins with Nehemiah, who again set an excellent example for the people. Many of the 24 names in 10:1-8 are listed in 12:12-21, names of heads of families. These were priests (10:8). Ezra is not listed, but he was a descendant of Seraiah (v. 2).

- 2] Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,  
3] Pashur, Amariah, Malchijah,

- 4] Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,
- 5] Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,
- 6] Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,
- 7] Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,
- 8] Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah: these *were* the priests.
- 9] And the Levites: both Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel;
- 10] And their brethren, Shebaniah, Hodijah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan,
- 11] Micha, Rehob, Hashabiah,
- 12] Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah,
- 13] Hodijah, Bani, Beninu.

After the priests, 17 Levites were listed, six of whom were involved in reading the Law (8:7). The other group of signers of the agreement were 44 leaders, that is, heads of families. Some of them are listed in 7:8-25.

- 14] The chief of the people; Parosh, Pahathmoab, Elam, Zattu, Bani,
- 15] Bunni, Azgad, Bebai,
- 16] Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin,
- 17] Ater, Hizkijah, Azzur,
- 18] Hodijah, Hashum, Bezai,
- 19] Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai,

Anathoth (Cf. Neh 16:32...) Cf. Jer 32:6-14.

- 6] And Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came unto me, saying,
- 7] Behold, Hanameel the son of Shallum thine uncle shall come unto thee, saying, Buy thee my field that is in Anathoth: for the right of redemption is thine to buy it.
- 8] So Hanameel mine uncle's son came to me in the court of the prison according to the word of the LORD, and said unto me, Buy my field, I pray thee, that is in Anathoth, which is in the country of Benjamin: for the right of inheritance is thine, and the redemption is thine; buy it for thyself. Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.
- 9] And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver.
- 10] And I subscribed the evidence, and sealed it, and took witnesses, and weighed him the money in the balances.
- 11] So I took the evidence of the purchase, both that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open:
- 12] And I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, in the sight of Hanameel mine uncle's son, and in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison.
- 13] And I charged Baruch before them, saying,
- 14] Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days.

- 20] Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir,
- 21] Meshezabeel, Zadok, Jaddua,
- 22] Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah,
- 23] Hoshea, Hananiah, Hashub,
- 24] Hallohesh, Pileha, Shobek,
- 25] Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah,
- 26] And Ahijah, Hanan, Anan,
- 27] Malluch, Harim, Baanah.
- 28] And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding;
- 29] They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes;

The rest of the people did not place their seals to the written agreement, but they did join in binding themselves to follow God's Law. Gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants were listed in 7:44-60. All others are included under the rubric all who separated themselves from foreign peoples (cf. 9:2). Their commitment, though not indicated by seals, was evidenced by a curse (that called down calamity if they failed to carry through on their agreement) and an oath. The curse may refer to the cursings God stated in the Deuteronomic Covenant (Deut 28:15-68).

- 30] And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons:
- 31] And *if* the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, *that* we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and *that* we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt.
- 32] Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God;

The stipulations they spelled out in the agreement include:

- a) avoidance of intermarriages (v. 30; cf. Ex 34:16; Deut 7:3-4),
- b) keeping the Sabbath and the sabbatical year (Neh 10:31; cf. Ex 20:8-11; 23:11-12; 31:15-17; Lev 25:2-7; Deut 15:1-3), and
- c) supporting the temple service by giving a third of a shekel (about one-eighth of an ounce) annually (Neh 10:32-33).

According to Exodus 30:11-16 the temple gift was to be one-half a shekel annually, but here it was valued lightly.

- 33] For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the

holy *things*, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and *for* all the work of the house of our God.

These temple offerings gave the priests and Levites money for maintaining the bread on the table of the Presence (Ex 35:13; 39:36; Num 4:7), for making various offerings, for celebrating monthly and annual festivals, and carrying out other duties. (Cf. Neh 13:10-11 regarding the people's failure to keep this commitment.)

- 34] And we cast the lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring *it* into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the LORD our God, as *it is* written in the law:
- 35] And to bring the firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the LORD:
- 36] Also the firstborn of our sons, and of our cattle, as *it is* written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, unto the priests that minister in the house of our God:
- 37] And *that* we should bring the firstfruits of our dough, and our offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, of wine and of oil, unto the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and the tithes of our ground unto the Levites, that the same Levites might have the tithes in all the cities of our tillage.

Other responsibilities to which the leaders and people pledged themselves were:

- d) contributing wood for the fire on the altar of burnt offering, which was to burn continually (Lev 6:12-13),
  - e) giving the firstfruits of their crops (Ex 23:19; Deut 26:1-3) and their firstborn sons and animals (Num 18:15-17; Deut 12:6) to the Lord, and
  - f) paying annual tithes (Lev 27:30; Num 18:21-24). The Levites were to tithe the tithes they received (Neh 10:38-39; cf. Num 18:26) to help provide for the priests' needs.
- 38] And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house.
- 39] For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the new wine, and the oil, unto the chambers, where *are* the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers: and we will not forsake the house of our God.

The final statement of the agreement, We will not neglect the house of our God (Neh 10:39), summarizes obligations (c) through (f). Under Ezra's and Nehemiah's leadership the people had been led to place a

higher priority on spiritual things, including the care of the restored temple. This was even more important than restoring the city's walls.

## Nehemiah 11

Comparatively few people lived in Jerusalem because of the rubble in the city (7:4). Now that the walls and gates were repaired, the city was ready to be occupied by more people.

- 1] And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts *to dwell in other* cities.

Along with the leaders, one-tenth of the Israelites were to reside in Jerusalem, here called the Holy City (cf. v. 18; Isa 52:1; Dan 9:24; Rev 11:2). They were chosen by lots (cf. Prov 16:33).

- 2] And the people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem.

Those who volunteered were either the ones chosen by lots who gladly moved to the city, or were additional men.

- 3] Now these *are* the chief of the province that dwelt in Jerusalem: but in the cities of Judah dwelt every one in his possession in their cities, *to wit*, Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants.
- 4] And at Jerusalem dwelt *certain* of the children of Judah, and of the children of Benjamin. Of the children of Judah; Athaiah the son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalaleel, of the children of Perez;

Some priests and Levites including temple servants lived in surrounding towns and villages and "commuted" to Jerusalem when they served in the temple. Others who were not civil or religious leaders took up residence in Jerusalem. They were of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

- 5] And Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Colhozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of Shiloni.
- 6] All the sons of Perez that dwelt at Jerusalem *were* four hundred threescore and eight valiant men.

The descendants of various family heads who moved into Jerusalem included 468 laymen of the tribe of Judah (vv. 4b-6) [according to 1 Chronicles 9:3 descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh also lived in



Jerusalem. The total of “provincial leaders” (Neh 11:3) from Judah included Athaiah, a descendant of Perez, and Maaseiah, a descendant of Shelah (vv. 4-5). Perez and Shelah were sons of Judah (cf. Gen 38:2-5, 26-29). Another son of Judah, Zerah, mentioned in Gen 38:30 and 1 Chr 9:6, is not referred to in Neh 11:4-6. This explains why 1 Chr 9:6 has 690 and Neh 11:6 has 468 in the census.]

- 7] And these *are* the sons of Benjamin; Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jesaiah.
- 8] And after him Gabbai, Sallai, nine hundred twenty and eight.

[In the Benjamite list Nehemiah named one line of descendants (v. 7) but the chronicler included four lines of descent. This may or may not account for Nehemiah’s figure of 928 Benjamites (v. 8) being slightly lower than the Chronicles figure of 956 (1 Chr 9:9).]

- 9] And Joel the son of Zichri *was* their overseer: and Judah the son of Senuah *was* second over the city.

...928 laymen of the tribe of Benjamin (vv. 7-9).

- 10] Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin.
- 11] Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, *was* the ruler of the house of God.
- 12] And their brethren that did the work of the house *were* eight hundred twenty and two: and Aadaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashur, the son of Malchiah,
- 13] And his brethren, chief of the fathers, two hundred forty and two: and Amashai the son of Azareel, the son of Ahasai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer,
- 14] And their brethren, mighty men of valour, an hundred twenty and eight: and their overseer *was* Zabdiel, the son of *one of* the great men.

... and 1,192 priests (vv. 10-14). [The priests were from six family heads (Neh 11:10-14): Jedaiah; the son of Joiarib; Jakin; Seraiah, Aadaiah; and Amashai. In 1 Chr 9:10-13, the names refer to the same individuals, with a few spelling variations. The son of Joiarib is Jehoiarib, Seraiah is Azariah, and Amashai is Maasai. It is difficult to know why the 1,192 priests differ from the total of 1,760 in 1 Chr 9:13.]

- 15] Also of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hashub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni;
- 16] And Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the chief of the Levites, *had* the oversight of the outward business of the house of God.
- 17] And Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, *was* the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer: and Bakkukiah the second among

his brethren, and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun.

- 18] All the Levites in the holy city *were* two hundred fourscore and four.

...284 Levites (vv. 15-18). [The list of Levite family heads in Neh 11:15-18 and the list in 1 Chr 9:14-16 have several variations in spelling and additions or omissions (e.g., Bakkukiah may be the same as Bakkakkar, and Abda may be Obadiah; cf. Neh 12:25). The chronicler listed Heresh, Galal, and Berekiah whereas Nehemiah does not, and Nehemiah lists Shabbethai and Jozabad, who did outside work on the temple (11:16) whereas 1 Chronicles does not.]

- 19] Moreover the porters, Akkub, Talmon, and their brethren that kept the gates, *were* an hundred seventy and two.

...and 172 gatekeepers (v. 19)—3,044 men in all. [The gatekeepers’ family heads were two, whereas 1 Chr 9:17 names four. This may account for the difference in the total gatekeepers: 172 in Neh 11:19 and 212 in 1 Chr 9:22.]

- 20] And the residue of Israel, of the priests, *and* the Levites, *were* in all the cities of Judah, every one in his inheritance.
- 21] But the Nethinims dwelt in Ophel: and Ziha and Gispa *were* over the Nethinims.

The rest of the Israelites were in Judean towns (v. 20) except for temple servants in Ophel (cf. 3:26), the hill in the city that led north to the temple.

- 22] The overseer also of the Levites at Jerusalem *was* Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micha. Of the sons of Asaph, the singers *were* over the business of the house of God.
- 23] For *it was* the king’s commandment concerning them, that a certain portion should be for the singers, due for every day.
- 24] And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabeel, of the children of Zerah the son of Judah, *was* at the king’s hand in all matters concerning the people.

Uzzi was over the Levites (11:22). The singers were under the orders of the king (v. 23), presumably Artaxerxes. Pethahiah (v. 24; cf. 9:5) was the agent who represented the Jews’ affairs to Artaxerxes and informed them of the king’s wishes and directives.

- 25] And for the villages, with their fields, *some* of the children of Judah dwelt at Kirjatharba, and *in* the villages thereof, and at Dibon, and *in* the villages thereof, and at Jekabzeel, and *in* the villages thereof,

In the postexilic period under Nehemiah some of the people of Judah settled in 17 towns and their surrounding villages as far south as Beersheba (vv. 27, 30), about 32 miles south of Jerusalem, to the Valley of Hinnom, immediately south of Jerusalem (cf. Josh 15:8). Kiriath Arba was an older name for Hebron (Josh 14:15).

- 26] And at Jeshua, and at Moladah, and at Bethphelet,
- 27] And at Hazarshual, and at Beersheba, and *in* the villages thereof,
- 28] And at Ziklag, and at Mekonah, and in the villages thereof,
- 29] And at Enrimmon, and at Zareah, and at Jarmuth,
- 30] Zanoah, Adullam, and *in* their villages, at Lachish, and the fields thereof, at Azekah, and *in* the villages thereof. And they dwelt from Beersheba unto the valley of Hinnom.
- 31] The children also of Benjamin from Geba *dwelt* at Michmash, and Aija, and Bethel, and *in* their villages,
- 32] *And* at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah,
- 33] Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim,
- 34] Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat,
- 35] Lod, and Ono, the valley of craftsmen.

The 15 places where the descendants of Benjamin lived were north of Judah. The Valley of the Craftsmen may have been near Lod and Ono.

- 36] And of the Levites *were* divisions *in* Judah, *and* in Benjamin.

Some of the Levites who were living in Judah moved north to Benjamin.

## Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) What does the Levitical prayer emphasize about the character and attributes of God?
- 2) Why did God have Jeremiah purchase a plot of land just prior to the anticipated deportation to Babylon? What are the lessons here that impact our understanding of the Book of Revelation?

## Discussion Questions

(“Where two people agree, one is redundant.”)

- 1) What personal lessons are there in these passages for us today?
- 2) How are the attributes of God—so prominent in the Levitical prayers—evident in our personal lives today?

## Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) The material in Nehemiah 9:5b-10:39 follows a normal covenant form; compare this with the structure and design of the Book of Deuteronomy.
- 2) Nehemiah 11:6 mentions the sons of Perez. What was the significance of the prophecy on the line of Perez in Ruth 4?

## Preparation for Next Session:

Read Nehemiah chapters 12 and 13.

## Session 8 Nehemiah 12 - 13

### Nehemiah 12

- 1] Now these *are* the priests and the Levites that went up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra,
- 2] Amariah, Malluch, Hattush,
- 3] Shechaniah, Rehum, Meremoth,
- 4] Iddo, Ginnetho, Abijah,
- 5] Miamin, Maadiah, Bilgah,
- 6] Shemaiah, and Joiarib, Jedaiah,
- 7] Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah, Jedaiah. These *were* the chief of the priests and of their brethren in the days of Jeshua.

David had appointed 24 priestly divisions to serve in the temple (1 Chr 24:7-19) when it would be built. Now Nehemiah listed the 22 leaders of the priests who had returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, almost 100 years earlier, in 538 B.C. [Perhaps two names were dropped from the list in copying or perhaps it was not possible to fill the roster of 24.]

- 8] Moreover the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, *and* Mattaniah, *which was* over the thanksgiving, he and his brethren.
- 9] Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brethren, *were* over against them in the watches.

The names of eight of the Levites who returned with Zerubbabel are listed here. Their associates brought the number to 74 (Ezra 2:40), or to 202 if the Levite singers (Ezra 2:41) are included. Of the eight names, Ezra

listed only 2, Jeshua and Kadmiel (Ezra 2:40). Mattaniah and Bakbukiah (Neh 12:8-9) in Zerubbabel's day (v. 1) should not be confused with men by the same names in Nehemiah's day (11:17) though their work of leading songs of thanksgiving (cf. 12:24) was similar.

- 10] And Jeshua begat Joiakim, Joiakim also begat Eliashib, and Eliashib begat Joiada,  
11] And Joiada begat Jonathan, and Jonathan begat Jaddua.

The many generations of high priests extended from Aaron to Jehozadak, who was taken into exile to Babylon (1 Chr 6:3-15). Then Jeshua the high priest returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:1-2; Neh 11:1). Jeshua's descendant Eliashib (12:10) was the high priest in Nehemiah's day (3:1; 13:4, 7, 28). Some scholars suggest that the reference to Eliashib's line to Jaddua, three generations later, was added by someone after Nehemiah's time. However, it was certainly possible that Eliashib's great-grandson was born while Nehemiah was still living. Jonathan is probably the same as Johanan in 12:22.

- 12] And in the days of Joiakim were priests, the chief of the fathers: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah;  
13] Of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan;  
14] Of Melicu, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph;  
15] Of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai;  
16] Of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam;  
17] Of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai;  
18] Of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan;  
19] And of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi;  
20] Of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber;  
21] Of Hilkiyah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethaneel.

These verses list the heads of the priestly families in the days of Joiakim, the son of Jeshua the high priest (cf. v. 10). Twenty names are listed here, corresponding roughly to the 22 names in verses 1-7. Hattush in verse 2 and Maadiah in verse 5 are not in the list in verses 12-21. Harim (v. 15; cf. 10:5) is spelled Rehum in 12:3. Minjamin in verse 17 is spelled Mijamin in verse 5.

- 22] The Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and Jaddua, were recorded chief of the fathers: also the priests, to the reign of Darius the Persian.

Darius is probably Darius II who ruled Persia from 423 to 404 B.C. According to the Elephantine papyri, Johanan was high priest in 408 B.C. Possibly Nehemiah lived to see Johanan's son Jaddua become high priest sometime between 408 and 404 B.C.

- 23] The sons of Levi, the chief of the fathers, were written in the book of the chronicles, even until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib.

The book of the annals was an official record book of the Levite family heads up to the days of Johanan.

- 24] And the chief of the Levites: Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brethren over against them, to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of David the man of God, ward over against ward.  
25] Mattaniah, and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, Akkub, were porters keeping the ward at the thresholds of the gates.

The Levites mentioned in verses 24-25 served in the days of the high priest Joiakim (cf. vv. 10, 12), and in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra. Hashabiah may be the man mentioned in 3:17; Sherebiah and Jeshua are mentioned in 12:8 as being involved in leading songs of thanksgiving, sung antiphonally. Mattaniah and Bakbukiah (cf. 11:17) were associated with music in 12:8 but here (v. 25) they were gatekeepers. Obadiah was probably the same as Abda (11:17). Possibly they served in both capacities. Meshullam (also mentioned in 3:4, 30) may be a variant spelling for Shallum, who along with Talmon and Akkub were gatekeepers (cf. 1 Chr 9:17).

- 26] These were in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor, and of Ezra the priest, the scribe.  
27] And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.  
28] And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about Jerusalem, and from the villages of Netophathi;  
29] Also from the house of Gilgal, and out of the fields of Geba and Azmaveth: for the singers had builded them villages round about Jerusalem.  
30] And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall.

Nehemiah had the Levites, who had settled in various towns around Jerusalem (cf. 11:3, 20) join the others in the holy city for the ceremonies to dedicate the rebuilt wall. It was to be a time of singing songs of thanksgiving (cf. 12:8) to God with musical instruments (cf. 1 Chr 25:1). Singers, who were Levites, assembled from south of Jerusalem (the villages of Netophah), the east (assuming Beth Gilgal is the same as Gilgal), and the north (the Benjamite towns of Geba and Azmaveth).

The preparations also included ceremonial cleansing of all the people and of the gates and the wall. This was done no doubt by sprinkling the blood of sacrificed animals.

- 31] Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great *companies of them that gave thanks, whereof one* went on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate:
- 32] And after them went Hoshaiiah, and half of the princes of Judah,
- 33] And Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam,
- 34] Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah,
- 35] And *certain* of the priests' sons with trumpets; *namely*, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph:
- 36] And his brethren, Shemaiah, and Azarael, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethaneel, and Judah, Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe before them.
- 37] And at the fountain gate, which was over against them, they went up by the stairs of the city of David, at the going up of the wall, above the house of David, even unto the water gate eastward.
- 38] And the other *company of them that gave thanks* went over against *them*, and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall;
- 39] And from above the gate of Ephraim, and above the old gate, and above the fish gate, and the tower of Hananeel, and the tower of Meah, even unto the sheep gate: and they stood still in the prison gate.
- 40] So stood the two *companies of them that gave thanks* in the house of God, and I, and the half of the rulers with me:
- 41] And the priests; Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets;
- 42] And Maaseiah, and Shemaiah, and Eleazar, and Uzzi, and Jehohanan, and Malchijah, and Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah *their* overseer.

Nehemiah assembled two great choirs to sing thanks (cf. vv. 8, 27); the number in each choir is not indicated. The choirs probably began near the Valley Gate, which interestingly is the place where Nehemiah began and ended his nighttime inspection of the ruined walls months earlier (2:13-15). The first procession moved counterclockwise on the southern and eastern wall toward the Dung Gate (12:31) and past the Fountain Gate up to the Water Gate. Because both choirs entered the temple (v. 40), the first one may have proceeded on the wall up to the East Gate.

The procession included the following: Ezra, who led the group (12:36), the choir, Hoshaiiah half the leaders of Judah (v. 32), priests (seven of them named and some with trumpets), and Zechariah and his eight associates with musical instruments.

The second choir moved clockwise, presumably starting at the Valley Gate and going past various gates and towers (see comments on chap. 3) till they arrived at the Gate of the Guard. This group included the choir, Nehemiah, half the officials (12:40), priests (seven of them named and with trumpets), and eight others who apparently were singers. The parallel arrangement of the two processions is striking.

Their walking on top of the wall (vv. 31, 38) visually demonstrated that the walls were strong, a rejoinder to Tobiah's earlier mocking claim that the wall would be so weak that even a fox on top of it would break it down (4:3). Perhaps Nehemiah wanted Tobiah to see that with God's help the project was completed in spite of his and others' opposition. Since the people now carried no spears, swords, or bows (cf. 4:16, 18), the enemies had no doubt withdrawn. Seeing the two large processions marching on the walls must have been an impressive sight.

- 43] Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.

In the temple ("the house of God," v. 40) the choir leader Jezrahiah led the two large choirs. Sacrifices were made and the people rejoiced so loudly that they could be heard far away.

- 44] And at that time were some appointed over the chambers for the treasures, for the offerings, for the firstfruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them out of the fields of the cities the portions of the law for the priests and Levites: for Judah rejoiced for the priests and for the Levites that waited.
- 45] And both the singers and the porters kept the ward of their God, and the ward of the purification, according to the commandment of David, *and of Solomon* his son.
- 46] For in the days of David and Asaph of old *there were* chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving unto God.
- 47] And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion: and they sanctified *holy things* unto the Levites; and the Levites sanctified *them* unto the children of Aaron.

Nehemiah took advantage of this celebration to provide for ongoing worship. The storerooms to which the people were to bring their contributions, firstfruits, and tithes that were required by the Law were siderooms on the temple (cf. 1 Kgs 6:5; 1 Chr 28:11; 2 Chr 31:11; Neh 10:37-39; 12:25; 13:4, 12-13). [More on these later...] Nehemiah had the ministering priests and Levites follow the order of responsibilities outlined more than 500 years earlier by David (1 Chr 22-26) and presum-

ably established by Solomon. Music had been an important part of David's preparations for the temple, under the leadership of the musician Asaph (1 Chr 15:19; 16:4-5, 37). Besides being an effective administrator Nehemiah was also a man of worship. He was concerned with praise by music and praise by gifts.

## “All Israel”?

After the Babylonian captivity, the terms “Jew” and “Israelite” are used interchangeably. Ezra calls the returning remnant “Jews” eight times and “Israel” 40 times. (Ezra also speaks of “all Israel”: Ezra 2:70; 3:11; 8:35; 10:25, et al.) Nehemiah uses the term “Jew” 11 times and “Israel” 22 times. Nehemiah too speaks of “all Israel” being back in the land (Neh 12:47). The remnant that returned from Babylon is represented as “the nation” (Mal 1:1, et al.).

The same is true in the New Testament. Our Lord is said to have offered Himself to the nation, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 10:6; 15:24). Tribes other than Judah are mentioned specifically in the NT as being represented in the land. Anna knew her tribal identity was of the tribe of Asher (Lk 2:36). Paul knew he was of the tribe of Benjamin, a “Jew,” and an “Israelite” (Rom 11:1). The New Testament speaks of “Israel” 75 times and uses the word “Jew” 174 times. At the Feast of Pentecost Peter cries, “Ye men of Judea” (Acts 2:14), “ye men of Israel...” (Acts 2:22), and “All the house of Israel” (Acts 2:36).

[See Addendum A for a more detailed discussion on the “Lost Ten Tribes” myth.]

## Nehemiah 13

For 12 years Nehemiah served as governor of Judah, from Artaxerxes' 20<sup>th</sup> year to his 32<sup>nd</sup> year (5:14; cf. 13:6), that is, from 444 B.C. to 432 B.C. Other than his rebuilding and dedicating the wall, getting the people to agree to keep the Law, and organizing the work of the priests and Levites in the temple, little is known about Nehemiah's 12-year rule. Undoubtedly that was a successful period of time in his life.

When the 12 years were up Nehemiah returned to Persia (perhaps to the city of Susa; cf. 1:1; or to the capital, Persepolis), evidently once again to serve King Artaxerxes (cf. 2:6). How long he remained in this position is not known. Perhaps it was two years or so. While he was gone some rather startling changes took place in Judah, changes involving serious

violations of the Mosaic Law. When Nehemiah once again returned to Judah (perhaps around 430 or later), he faced a task that in some respects must have been even more difficult than rebuilding the wall.

- 1] On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever;
- 2] Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.
- 3] Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.

“On that day” refers not to 12:44 but to the time after Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to be governor again, as indicated in 13:4-7. The portion of the Law (the Book of Moses) that was read is Deuteronomy 23:3-5. The Ammonites and Moabites had resisted Israel's march to Canaan, and the Moabites had hired Balaam to curse Israel but God turned that attempted curse into a blessing (Num 22-25). Therefore Ammonites and Moabites were to have no part in Israel's temple worship. Being reminded of this the people in Nehemiah's day eliminated those foreigners (as stated in Neh 13:4-9, 23-28). Interestingly once again the reading of God's Word had an effect on the people (cf. 8:1-6, 13-17; 9:3).

- 4] And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, *was* allied unto Tobiah:
- 5] And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded *to be given* to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he was shocked to find that Eliashib, the high priest in Judah (cf. 3:1, 20; 13:28), had prepared a large room in the temple for Tobiah. Eliashib and Tobiah were closely associated, which may mean family ties (cf. Tobiah's relationships by marriage with several Jews, 6:17-18).

Tobiah had been an enemy of Nehemiah, opposing the wall-building (2:10-19; 4:3, 7; 6:1, 12, 17, 19); but now that Nehemiah was gone (13:6) Tobiah the Ammonite (cf. comments on vv. 1-3) moved into the temple! The room he occupied had been one of the temple storerooms (v. 4; see comments on 12:44), a side room for storing grain offerings (13:4-5). There Tobiah could oppose God's work while posing to assist it!

- 6] But in all this *time* was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king:
- 7] And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.
- 8] And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber.
- 9] Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense.

Artaxerxes is called the king of Babylon because his rule over the Persian Empire included Babylon. Nehemiah's return to Artaxerxes (at either Persepolis, the capital, or Susa) was in 432. Some time later (perhaps two years or more) Nehemiah asked to return to Jerusalem. How long he stayed this second time is not stated. Malachi may have ministered about that same time.

Hearing what the high priest had done for Tobiah (Nehemiah called it an evil thing; cf. Neh 13:17), Nehemiah was deeply distressed. Eliashib had been involved in restoring the walls (3:1), but now inconsistently he had allowed an opponent to reside *inside* the temple complex! These wooden additions were private chambers intended for storing the personal items of the priests. [Their architectural significance will be reviewed in an addendum to these notes.]

Understandably, Nehemiah was so angry that he went into the chambers and tossed out all Tobiah's household goods. He then had the rooms purified, either ceremonially or by fumigation, or perhaps both, and then he restored the priestly articles that belonged there.

- 10] And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given *them*: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field.

Nehemiah's next task pertains to why Tobiah was able to occupy one of the storeroom chambers. They were empty because the people had failed in their commitment to bring their tithes and offerings to the Levites. As a result the Levites and others who were to live off these offerings as they performed spiritual services for the people had to work in the fields caring for their livestock (cf. Num 35:1-5). This meant they had less time to work in the temple.

- 11] Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place.
- 12] Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries.

- 13] And I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah: and next to them *was* Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah: for they were counted faithful, and their office *was* to distribute unto their brethren.
- 14] Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof.

Nehemiah reprimanded the Jewish officials for neglecting this aspect of the work of the temple (the house of God; cf. vv. 4, 7, 9, 14). Malachi addressed this problem too (Mal 3:8-10).

The officials had failed to make sure the people of Judah obeyed the Lord in these matters. What made this problem even more distressing for Nehemiah, and difficult to believe, is that these leaders had previously signed a document promising before the Lord and the people that they would never again let this happen (Neh 9:38; 10:14-29, 35, 37, 39). They had even said specifically, "We will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39b).

Besides rebuking the leaders for their neglect, Nehemiah took action to correct the problem (cf. 13:17-19). He stationed the Levites at their posts in the temple and appointed four men—a priest, a scribe, a Levite, and an assistant, all trustworthy (v. 13)—to oversee the distribution of the peoples' tithes (grain, new wine, and oil, v. 12; cf. v. 5; 10:39). Also Nehemiah, as he so often did, prayed for God's help in the matter (13:14). Remember was a plea for help, not merely a request that God not forget something (cf. "remember" in vv. 22, 29, 31; 5:19; 6:14 [twice]). Judah's leader did not want his efforts of reform to be undone by the people's neglect.

- 15] In those days saw I in Judah *some* treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all *manner of* burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified *against them* in the day wherein they sold victuals.
- 16] There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

Another commitment Israel had made in writing was to keep God's laws regarding the Sabbath (10:31). But when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he found that the people had also violated this promise. They were working on the Sabbath as they did on the other days of the week. They were treading grapes in the winepresses, and transporting the wine, along with grain grapes, figs, and other merchandise, into Jerusalem to sell it. They also were buying fish and other items from people of Tyre who resided in Jerusalem.

- 17] Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing *is* this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?
- 18] Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.
- 19] And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and *some* of my servants set I at the gates, *that* there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.
- 20] So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.
- 21] Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do *so* again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no *more* on the sabbath.
- 22] And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and *that* they should come *and* keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, *concerning* this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

Again Nehemiah met the problem with a rebuke and action (cf. vv. 11-13). In rebuking their Sabbath desecration (calling it a wicked thing; cf. v. 7), he referred to a similar sin in Jeremiah's day (cf. Jer 17:19-27) which God punished by the Exile (calamity). Nehemiah had the city doors shut on the Sabbath, beginning on Friday evening, with guards posted to see that merchandise was not brought in. Even so, some merchants stayed all night outside the walls, perhaps hoping people would slip outside in the darkness to purchase their goods. When Nehemiah heard of this, he threatened to use force against them. Then he told the Levites (cf. Neh 13:30) to help guard the gates (cf. 7:1; 11:19). Again (cf. 13:14) he asked God to help in this problem, showing mercy to him out of His great love (*hesed*, "loyal love").

- 23] In those days also saw I Jews *that* had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, *and* of Moab:
- 24] And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people.

The people of Judah had also promised in writing that they would not intermarry with pagan people (10:30). Yet when Nehemiah arrived back in Jerusalem, he found that many of the men had violated this commitment also (cf. Ezra 9:1-4; 10:44; Mal 2:10-11) by marrying women from the Philistine city of Ashdod, and Ammonite and Moabite (cf. comments on Ezra 10:1-3) women. This too had been forbidden in the Mosaic Law (Ex 34:12-16; Deut 7:1-5). These mixed marriages even meant that their children were speaking their mothers' language, not Hebrew (the language of Judah).

- 25] And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, *saying*, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.
- 26] Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin.
- 27] Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

Again Nehemiah responded with a rebuke (cf. vv. 11, 17). Also he asked God to judge them (called curses down on them) and even struck some of them physically, pulling out their hair, probably from their beards. To lose one's beard was a disgrace (2 Sam 10:4; also see Isa 50:6). He made them swear before God that they would not continue to commit this violation of God's Law. He reminded them of Solomon's sin in marrying foreign women (cf. 1 Kgs 11:1-8). This was wickedness, an act of unfaithfulness.

Nehemiah's pulling out the men's hair may seem to be violent and inappropriate for a man of God. However, Nehemiah was concerned that God's judgment not fall again on Judah. He knew God would not tolerate this sin.

- 28] And *one* of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, *was* son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me.
- 29] Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.

Even the priesthood was contaminated by this sin! A grandson of the high priest Eliashib (cf. 3:1, 20; 13:4) had married Sanballat's daughter. Sanballat, perhaps governor of Samaria, had vigorously opposed Nehemiah's work (cf. 2:10, 19; 4:1, 7; 6:1-2, 5, 12, 14), and now he, like Tobiah (cf. 6:17-18; 13:4), had apparently planned through this family relationship to destroy God's work. Nehemiah had thrown Tobiah's furniture out of the temple storage chambers (v. 8); now he chased the guilty husband away.

Nehemiah prayed that God would judge the high priest's grandson. Who else is included in his word them is not specified, but probably Sanballat was in mind. Mixed marriages defiled the priesthood for a priest was to marry "only a virgin from his own people" (Lev. 21:14).

- 30] Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business;

- 31] And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

This problem, like the others reported in this chapter (cf. vv. 9, 22), called for ceremonial purifying. Again the priests and the Levites were assigned their duties. (Nehemiah was great at getting people to work!) He also made sure the people brought their contributions and firstfruits to the temple (cf. comments on vv. 10-13).

For the fourth time in this chapter this great leader prayed that God would remember him, that is, that God would bestow His blessings on him in return for his diligence. This book underscores the importance of physical protection for God's people in Jerusalem but, more importantly, it stresses the need for His people to obey His Word, not giving in to sin through neglect, compromise, or outright disobedience.

### Study Questions

(For the diligent student.)

- 1) David had appointed 24 priestly divisions to serve in the temple (1 Chr 24:7-19). How does this influence our understanding of Revelation 4 & 5?
- 2) What are the implications of the "hidden chambers" on the architecture of *ourselves*?
- 3) What are the lessons in Nehemiah for our personal *stewardship*?

### Discussion Questions

("Where two people agree, one is redundant.")

- 1) What are the main lessons from the Book of Nehemiah that might be developed into a "Management Manual" for Christians?
- 2) Do we have rubbish in our "hidden storerooms" that need cleaning out? How do we go about it?
- 3) How does the exclusion of foreigners in Nehemiah's undertakings relate to the tide toward multiculturalism among us today? What are the lessons, and the hazards, of separatism and isolation?
- 4) What are the implications of "blue laws" (closing businesses, etc., on Sunday) for us today? Are they effective or deleterious?

5. Discuss the implications of the call for separatism in Nehemiah's day with the intermarriage among different cultural backgrounds among us today.

### Research Projects

(For the truly dedicated.)

- 1) Explore the role of the myth of the "Ten Lost Tribes" in the history of Anti-semitism.
- 2) Research the reports that it is now possible to identify a descendant of Levi from his DNA. Are they reliable? If so, what are the implications for Revelation 7?

### Preparation for Next Session:

Read through the next book on your journey through the Scriptures. God has a special purpose for you and your adventure is to discover it!

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### Addendum A:

#### "Ten Lost Tribes" Myth

There are many groups that believe the northern tribes, separated during the rift between Rehoboam and Jeroboam after the death of Solomon (and subsequently taken captive by Assyria in 722 B.C.), later migrated to Europe and elsewhere.

The myth of the "Ten Lost Tribes" is the basis for "British-Israelism" and other colorful legends, but these stories have no real Biblical basis. They are based upon misconceptions derived from the misreading of various Bible passages.<sup>1</sup>

### The Faithful Voted With Their Feet

Before the Assyrian captivity, substantial numbers from the northern tribes had identified themselves with the house of David.<sup>2</sup> The rebellion of Jeroboam and subsequent crises caused many to repudiate the Northern Kingdom and unite with the Southern Kingdom in a common alliance to the house of David and a desire to worship the Lord in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

In 930 B.C., Jeroboam ruled the Northern Kingdom from his capital in



Samaria.<sup>4</sup> When Jeroboam turned the Northern Kingdom to idolatry, the Levites (and others who desired to remain faithful) migrated south to Rehoboam.<sup>5</sup>

Horrified that Jeroboam had set up a rival religion with golden calf worship at Bethel and Dan, many Northerners moved south, knowing that the only place acceptable to God was the Temple on Mt. Moriah.<sup>6</sup> Those who favored idolatry migrated north to Jeroboam. Later, when Asa reigned as king in the south, another great company came from the north.<sup>7</sup>

Years after the deportation by Assyria, King Hezekiah of Judah issued a call to all Israel to come and worship in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover.<sup>8</sup> Eighty years later King Josiah of Judah also issued a call, and an offering for the Temple was received from “Manasseh and Ephraim and all the remnant of Israel....”<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, all 12 tribes were represented in the south. God even addresses the 12 tribes in the south: “Speak unto Rehoboam the son of Solomon, king of Judah, and to all Israel in Judah and Benjamin....”<sup>10</sup>

The “tribe of Judah” (2 Kgs 17:18, et al.) is used idiomatically for the Southern Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> When encountering the tribal designations, it is important to distinguish between the *territories* allocated to the tribes and the *people* themselves.

## The Northern Kingdom Falls

In 724 B.C. Shalmaneser V besieged Samaria for three years. King Hoshea of Israel attempted to revolt against paying Assyrians annual tribute money—a treaty with Pharaoh of Egypt did not help<sup>12</sup>—and Samaria, Jeroboam’s capital, fell in 722 B.C. with Sargon II seizing power in 721 B.C.

The Assyrians implemented their infamous policy of mixing conquered peoples to keep them from organizing a revolt. Israelite captives were mixed with Persians and others, and strangers from far-off lands were resettled in Samaria. The resulting mixed, quasi-Jewish populations became the “Samaritans.”<sup>13</sup> (You can read about this “fall” in 2 Kgs 17.)

Not all from the Northern Kingdom were deported. Archaeologists have uncovered annals of the Assyrian Sargon, in which he tells that he carried away only 27,290 people and 50 chariots.<sup>14</sup>

Population estimates of the Northern Kingdom at that time range from 400,000 to 500,000; less than 1/20th were deported—mostly the leadership from the capital, Samaria. The rest of the Northern Kingdom were taken by Assyria as slaves, which were a valuable commodity. (It is difficult to view the Assyrians as careless enough to let their captives wander off to Europe.)

When the Babylonians take over Assyria, the descendants of the “ten tribes” were probably again commingled with the captives of Judah.

## The Babylonians Take Over

When the Northern Kingdom went into captivity (722 B.C.), all 12 tribes were also represented in the south. When the Babylonians took the Southern Kingdom into captivity (586 B.C.), members of all 12 tribes of Israel were involved. Isaiah, prophesying to Judah, refers to them as the “House of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel...” (Isa 48:1; cf. vv. 12-14).

## Post-Captivity Terminology

After the Babylonian captivity, the terms “Jew” and “Israelite” are used interchangeably. Ezra calls the returning remnant “Jews” 8 times and “Israel” 40 times. (Ezra also speaks of “all Israel”: Ezra 2:70; 3:11; 8:35; 10:25, et al.) Nehemiah uses the term “Jew” 11 times and “Israel” 22 times. Nehemiah too speaks of “all Israel” being back in the land (Neh 12:47). The remnant that returned from Babylon is represented as “the nation” (Mal 1:1, et al.).

## New Testament Terminology

The same is true in the New Testament. Our Lord is said to have offered Himself to the nation, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 10:5-6; 15:24). Tribes other than Judah are mentioned specifically in the NT as being represented in the land.<sup>15</sup> Anna knew her tribal identity was of the tribe of Asher (Lk 2:36). Paul knew he was of the tribe of Benjamin, a “Jew” and an “Israelite” (Rom 11:1). The New Testament speaks of “Israel” 75 times and uses the word “Jew” 174 times.<sup>16</sup>

At the Feast of Pentecost Peter cries, “Ye men of Judea” (Acts 2:14), “ye men of Israel...” (Acts 2:22), and “All the house of Israel” (Acts 2:36).

## Regathered as One

Ezekiel 36 and 37, the Dry Bones Vision, declares that Judah (Jews) and Israel (10 tribes) shall be joined as one in the regathering.<sup>17</sup> This is true today. [The total physical descendants were not the people to whom the promises were made (Rom 9:4-7).]

## Anti-Semitism

Accompanying some of the legends of the so-called “Ten Lost Tribes” are aspersions on the present State of Israel and the people being regathered in the Land. These various theories such as “British Israelism” are by their nature anti-Semitic because they deny the Jewish people their proper place in the plan of God. Let’s remember that Genesis 12:3 has never been repealed!

Israel is being regathered in the land just as God has announced.<sup>18</sup> There is yet to come an event which will awaken them to realize that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob once again has His hand upon them (Ezek 38, 39). I believe this event could happen at any moment.<sup>19</sup> The Throne of David was promised to the Son of Mary (Lk 1:32). I believe His taking possession of it is on the near horizon. *Maranatha!*

\* \* \*

### Sources:

Lewis, David Allen, *Can Israel Survive in a Hostile World?*, New Leaf Press, 1993.  
Scofield, C.I., *The New Scofield Study Bible*, notes on 2 Kgs 17:23.

### Notes:

1. 2 Kgs 17:7-23; 2 Chr 6:6-11, etc.
2. 1 Kgs 12:16-20; 2 Chr 11:16-17.
3. 2 Chr 19:4; 30:1, 10-11, 25-26; 34:5-7, 22; 35:17-18.
4. 1 Kgs 11:43-12:33.
5. 2 Chr 11:14-17.
6. Deut 12:5-7; 16:2-6; Isa 18:7.
7. 2 Chr 15:9.
8. 2 Chr 30:5-6, 10-11, 21.
9. 2 Chr 34:9.
10. 2 Chr 11:3.
11. Cf. 1 Kgs 11:13, 32.
12. 2 Kgs 18:2.
13. Jn 4:20-22.

14. *Biblical Archaeology*, VI, 1943, page 58.
15. Mt 4:13, 15; Lk 2:36; Acts 4:36; Phil 3:5; “the twelve tribes,” Acts 26:7; Jas 1:1.
16. Acts 21:39; 22:3; Rom 11:1; 2 Cor 4 11:22; Phil 3:5, etc.
17. Ezek 37:16-17, 21-22.
18. Ezek 36, 37; Isa 11:11, et al.
19. See *The Magog Invasion* briefing package for more information on the predicted invasion of Israel and its role in the end times.

### Addendum B:

## The Architecture of Man & The “Subconscious” Controversy

### The Great Commandment

*Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.*

Mt 22:37 (vs. Deut 6:4,5)

**Heart?** Jer 17:9; **Soul?** Heb 4:12; **“Mind?”** Greek word here is *διάνοια dianoya*, “channel,” or “will power.” (The usual Greek word for mind is *νοῦς nous* which means a whole process that includes not only the conceptions of an idea, but also its fulfillment).

### The Temple as a Model

“Ye are the Temple of God” appears *seven* times in the *New Testament*: 1 Cor 3:9-16; 1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:20, 21; Heb 3:6; 1 Pet 2:5; 1 Pet 4:17.

(Jesus also refers to His own Body as a Temple: Mk 14:58, Jn 2:19 etc.)

### The Uniqueness of Solomon’s Temple

- 1) It was the only Temple where all the detailed plans, not only of the construction of the Temple, but also of all the furniture, *were given* by the **Spirit of God** (1 Chr 28:12,19)
- 2) It was also the only Temple in which God’s **Spirit dwelt** until the Temple was destroyed. (1 Kgs 8:1-11; 9:3. It finally leaves: Ezek 11:23.)
- 3) And it was also the only Temple where the **Ark of the Covenant** dwelt.

## The Architecture of the Temple

One of the things that we learn from these software insights is that it is futile to attempt to infer our architecture from a neural analysis, or exploring the *physical* aspects of the brain, etc. Our soul, our “heart,” etc., simply does not show up on an X-ray or an MRI scan. (It is strange that we should cling the perceptions of a paranoid schizophrenic who lived in Vienna in our attempt to understand our system design.)

Let’s try to understand our “system design” as our System Architect has provided it to us: Heb 4:12. (Cf. Similitudes, analogies: Hosea 12:10.)

The Shekinah Glory used to dwell in the physical Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. But God’s Spirit now dwells in “temples made without hands.” (Acts 17:24)

The Temple, the Holy of Holies (which corresponds to our *new* Spirit), the Holy Place (which is our *new* Heart), and the Porch (which is our *new* Will Power) *are all solid gold*. All the furniture and even the walls were of gold. Gold speaks of holiness, deity, purity.

The Pillars of the Temple, and all of the items in the Inner and Outer Courts, the lavers, the altar of sacrifice, the “molten sea,” etc., were bronze. Bronze spoke of fire, and that which still must be judged, something that is *not* redeemed yet.

**Psyche:** Soul. (Notice this area is *not new*.) Jer.31:12 says, “Our souls should be like a watered garden.” A double souled (not “minded” as in KJV) man is unstable in all his ways (James 1:8; 4:8).

**Soma:** Body (again, not new). Now, as we choose to “walk after the Spirit” and make those faith choices, our bodies are going to manifest and reflect God’s Life and be “*a light on top of a candlestick*”: Luke 11:33. If we choose to “walk after the flesh,” making our own emotional choices, our bodies will manifest and reflect our own self life and we will be that “*light hidden under a bushel*.”

**Pneuma:** Spirit. [*This whole message does not apply, unless you have the Spirit of God in you.* 1 Pet 1:3,23; Jn 3:3; 1 Cor 6:17 .]

**Kardia:** Heart. Our old heart is “incurably” wicked: Jer 17:9; Mk 7:21; Rom 3:11-12; A new heart is required (Ps 51:10; Ezek 36:26-27; 11:19) filled with His supernatural Love (Rom 5:5), His supernatural Thoughts (Heb

8:10). A new creation: 2 Cor 5:17. It is then God’s Life in our hearts and not our own: Ecc 3:11; Eph 4:24; “new wineskins”: Lk 5:37, Mk 2:21, Mt 9:17; “being circumcised”: Col 2:11; Phil 3:3; Gal 6:15.

**Dianoia** (“channel”): Will Power. New will power given at our new birth: Heb 8:10, 10:16. Our Will Power is the Passageway, doorway or gateway from our hearts into our lives. The Bronze Pillars associated with the Porch were named: The right pillar was called Jachin, which meant “in His Counsel”; and the left pillar was called Boaz, which meant “by His Strength.” 1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chr 3:17.

Our choices determine whose life will be lived in our souls, *God’s or our own*.

**Hidden Chambers:** Our Subconscious. We must be careful not to stuff our junk (unresolved hurts, emotions, etc.) here. We need to continually cleanse ourselves by giving them over to Him. This is a continual process.

The Hidden Chambers were of wood. (The Hebrew word actually means something “to be burned up.”) Here the Priests hid their personal idols, thinking they were secret. Ezek 8:6-12. These secret hidden chambers are suggestive of what we sometimes call the “subconscious.”

These ideas are discussed in detail and rendered into practical personal steps in the book, *Be Ye Transformed*, which is part of the King’s High Way Trilogy.

## The Hidden Chambers

Recently, it has come to our attention that many people are confused both about the existence of what is commonly called the subconscious<sup>1</sup> and its role. Many Christians, driven by their concern about the preoccupation of psychologists with the subconscious, mistakenly ignore its Biblical basis. Because the writings of Sigmund Freud have had much influence on our daily vocabulary and familiar idioms, many erroneously assume that the subconscious itself is a Freudian concept.

While we in no way validate Freud’s peculiar views and obsessions with the subconscious,<sup>2</sup> we do believe that many Christians, in their zeal to distance themselves from the deceptions of Freudianism, assume that the concept of the “subconscious,” or “unconscious,” is also fallacious.

Thus, they have thrown “the baby out with the bathwater.” The insight that our memory works below the level of consciousness predates Freud by over 1500 years!

## History

William Law in his book, *The Power of the Spirit*, written in the early 1700s and recently re-edited by Dave Hunt, states, “Memory is the faithful repository (“a place where things are deposited and stored”)<sup>3</sup> of all the fine things that self has ever done, and lest any of them should be lost or forgotten, memory is continually setting them before self’s eyes... Imagination, as the last and truest support of self, lays unseen worlds at his feet, and crowns him with secret revenges and fancied honors. This is that natural self that must be denied and crucified, or there can be no disciple of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Law lived 200 years before Freud!

Law’s statements are particularly interesting, because memory and imagination are precisely the two words philosophers have used for centuries to describe the subconscious or the unconscious.<sup>5</sup>

*Great Books of the Western World* states, “Memory is knowledge of past particulars.” Its primary function is retention. Recollection occurs through activating connections which have been formed and retaining them. This can happen by chance recall or by purposeful pursuit of the past.”<sup>6</sup>

The following is a secular history of the subconscious. While we do not adhere to some of the philosophies of these gentlemen, this survey does show that the idea of the subconscious far precedes Freud. The Biblical view of the subconscious follows this history.

Since the early 1600s, the Western world has rediscovered the idea of the unconscious “that had long been taken for granted in Greek and Christian writings.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the idea of an unconscious goes back to Augustine (A.D. 354-430), who believed memory extended beyond the grasp of the conscious mind.<sup>8</sup> “Nothing can be utterly forgotten if, as Augustine suggests, what seems to be forgotten remains in the memory.”<sup>9</sup>

“The ancients speak of the memory as a storehouse of images. Every variety of thing which can be perceived can be stored up in the memory.”<sup>10</sup> Augustine lived 1500 years before Freud!

Then came Aquinas (1225-1274), who developed a theory of the mind covering “processes in the soul of which we are not aware.”<sup>11</sup> Most mystics of that time assumed that insights are gained by a process of inner reception in which the conscious mind is passive.<sup>12</sup> This was about 600 years before Freud!

Around the 1600s, the West recognized these unconscious mental processes and began seeking to scientifically validate the unconscious and the separation of the conscious mind from material processes. The purpose of this was to link conscious awareness and behavior with a system of processes of which one is not immediately aware and to establish this connection without losing the benefits of scientific precision.<sup>13</sup> This was around the time of Descartes, who lived 300 years before Freud!

After Descartes (1637), acceptance of the validity of the subconscious became widespread, and by the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this view was popular in Germany and Britain and, to a lesser extent, in France. “The existence of the unconscious had become a common assumption of educated and psychological discussions.”<sup>14</sup> Ralph Cudworth (1678) wrote: “There may be some vital energy without clear consciousness or express attention—Our human souls are not always conscious of whatever they have in them... There is also a more interior kind of plastic power in the soul... whereby it is formative of its own cogitations, which it itself is not always conscious of....”<sup>15</sup>

Among the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century figures exploring the subconscious were Leibnitz, who thought that “ordinary perceptions were the summation of countless small ones, each of which we are not aware of, because they lie below the threshold”<sup>16</sup>; Rousseau (18<sup>th</sup> century), who tried to explore the subconscious of his own temperament; and J.G. Hamann, a German religious philosopher who also studied the deeper levels of his own mind as evidenced in his experiences of conversion, in the emotional life and in imaginative thinking. (“How much more the formation of our own ideas remain secret.”)<sup>17</sup>

Between 1750 and 1830, a number of German philosophers and poets increasingly emphasized the emotional and dynamic aspects of the subconscious. Among them were: Herder, Goethe, Fichte, Hegel and Schelling.<sup>18</sup> Other German thinkers in the 1880s who made the idea of an unconscious a “commonplace thing” were: Schopenhauer, C.G. Carus, Gustav Fechner, Eduard von Hartmann and Nietzsche.<sup>19</sup>

Hartmann (1869), anticipating Freud, wrote, “consciousness only touches the surface....”<sup>20</sup> Even many of the romantic writers and poets in Germany and England echoed a sense of the powerful, dark, and yet creative aspects of the unconscious mind. Thus, J.P.T. Richler wrote, “The unconscious is really the largest realm in our minds....”<sup>21</sup>

This same theme is also alluded to in Francis Schaeffer’s writings in the mid-1900s. “We are constantly brought face-to-face with the concept of the subconscious, which is the realization that man is more than that which is on the surface. All too often the evangelical Christian acts as though there is nothing to man except that which is above the surface....”<sup>22</sup>

Others who preceded Freud in the study of the subconscious were William Hamilton, student of medicine; psychiatrist H. Maudsley; and naturalist W.B. Carpenter (1879). During the 1870s several theories of unconscious organic memory were developed. And between 1880 and 1910, many physicians and philosophers in several different countries were concerned with the various aspects of the unconscious.<sup>23</sup>

This brief review of the history of the unconscious clearly demonstrates that “Freud was not the first to develop a systematic theory of conflicts in the unconscious.”<sup>24</sup> Believing that we do indeed have a subconscious (memory or unconscious) does not make one a “Freudian” or a “psycho-heretic!”

## Biblical Allusions

The Bible alludes many times to parts of our memory and experience that are not accessible to our conscious mind. In Psalm 19:12-13, David asks God, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse Thou me from secret [covered up, closed up, hidden] faults...let them not have dominion over me....”

From whom are these faults secret? God? I think not. Ourselves? Yes, this is what David is imploring God to do; to show him and cleanse him from his secret faults. These are things that we have hidden away either out of ignorance or simply not wanting to deal with them. Only God, by His Spirit, can show us and cleanse us from them.

The Amplified Bible calls these faults “hidden and unconscious.” Its publishers state in the foreword, “...amplification helps the English reader comprehend what the Hebrew and Greek listener understood as

a matter of course.”<sup>25</sup> Psalm 139:23-24 follows this same line of reasoning, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me....” Again David is asking God to expose any “secret, unknown faults” in him, so he can confess and repent of them. And Psalm 51:6 states, “Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inward parts; and in the hidden part Thou shalt make me know wisdom.” Here, David refers not only to “inward parts,” but also to “hidden parts” of our internal architecture. What is he referring to, if there really is no hidden place or secret place?

And in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, what are the “strongholds” that Paul is talking about? Are these strongholds simply conscious attitudes and physical behaviors that we have? Or, could these also be the secret, hidden faults that David asks God to cleanse him of in Psalm 19:12?

Paul also refers to a “root of bitterness” in Hebrews 12:15. We understand that a “root” is something hidden or covered up. Often we are not even aware that a “root of bitterness” has sprung up in us until God, by His Spirit, points it out.

Then, of course, there is the undeniably clear Scripture in Jeremiah 17:9 which tells us that not only is our human heart “deceitful above all things, and desperately [incurably] wicked,” but, “who can know it?” No one but God can understand the wickedness of our hearts. In other words, there are things in our hearts that are hidden and secret, even to us!

Daniel 2:30, Psalm 44:21 and 1 Corinthians 14:25 present this same line of thinking. God is the only One who “knoweth the secrets of our hearts” because He is the only One who can see, search and try our hearts.<sup>26</sup>

Among other Scriptures that hint at covered, closed and hidden things that we are not even aware of are Deuteronomy 7:20, Acts 8:21-23, Psalm 16:7 and Ezekiel 14:1-6.

## The Hidden Chambers of the Bible (*cheder*) חֶדֶר

Is the idea of a subconscious, where “secret faults” are hidden, Biblical? The actual word “subconscious” or “unconscious” is not used in our translations. The Hebrew word found in Scripture is *cheder*, which means “the innermost part,” “the hidden chambers,” “the inward part” or “the secret place.” Of the over 38 Scriptures that use the word *cheder*, over half refer to a secret, hidden, innermost chamber or parlor. Here are a few examples:

Proverbs 20:27: “The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts (*cheder*) of the belly.” (Why would the spirit search our inward parts, if not to reveal hidden sin in us, to us?);

Proverbs 18:8: “The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts (*cheder*) of the belly.” (If there is no “secret place” or “hidden chambers,” where is this “innermost part”? This is also quoted in Proverbs 26:22);

Proverbs 20:30: “The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil; so do stripes the inward parts (*cheder*) of the belly.” (What does God mean, if we don’t really have an innermost part or hidden chambers where evil can hide?);

And, Proverbs 24:4: Only “by [intimate] knowledge (*daath*) shall the chambers (*cheder*) be filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” (Intimate knowledge of God happens internally—in our soul. How, then, can these “chambers” be filled with “all precious and pleasant riches,” if there really isn’t an “innermost part”?)

Psalm 51:6 seems to follow this same line of thinking. David says “...in the hidden part Thou shalt make me to know wisdom.” (God wants this hidden part—this secret place—cleansed of “secret faults” and then filled with all precious and pleasant riches; i.e., God’s Wisdom.) Among other provocative Scriptures that use the word *cheder* are Ezekiel 8:12, Deuteronomy 32:25, Proverbs 7:27 and 2 Chronicles 18:24.

## Two Extremes Among Christians

The Church is really experiencing two extremes right now. On the one hand, many orthodox Christians believe and teach that all we need to do in order to “deal with” our hurts, painful past experiences and fears is to simply appropriate the fact that Christ died for our sins and has risen from the dead to live His Life out in us. They feel the idea of “hidden chambers” or a “secret place” where we hide and bury our hurts, fears and insecurities is purely a Freudian idea and must be discarded. They teach that all we are supposed to do is just forgive and love others because of God’s Love and forgiveness to us.

At the other extreme, we encounter Christian psychologists and psychiatrists who believe and teach that the only way we can deal with our hurts, past experiences and fears is by going through years of in-depth therapy, inner healing, visualization, healing of the memories, etc.

Both extremes leave the person with more hurts and on the road to frustration. No wonder there is such confusion, division and ignorance in the Body of Christ today.

While we do not adhere at all to psychology or psychiatry as God’s answer to dealing with our sin,<sup>27</sup> we do believe Scripture teaches us that we have a secret place—an innermost part, hidden chambers—where we bury our hurts, fears and insecurities if we don’t know how to give them to God. These are things that are too painful to retain in our consciousness, so we push them down, bury them and try to forget them. These hidden things, then, can eventually motivate and influence our actions.

## Results of These Two Extremes

The results of both these two extreme ways of thinking are similar. The orthodox way of thinking does put Jesus in the center as our only true healer.<sup>28</sup> But if they don’t allow Him to expose and deal with the root causes of our problems (because they don’t believe we have a hidden part), and simply concern themselves with the symptoms, then those symptoms will return again and again.

We are not saying that everything we think and feel has a hidden root cause, but we do believe that much of what makes us bitter and angry and fearful does. As a result of seeing our symptoms return, we end up discouraged, depressed and convinced that God doesn’t love us, because He hasn’t answered our prayers—He hasn’t taken these things from us. And, of course, Satan rejoices!

Similar results occur with the Christian psychologist’s or psychiatrist’s viewpoint. Many of these counselors and doctors do not put Jesus in the center as the only true Healer of our souls, but rather the therapy itself. All we are doing in our counseling sessions, then, is reprogramming those same negative hurts, fears and insecurities right back into our hidden chambers, where they become even more tenacious strongholds for the enemy. As a result, we again end up discouraged, depressed and convinced that God doesn’t love us, because he hasn’t answered our prayers—He hasn’t taken these things away from us. And once again, Satan rejoices!

## Solution

We need to understand how to allow the Spirit of God to work in our whole person, not only the conscious part of us where we experience

many of the “symptoms” of our problems, but also the “hidden, secret part” of us where many of the roots of our problems lie. If we don’t allow the Spirit of God to point out the roots, many of our symptoms will return again and again (as in the two above ways of thinking).

What is needed in the Christian body is: 1) to put Jesus in the center as our only true Healer. Because only Jesus can see our hearts; only He can show us the real “root causes” of our problems; only He can remove them “as far as the east is from the west”; only He can align our feelings with our choices and make us genuine; and only He can give us the Love we need to go on as if nothing has happened.<sup>29</sup> And, 2) to allow Jesus, by His Spirit to expose, cleanse and heal our hidden and secret faults, so that God can completely remove these roots from us and we can truly be healed.

At this point, we will be able to let Christ live His Life out through us and we will be able to genuinely love and forgive others as Christ would have us do. We needn’t wait, by the way, until all our problems and hurts are dealt with before God can live His Life out through us.

If we can choose to give over to God, any root of bitterness, unforgiveness, unbelief, fear, etc. (whatever God shows us), then His Life and His Love will flow through us in a new and powerful way. As a result, we’ll experience an intimacy with Him that we haven’t known before—experiencing more of His Love not only for ourselves, but “unconditionally” for others.

## Conclusion

Man has recognized for a long time that a substantial portion of our memory lies below the conscious level and through the ages it has been given many names. This idea did not originate with Freud. It is Biblical and it appears to be parallel to what the Hebrew calls the “innermost part” or “the hidden chambers” (*cheder*)—the place where secret faults are stored.

So, as Christians we don’t have to work at cleaning up our past as psychology teaches, but simply giving God permission to expose, in the present, the whole man—not only our conscious sins, but also our secret faults. Once He brings up the roots and they are dealt with as He would have us to do, then He will remove them “as far as the east is from the west” and we will truly be healed.

[Portions of this addendum have been taken from Nan’s book, *Be Ye Transformed.*]

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## Notes:

1. We use the words “subconscious,” “unconscious” and “memory” as synonyms.
2. *Personal UPDATE*, “The Fallacies of Freud,” Chuck Missler, Koinonia House, May 1996.
3. *The American College Dictionary*, Clarence L. Barnhart, Random House, New York NY, pages 1028-1029.
4. *The Power of the Spirit*, William Law, Christian Literature Crusade, Fort Washington PA, page 142.
5. *Great Books of the Western World*, The Great Ideas II, Robert Maynard Hutchins, University of Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952, Vol. 3, Chapter 56, pages 133-157.
6. Ibid.
7. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York NY, 1967, Vol.1, page 185.
8. Ibid.
9. *Great Books of the Western World*, The Great Ideas II, Robert Maynard Hutchins, University of Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952, Vol. 3, Chapter 56, page 135.
10. Ibid, page 136.
11. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York NY, 1967, Vol.1, page 185.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid, pages 185-186.
15. *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Book 1, Chapter 3.
16. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York NY, 1967, Vol.1, page 186.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. *True Spirituality*, Francis A. Schaeffer, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton IL, 1971, pages 132-133.
23. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York NY, 1967, Vol.1, page 186-187.
24. Ibid, page 186.
25. *The Amplified Bible*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids MI, 1970, page 265.
26. Luke 9:47; Proverbs 21:1-2; Hebrews 4:12; Psalm 139:23; 1 Chronicles 29:17; Jeremiah 11:20; 17:10; 20:12 and many more.
27. Psychology really is “another gospel” because it leads us to the wrong goal: “conformity to the world” and not Christ.

28. Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18-19.  
29. Proverbs 20:27; Psalm 19:12; Psalm 103:12; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

**Notes:**

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# About The Cover Design

*(on the tape cassette volumes)*

## The “Front” cover:

The Greek border: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty (Revelation 1:8).” The center design element symbolizes the Word of God Incarnate, illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

## The “Back” cover: (the “front” to the Jewish reader)

The Hebrew border: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might (from the Sh’ma, Deut 6:4-5).”

The center design represents the Burning Bush, made up of Hebrew letters which proclaim “the Eternal One cannot lie.”

## The Spine:

The spine includes a Menorah from the Old Testament, a Maranatha Dove suggesting the New Testament, and the Koinonia House logo at the base.



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