

THE BOOK OF EZRA

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INTRODUCTION

The seventy years of Israel's captivity had now come to an end, exactly as Jeremiah said it would, **Jeremiah 29:1-14**, and so, the Book of Ezra covers the events of the Jews returning from their Babylonian captivity. In the year 538 B.C., the Medes and Persians took over from the Babylonians and became the ruling power of the world. All the prisoners, including those from Israel, who were formally under the subjection of Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king were now under the control of Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king.

Isaiah also prophesied the end of Israel's captivity, he even names Cyrus and tells us that he would be the king who would help Israel rebuild the temple and Jerusalem, **Isaiah 44:28-45:7**.

Cyrus was a different kind of king, as he believed that all his prisoners would be more loyal to him if they were free, rather than being slaves. He and the other kings who followed, helped the people to return home and rebuild their temples. Because the people were free to practice their religion, this, in turn, promoted loyalty to the kings.

AUTHOR

It's generally agreed that Ezra, who was a scribe and priest, wrote the Book of Ezra and many commentators also believe that Ezra wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles and **Psalms 119**. We know that the first Jewish synagogue began when the Jews were in captivity, and we know that the Sanhedrin court began in captivity and Jewish tradition suggests that these were established by Ezra.

The name Ezra means 'help' and he was born among the Babylonian exiles and raised in Babylon, **Ezra 7:6**. He was the great-grandson of Hilkiah who was the high priest during the reign of Josiah, **Ezra 7:1-5**. He was also a descendant of Aaron because he was a Levitical priest.

Because he was a scribe, he was held in high esteem among the Medo-Persian officials. He was a highly educated man, especially in regards to God's laws and teaching God's laws, **Ezra 7:6**. He loved God and His Word and knew what obedience to God was all about, **Ezra 7:10**. He taught God's Word not only to those who were in captivity but also to those who had returned from captivity, **Nehemiah 8:1-8**.

THE STAGES OF THE RETURN

The return of Judah took place in three stages and may be summarised as follows.

STAGE 1

This first stage was by the decree of Cyrus for the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple to God in 538 B.C. **Ezra 1-6**. The political leader of the Jews who returned at this time was an individual named Zerubbabel, while the Levitical religious leader who returned with him was an individual name, Joshua.

Approximately 50,000 people returned at this time, 42,360 Jews plus 8,000 servants and 200 singing men. The purpose of this return was to rebuild the temple, which was completed in 516 B.C. It was during this time that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered.

The work of temple rebuilding was well begun under Zerubbabel and Joshua, the altar was established on October 5th 537 B.C., and the foundations of the second temple were completed in May/June of 536 B.C.

However, the people grew selfish and careless and the work lay dormant for several years. God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah to rebuke and encourage the people, and the temple was finally completed in February/March of 516 B.C.

STAGE 2

The religious leader of this return was Ezra the scribe, 458 B.C. **Ezra 7-10**. This was a much smaller return as only about 2,000 Jews returned at this time. The purpose of this return was to purify the worship services. Pagan wives had been taken and squatters were in the temple.

STAGE 3

It was at this time that Nehemiah was allowed to return to the land in order to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and enable the people to re-inhabit the city, 445/444 B.C. **Nehemiah 1:1-13**. The Old Testament prophet that ministered at this time was Malachi.

Meanwhile in the year 479 B.C. Esther married King Ahasuerus and became queen of the Medo-Persian Empire, **Esther 2:17**. It was during this period that the remaining Jews who hadn't returned to Palestine but remained on the outside of Persian territory were protected from the murderous scheme of Haman.

LIFE DURING THE RETURN

Very little had changed from the time of the exile. The Jews were living previously in Babylon, modern-day Iraq, during the exile. But, we find them in the land of Persia, modern-day Iran, and returning to their homeland of Israel during the period of the return.

The land of Persia or modern-day Iran is a large plateau between the plain of the Tigris on the west and the Indus River valley to the east. In the south, it is bordered by the Persian Gulf leading to the Indian Ocean. To the north of the plateau are the Caspian Sea and the chains of mountains that extend from the south end of the Caspian Sea.

Cyrus conquered territories he emphasized winning the favour of the gods, the priesthoods and their followers in those lands. Thus he would reverse the deportation policies of Assyria and Babylon, allowing people to return to their homelands and thus gaining their loyalty.

The Persian people were polytheistic, but at this time there seems to have been the beginnings of Zoroastrianism. To be sure, Darius and Xerxes exalted Ahuramazda, the god Zoroaster preached, but they do not mention Zoroaster. Cyrus, however, comes across as very tolerant of various religions, making him simply a typical Persian polytheist.

Zoroastrianism contains a dualism, a contradiction of good and evil, a Good Spirit and an Evil Spirit with his demon henchmen. The Good Spirit represents light, fire, summer, fertile land, and health. While the Evil Spirit represents darkness, winter, drought, sickness, and death.

In later Zoroastrianism, individuals were judged by whether their good deeds, outweighed their evil deeds. The fire was used as a symbol of the god Ahuramazda, the god worshipped in Zoroastrianism.

All other aspects of life, dress, diet, etc, were the same as the period of the exile. Obviously, those who stayed in Persia lived a wealthier lifestyle than those who returned to the land. Those that returned would have a more basic lifestyle for a while until houses were rebuilt, city walls put up and crops re-grown.

DATE

If Ezra was the writer of the book, it was probably written sometime between 440 B.C. and 400 B.C.

OUTLINE

- The Exiles Return From Babylon. Ezra 1:1-2:70
 - The Ordination of Cyrus. Ezra 1:1-4
 - Preparations for the journey. Ezra 1:5-11
 - Those who returned. Ezra 2:1-70
 - Temple Building Began. Ezra 3:1-4:24
 - The altar and the foundations. Ezra 3:1-13
 - Opposition to the work. Ezra 4:1-24
 - The Building is Completed. Ezra 5:1-6:22
 - Work resumed. Ezra 5:1-5
 - Tattenai's letter to Darius. Ezra 5:6-17
- The Ordinations of Cyrus and Darius. Ezra 6:1-12
 - The temple was finished. Ezra 6:13-22
- Ezra's Journey To Jerusalem. Ezra 7:1-8:36
 - Ezra introduced. Ezra 7:1-10
 - Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra. Ezra 7:11-28
 - The journey to Jerusalem. Ezra 8:1-36
 - The Great Reformation. Ezra 9:1-10:44
 - The tragic report and Ezra's prayer. Ezra 9:1-15
- The abandonment of mixed marriages. Ezra 10:1-17
 - List of those with foreign wives. Ezra 10:18-44

EZRA 1

Before we get into the text, I think it would be useful to break the book down into two sections. In **Ezra 1-6** we read about those who were first to return to Palestine under the rulership of Zerubbabel, they were the ones who rebuilt the temple.

In **Ezra 7-10** we read about those who were second to return to Palestine under the leadership of Ezra. Ezra's main purpose is to restore worship according to the law of Moses, along with teaching God's people God's Word.

CYRUS HELPS THE EXILES TO RETURN

‘In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: ‘This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’ Ezra 1:1-4

The first year of Cyrus king of Persia is referring to the first year of his reign over the Babylonian lands in 538/537 B.C. His actual reign over the Medes and Persians began earlier in 557 B.C. He was known as Cyrus the Great, and he is the very person whom Isaiah names in his prophecy, **Isaiah 45:1**, who would help Israel rebuild the temple and Jerusalem, **Isaiah 44:28-45:7**.

The seventy years of captivity were coming to an end just as Jeremiah had said, **Jeremiah 15:12-14** / **Jeremiah 29:10-12**. The seventy years are calculated from the first captivity during the days of Daniel and his friends, **Daniel 1:1**, to the first return of the captives in 536 B.C. There is no doubt that the Jews saw what was happening as a fulfilment of the prophecies.

It would be easy for God to move the heart of Cyrus, especially if someone pointed out to Cyrus that his name actually appears in the prophecies of Isaiah, which were written many years before **Isaiah 44:28** / **Isaiah 45:1-4** / **Isaiah 24:13**.

Cyrus then goes on to make a proclamation not only verbally but also in writing, **2 Kings 19:9-14**. The accounts of this proclamation here and in **2 Chronicles 36:22-23** were the public proclamations of the decree. The quotation of the proclamation in **Ezra 6:3-5** was the official recording of the decree. It's possible that each group would receive a different letter with the same thing written on them.

Cyrus gives credit to God and proclaims that he will build a temple for God in Jerusalem, **1 Chronicles 17:11-12** / **1 Chronicles 22:10** / **1 Chronicles 28:6** / **2 Chronicles 6:9-10**. He then proclaims that God's people may return home to help with the building work. Sadly, only a small number of Jews decided to return home from exile, as Isaiah had prophesied, **Isaiah 10:22**.

THE CYRUS CYLINDER

If you visit the British Museum in London, you will see on display an original pair of cufflinks based on the Cyrus Cylinder. The cufflinks are made from 24k plated bronze and are supplied in a presentation box.

The Cyrus Cylinder is one of the most famous objects to have survived from the ancient world. The cylinder was inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform, cuneiform is the earliest form of writing, on the orders of the Persian King Cyrus the Great, 559-530 B.C. after he captured Babylon in 539 B.C.

It is often referred to as the first bill of human rights as it appears to encourage freedom of worship throughout the Persian Empire and to allow deported people to return to their homelands. The cylinder was found in Babylon, modern Iraq, in 1879 during a British Museum excavation.

After the deportations only the poor of the land, the vine-growers and farmers were left, **2 Kings 25:12 / Jeremiah 39:10 / Jeremiah 40:7 / Jeremiah 52:16**. Notice that Cyrus also proclaims freewill offerings, this tells us that it wasn't just about the remnant returning to Jerusalem to live but they were to return to also rebuild the temple.

‘Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. All their neighbours assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.’
Ezra 1:5-6

Some commentators suggest that it was around 50,000 from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin who took part in this first return. It's possible that because this number was so high, others, who didn't want to return home were asked to contribute to those who were making the journey to Jerusalem and the building work for the temple.

Notice that ‘all their neighbours assisted them’, it appears that some Gentiles contributed towards their journey too.

‘Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. This was the inventory: gold dishes 30 silver dishes 1,000 silver pans 29 gold bowls 30 matching silver bowls 410 other articles 1,000. In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along with the exiles when they came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.’ Ezra 1:7-11

These articles which Cyrus brought out were the articles which Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the temple during the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. **2 Kings 25:14-16 / 2 Chronicles 36:10 / 2 Chronicles 36:18 / Daniel 1:2**.

Some believe that Sheshbazzar worked in partnership with Zerubbabel, **Ezra 2:2 / Ezra 3:2**, and others believe that these were simply two names for the same person, **Haggai 1:1 / Haggai 1:14 / Zechariah 4:9 / Ezra 3:8-11**.

All of these articles given by Cyrus, not only show us how rich he was but also how generous and genuine he was in regards to sending some of God's people home to rebuild the temple.

EZRA 2

INTRODUCTION

‘Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to their own town, in company with Zerubbabel, Joshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah): The list of the men of the people of Israel: the descendants of Parosh 2,172 of Shephatiah 372 of Arah 775 of Pahath-Moab (through the line of Jeshua and Joab) 2,812 of Elam 1,254 of Zattu 945 of Zakkai 760 of Bani 642 of Bebai 623 of Azgad 1,222 of Adonikam 666 of Bigvai 2,056 of Adin 454 of Ater (through Hezekiah) 98 of Bezai 323 of Jorah 112 of Hashum 223 of Gibbar 95 the men of Bethlehem 123 of Netophah 56 of Anathoth 128 of Azmaveth 42 of Kiriath Jearim, Kephirah and Beeroth 743 of Ramah and Geba 621 of Mikmash 122 of Bethel and Ai 223 of Nebo 52 of Magbish 156 of the other Elam 1,254 of Harim 320 of Lod, Hadid and Ono 725 of Jericho 345 of Senaah 3,630.

The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah (through the family of Jeshua) 973 of Immer 1,052 of Pashhur 1,247 of Harim 1,017. The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel (of the line of Hodaviah) 74 The musicians: the descendants of Asaph 128 The gatekeepers of the temple: the descendants of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita and Shobai 139 The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, Keros, Siaha, Padon, Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub, Hagab, Shalmal, Hanan, Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah, Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam, Uzza, Paseah, Besai, Asnah, Meunim, Nephusim, Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, Barkos, Sisera, Temah, Nezhiah and Hatipha. The descendants of the servants of Solomon: the descendants of Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda, Jaala, Darkon, Giddel, Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-Hazzebaim and Ami. The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon 392. The following came up from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon and Immer, but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel: The descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah and Nekoda 652. And from among the priests: The descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name). These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there was a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim. The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 male and female slaves; and they also had 200 male and female singers. They had 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys. When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments. The priests, the Levites, the musicians, the gatekeepers and the temple servants settled in their own towns, along with some of the other people, and the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns.' Ezra 2:1-70

THE LIST OF THE EXILES WHO RETURNED

After reading through this list of names, we find there are seven distinct groups of people mentioned.

1. The leaders. 2. The men of Israel. 3. The priests. 4. The Levites. 5. The temple servants. 6. The sons of Solomon's servants. 7. Those of uncertain genealogy.

These were the religious leaders of those who had returned from captivity, [Nehemiah 7:6-73](#).

Zerubbabel, whose name means 'seed of Babylon', possibly because he was born there, appears as the leader of the return to Jerusalem. He's usually described as the son of Shealtiel, [Ezra 3:2](#), but [1 Chronicles 3:19](#) describes him as the son of Shealtiel's brother Pedaiah.

It's probable that Shealtiel died childless, whereupon a Levirate marriage, [Deuteronomy 25:5-10](#), resulted in the birth of Zerubbabel, who was thus the actual son of Pedaiah but the legal son of Shealtiel.

Notice the name Nehemiah, this isn't the same Nehemiah who returned to the land in order to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, [Nehemiah 1:1-13](#). Also, notice the name Mordecai, this isn't the same Mordecai who was the cousin of Esther, [Esther 2:5-6](#). The event which is taking place here happened before the events of Esther and the later coming of Nehemiah.

Although we may find genealogies very boring to read, to the Jew they were vitally important, especially when it comes to possession of the land.

The Levites are mentioned not for the purpose of owning land because God was their inheritance, [Deuteronomy 10:8-9](#), they are mentioned in order to prove that they were from the tribe of Levi so that they could serve as priests in God's temple and minister to God's people, [Numbers 3:3-37](#) / [Numbers 4:3](#).

The total number of Levites was actually less than the number of priests that returned. This means that a remarkably small percentage of the Levites returned from Babylon. The priests were the descendants of Aaron and they were blessed to work in God's temple, [2 Chronicles 31:19](#). Most of the priests stayed behind in Babylon.

The temple servants are called the ‘Nethinim’ in some translations. They were the descendants of the Gibeonites, who were made special servants of the Levites and the priests at the temple. The descendants of Solomon were those employed by Solomon who came from other people groups. They came into Israel as foreign proselytes.

The Urim and the Thummim were kept inside the ephod of the priests, [Exodus 28:30](#) / [Leviticus 8:8](#) / [Judges 20:18-28](#) / [Nehemiah 7:65](#). Urim means ‘lights’ and Thummim means ‘perfections’. They were probably two jewels and although no one really knows how they worked, it appears they simply gave ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers to specific questions.

The size of this entire group is here stated to be about 50,000. However, this was only the first wave of repatriation to Israel from the Babylonian captivity and includes only the heads of families. This was only a small percentage of those who had been exiled and their descendants, the great majority stayed behind in Babylon.

There’s no doubt these first people who returned to Jerusalem were very generous. Their aim is simply to rebuild the altar so that they can begin sacrificing to the Lord. It’s clear that their offering was more than enough to get the job done.

EZRA 3

INTRODUCTION

‘When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD. On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD’s temple had not yet been laid.’ Ezra 3:1-6

REBUILDING THE ALTAR

The seventh month was an important month for the Jews, because of the feast of trumpets, [Numbers 29:1](#), the day of atonement, [Numbers 29:7](#) / [Leviticus 16:29](#), and the feast of tabernacles, [Leviticus 23:34-36](#) / [Leviticus 23:39-44](#) / [Numbers 29:12-38](#) all fell within this month.

The building of the altar was the main reason why they returned to their homeland in the first place. This was a real effort to turn back to God and live and worship according to God’s laws, [Deuteronomy 6:4](#).

The Jews still feared those around them, this is a natural feeling, especially since they have been in captivity for seventy years. But the fear they felt wasn’t because of any foreign nations around them but from the locals.

Remember Jerusalem was taken over by the Babylonians, so, understandably, the Jews would feel like strangers in a strange land seventy years later.

After the building of the altar, they then made their offerings, [Leviticus 23:34-42](#), this would have created a real sense of belonging, community and fellowship.

They haven't worshipped together for years in Jerusalem, but now that the altar has been built, people can make their journeys from different parts of the world to Jerusalem to make their offerings, animal sacrifices and worship God, [Acts 2:9-11](#).

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

'Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.

In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak and the rest of the people (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work. They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the building of the house of the LORD. Joshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah) and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers—all Levites—joined together in supervising those working on the house of God. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: 'He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.' And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.' [Ezra 3:7-13](#)

Work began on the temple in the spring of the second year after the Jews returned from captivity. Workers were hired, materials were sought and cedar was brought from Lebanon, [2 Chronicles 2:8-9](#).

It appears that Cyrus also donated some funding from his country's own treasury, [Ezra 6:3-5](#), and the Jews were happy to accept this, even though he was a Gentile king.

They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the building work. There appear to be different ages given throughout the Scriptures concerning when a Levite was old enough to work in the temple. Those ages vary from the age of 20, as here, up to 25, 30, or 35.

Simmons, in his commentary, gives the following reason for the varied ages.

'There were 24,000 Levites to see after the work of Solomon's temple, [1 Chronicles 29:4](#), and only 341 Levites returned from Babylon. It hardly takes a genius to figure out why they lowered the required age, they needed more men!'

Notice they praise God and with thanksgiving, they sang to the Lord, 'He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.' The Psalm they sang together here is [Psalm 136](#), which tells us they were thinking of Jeremiah's great prophecy, [Jeremiah 33:11](#).

While some shouted for joy when the foundation of the temple was being laid, many of the older priests, Levites and family heads began to weep loudly.

These were the men who had seen Solomon's temple in all its glory, they wept because this new temple as grand as it will be, will never be as magnificent as Solomon's original temple.

INTRODUCTION

‘When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, ‘Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.’

But Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, ‘You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.’ Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.’ Ezra 4:1-5

OPPOSITION TO THE REBUILDING

As the Jews were building the temple, enemies arose against the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. It appears that the Samaritans, [2 Kings 17:24-28](#), and others, who had been brought into Palestine after the initial deportation of the Assyrian captivity, [2 Kings 17:5-6](#), assumed that the reestablishment of the Jews in the land would pose a threat to them.

These people weren’t happy that Judah and Benjamin had come back to Judea, [2 Kings 17:33](#) / [Luke 10:25-37](#). Isaiah had prophesied that Northern Israel would cease to be a distinct people within sixty-five years, [Isaiah 7:8](#). This was fulfilled by 669 B.C., during the reign of Esarhaddon, 680-668 B.C.

The enemies asked to get involved in the building of the temple because they sought God, however, their motives weren’t totally pure, this is seen in their response to Zerubbabel.

In other words, they weren’t seeking the God of Israel, they didn’t really want to help in the building of the temple and institute the proper worship of God according to God’s commands. All they really wanted to do was to bring the Jews back into idolatry by worshipping their gods, [2 Kings 17:24-41](#).

It’s clear that the local people didn’t fully understand that Cyrus had allowed the captives to return home, in order to rebuild their temple. When Israel’s leaders rejected their offer of help, the locals turned on the Jews in an effort to frustrate their work.

The good news is that Israel is now showing a real commitment to God, they’ve obviously learned their lesson concerning idolatry from their seventy years in captivity.

Judah’s enemies went about discouraging them and frustrated their work on the temple. Sadly, their efforts succeeded and the construction work on the temple came to an end, this frustration continued through to the reign of Darius.

The situation remained like this until the arrival of God’s prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, however, instead of getting back to building the temple, they were more focused on building their own homes, [Haggai 1:4](#).

LATER OPPOSITION UNDER XERXES AND ARTAXERXES

‘At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. The letter was written in Aramaic script and in the Aramaic language. Rehum the commanding officer

and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows: Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary, together with the rest of their associates—the judges, officials and administrators over the people from Persia, Uruk and Babylon, the Elamites of Susa, and the other people whom the great and honourable Ashurbanipal deported and settled in the city of Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates. (This is a copy of the letter they sent him.) To King Artaxerxes, From your servants in Trans-Euphrates: The king should know that the people who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and eventually the royal revenues will suffer. Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonoured, we are sending this message to inform the king, so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place with a long history of sedition. That is why this city was destroyed. We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates. The king sent this reply: To Rehum the commanding officer, Shimshai the secretary and the rest of their associates living in Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates: Greetings. The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence. I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition. Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans-Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them. Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order. Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests? As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop.’ Ezra 4:6-23

Ezra 4:1-5 dealt with the Jews who began the building of the temple in 536 B.C. but Ezra 4:6-23 refers to the building of city walls.

The Samaritan accusations against the people of Judah sought to stop the work by influencing the king against the builders when Ahasuerus reigned in 485-465 B.C. The resistance under the reign of Artaxerxes I happened in 464-424 B.C.

Notice that everything is written in Aramaic, instead of Hebrew, beginning at Ezra 4:8 all the way through to Ezra 6:18. Ezra 7:12-26 is also written in Aramaic.

Please note that this was resistance to the work of rebuilding the city and its walls. We know because Zerubbabel started the work and he also finished it, Zechariah 4:9 / Haggai 2:3.

The N.I.V. has the name ‘Ashurbanipal’, in verse 10, but the K.J.V has the name ‘Asnappar’ but that name isn’t named anywhere else in the Scriptures. He was probably the king of Assyria who allowed Manasseh to return from exile, 2 Chronicles 33:11-13, and possibly the unnamed Assyrian king who brought people from other countries into the land of Palestine, 2 Kings 17:24.

The letter they wrote was filled with some truths but also filled with some lies. Yes, Jerusalem had a sinful past but not at this point in time after they returned from captivity. The biggest lie in all of this was they said that the Jews had rebellious intentions.

After reading the letter the Persian king focused on the truth, which was Jerusalem’s sinful past. He acknowledges that Israel once had great kings ruling over Jerusalem and he acknowledges that these kings had great power to tax the people and impose tributes on those nations around them.

He’s well aware of how vast Israel’s territories were in times past, 2 Samuel 8:3 / 1 Kings 4:21. It’s no wonder he began to see the Jews as a great threat, if they were once like that, they could easily rise up and become like that again. and so, he commands the work to stop.

‘Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.’ Ezra 4:24

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following about this verse.

‘Chronologically, this verse comes exactly after [Ezra 4:5](#), above, where it was stated that, ‘The people of the land hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia.’ In fact, this lobbying against the rebuilding of the temple went on throughout the remainder of the reign of Cyrus, through all the days of Cambyses, and until the second year of Darius I in 520 B.C.’

‘A little later in [Ezra 6](#), we shall have a detailed report of how the opposition of the Samaritans was successfully checkmated and how Darius I ordered the temple to be rebuilt. One of the significant revelations of the chapter is the racial makeup of what we have loosely called the ‘Samaritans’. A remnant of those people was descended from the ten northern tribes of Israel; but as the letter to Artaxerxes shows, there were not less than nine different nationalities besides Israelites who constituted the population of Samaria.’

Here we find that the writer reverts back to 520 B.C., the second year of King Darius when the Jews renewed their efforts to rebuild the temple with the encouragement of Haggai, and Zechariah, [Haggai 1:1-5](#) / [Ezra 4:24](#) / [Ezra 5:1-2](#) / [Haggai 1:4-15](#). It is then that they begin to rebuild the city walls.

EZRA 5

INTRODUCTION

‘Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.’ [Ezra 5:1-2](#)

TATTENAI’S LETTER TO DARIUS

After receiving opposition from the Samaritans and the locals who lived in Judea, the building work of the temple came to a complete standstill, [Ezra 4:23](#). It appears the Jews now turned their attention to building their own lives and houses, [Haggai 1:9-10](#), despite God’s temple being in ruins.

It was during this time that God’s prophets Haggai and Zechariah appeared, they rebuked but also encouraged the Jews to begin building God’s temple again and the work began.

When we read the Book of Haggai it comes across as if God is only interested in the temple being built, but when we read the Book of Zechariah, this tells us that God was also interested in people’s lives.

‘At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates went to them and asked, ‘Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?’ They also asked, ‘What are the names of those who are constructing this building?’ But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.’ [Ezra 5:3-5](#)

It seems like every time the Jews get back to work on the temple, they end up getting even more opposition. This time it was the governor Tattenai, who was a man appointed by the King of Persia to govern the province that included Judea. He and his companions wanted to know why the work of building the temple had started again.

Tattenai asks them ‘who authorised them to rebuild the temple’. remember the Jews have been back from captivity for many years at this point, so it’s possible he wasn’t aware of Cyrus’ decree, [Ezra 1:1-4](#).

He also wants to know the names of those who are constructing the temple, these were probably the names of the leaders. He wanted to know their names in order to convict them before king Darius, but despite all the questions, the Jews continued working on the temple.

‘This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates, the officials of Trans-Euphrates, sent to King Darius. The report they sent him to read as follows: To King Darius: Cordial greetings. The king should know that we went to the district of Judah, to the temple of the great God. The people are building it with large stones and placing the timbers in the walls. The work is being carried on with diligence and is making rapid progress under their direction. We questioned the elders and asked them, ‘Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?’ We also asked them their names, so that we could write down the names of their leaders for your information. This is the answer they gave us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our ancestors angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon. ‘However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. He even removed from the temple of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to the temple in Babylon. Then King Cyrus gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor, and he told him, ‘Take these articles and go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem. And rebuild the house of God on its site.’ ‘So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished.’ Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter.’ Ezra 5:6-17

Tattenai wrote a letter to Darius and he reassured the king that he had questioned the leaders concerning the building work. Notice he mentions that the Jews were using ‘large stones’ to build with.

It’s possible that these large stones cause Tattenai to be suspicious about what they were actually building, maybe in his mind, he thought they were building a fortress, not a temple.

Also, notice that ‘Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations’. Because of this, many people believe that Sheshbazzar is another name for Zerubbabel, and Tattenai used this name because it would be more likely to appear in the records that were to be searched.

Tattenai then asked king Darius to research the matter, to determine if the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem were royally sanctioned. Because the Persians had great respect for their own laws, [Daniel 6:8](#) / [Daniel 6:12](#), and former kings, if the decree of King Cyrus was found, then Darius would respect the decree, [Daniel 6:15](#).

While the building works continue on the temple, I’m sure the Jews would be anxiously waiting on Darius’ reply.

EZRA 6

INTRODUCTION

‘King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it: Memorandum: In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. Also, the gold and silver

articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.’ Ezra 6:1-5

THE DECREE OF DARIUS

At the request of Tattenai, [Ezra 5:17](#), a search was made for the decree of Cyrus, which states that the Jews were permitted to return home and rebuild the temple, [Ezra 1:1-4](#). We must remember that whilst this search was going on, the Jews continued to work on the temple, [Ezra 5:5](#).

This wouldn’t have been an easy task to find the scroll as the Persian archives were vast and credit must be given to Darius, for not giving up the search. He could have easily given up when nothing was found in Babylon, but he continued the search and eventually found it at Ecbatana.

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following about this account of the decree.

‘The variations between this decree of Cyrus and that report of it in [Ezra 1](#) is due to the fact that this one was an official document relating to the expenditure of public money, and that one was an oral, public proclamation. There is no disharmony whatever between them!’

‘The dimensions for the temple listed by Cyrus are a problem. There are different accounts of the size of Solomon’s temple, in [2 Chronicles 3](#) and [1 Kings 6](#), and, it is difficult to reconcile the dimensions given here with the statements made in [Zechariah 4:10](#) and [Haggai 2:3](#), implying that the second temple was smaller than the first. Perhaps the dimensions here are those which Cyrus required the Jews not to exceed.’

‘Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you other officials of that province, stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and olive oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail, so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons. Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.’ Ezra 6:6-12

After discovering Cyrus’ decree, any opposition was completely stopped and Darius commands Tattenai, and those associated with him, to actually help the Jews with their work of building the temple and asks them to use the royal treasury to help them with any funds which may be required.

Darius not only wanted to help the work to continue, but he also wants the Jews to pray for him and his sons, which I’m sure they would have done, [Jeremiah 29:7](#) / [1 Timothy 2:1-2](#).

Notice also that he took further steps to enforce his new decree by declaring that there will be severe consequences to anyone who ignored or disobeyed his decree.

COMPLETION AND DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE

‘Then, because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates carried it out with diligence. So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the

preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. For the dedication of this house of God they offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses.’ Ezra 6:13-18

Tattenai, Shethar-Bozenai and their associates diligently carried out Darius’ orders, they supported the work and punished anyone who opposed it. the work continued and the Jews were encouraged to keep going through God’s prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

Remember the building work was going very slowly because God’s people were more interested in building their own homes, [Haggai 1:2-3](#). As a result of their neglect of building the temple, God sent them famine as a judgment, [Haggai 1:5-6](#) / [Haggai 1:10-11](#).

This famine got their attention and they listened to Haggai and Zechariah, and under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, a new effort was begun, [Haggai 1:12-15](#).

The work was completed on ‘the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.’ This means that it took four years to complete the work initially begun. The first captives returned from Babylon when Cyrus was king but the temple construction was completed under the reign of Darius.

Artaxerxes is mentioned here because it was during his reign, almost sixty years after the first Jews returned from Babylon and began the construction under Zerubbabel.

It was during his reign that Ezra was given permission to take all the sacred articles of the temple from the temple in Babylon to be placed inside God’s new temple in Jerusalem, [Ezra 7:1-26](#).

After the temple was finished being built, they offered many sacrifices to God, [1 Kings 8:62-66](#), and there was a great celebration among the Jews. Notice that they offered ‘twelve male goats as a sin offering’, this speaks of all their past failures but also their reliance on God.

These would be the remnant of the twelve tribes of Israel who offered these sacrifices in the newly built temple, [Ezra 2:2](#) / [Ezra 2:59](#) / [Ezra 2:70](#) / [Ezra 3:1](#) / [Ezra 3:11](#) / [Ezra 6:16](#) / [Ezra 7:7](#) / [Ezra 7:28](#). It’s important to note that they were very careful to follow the proper priestly service as commanded by the Book of Moses.

THE PASSOVER

‘On the fourteenth day of the first month, the exiles celebrated the Passover. The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their relatives the priests and for themselves. So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbours in order to seek the LORD, the God of Israel. For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.’ Ezra 6:19-22

The writer now resumes the Hebrew language at this point, [Ezra 4:8](#) and with the exception of the letter of Artaxerxes, [Ezra 7:12-26](#), the remainder of the book is in Hebrew.

Here again, we’re reminded of their faith in God as they celebrate the Passover. When the initial Passover was kept by the Israelites the night before they left Egyptian captivity, [Exodus 12:1-20](#), the Israelites focused on the future promises of God.

Here when they celebrate the Passover they not only remember how God delivered from Egypt, but they would be looking forward to what God has planned for them in the future, the coming of the Messiah.

For the original Passover, it was the one who was offering the lamb who would slaughter it, [Exodus 12:1-6](#), but here we find the priests did it for them. Along with the Passover, there was also the feast of Unleavened Bread, [Exodus 12:17-20](#), which represented purity among God's people.

Notice also that everyone ate together, including anyone who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of the Gentiles. In other words, there were Jewish converts taking part, we see this with Rahab and Ruth, [Ruth 4:20-21](#) / [Matthew 1:4-5](#) / [Luke 3:32](#).

Notice that the Lord filled them with joy because he changed the mind of the king of Assyria, to help them finish the temple building work.

When we think about this, [Ezra 1:1](#) begins by telling us that God moved the heart of Cyrus and here this ends with God changing the heart of the king of Assyria. That is, the king of the Persian empire, which now included the possessions, and had surpassed the glory, of Assyria.

Rawlinson, in his commentary, gives the following wonderful summary of Ezra's commission.

THE TEMPORARY PROVISIONS

1. Permission for all Israelites who desired to do so to go with Ezra to Jerusalem.
2. Permission to carry the monetary gifts of the king and his counsellors to Jerusalem.
3. Permission to draw upon the royal sub-treasury large grants up to the limits set in [Ezra 7:22](#).
4. Permission to convey to Jerusalem all of the money that Ezra might receive from an area-wide fund-raising effort.
5. A royal mandate to 'inquire' concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

THE PERMANENT PROVISIONS

1. Ezra was endowed with the chief authority over all the great satrapy beyond the River, with the power to appoint magistrates and judges and to require their knowledge of the Mosaic Law.
2. He was empowered to enforce his decisions by penalties of fines, imprisonment, banishment, or even death.
3. A permanent status of tax exemption was granted for the entire religious community concerned with services in the temple.

EZRA 7

INTRODUCTION

As we enter this chapter, it's important to note that sixty years have now passed between the end of chapter six and chapter seven.

It was during those sixty years that the events recorded in Esther took place in Babylon. The ruler of Persia at the end of that period was Artaxerxes, who is also known to history as Artaxerxes Longimanus, the successor to Xerxes, the king who married Esther.

Other scholars suggest that the events recorded in Malachi took place during these sixty years too.

EZRA COMES TO JERUSALEM

‘After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. 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.’ Ezra 7:1-10

The list of names we find here is parallel with that of [Ezra 3:3-19](#), and there are many similarities. Basically, the same family names appear in both lists, although not in the same order. Only in [Ezra 8:5](#), Shekariah, [Ezra 8:9](#), Joab and [Ezra 8:10](#), Shelomith, do we find new families mentioned, and two of these are disputed.

Earlier we saw that Artaxerxes stopped the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem because of the opposition to the Jews in Judah, [Ezra 4:7-23](#). But what we read in the chapters which follow, is that he allowed Ezra to return from Babylonian exile in order to spiritually lead the people.

Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to Artaxerxes in Susa, [Nehemiah 1:1](#) / [Nehemiah 1:11](#). Artaxerxes commissioned Nehemiah to be the governor of Judah, [Nehemiah 2:1-6](#) / [Nehemiah 5:14](#), and more importantly, he also granted Nehemiah permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, [Nehemiah 6:15](#).

Ezra was the grandson or great-grandson of Seraiah, who was the high priest put to death by Nebuchadnezzar, [2 Kings 25:18](#). Ezra was one of the later Jews who returned from captivity to Judea and Jerusalem. Though there was a first great return, [Ezra 1-2](#), there were also many others who returned in the years following.

So that Ezra could establish his Levitical ministry and the priesthood, Ezra was identified by his genealogy as a direct descendant of Aaron. When we read about Ezra's character, he was a teacher and well versed in God's law, that is a scribe, [Psalm 45:1](#), and His heart was ready to seek God's laws and share them with others.

After being granted his request, notice that not all but some of God's children travelled to Jerusalem, others were happy to stay in Babylon, [Zechariah 2:6-7](#). This journey would have taken around four months and Ezra recognises that God is very much involved in what's happening.

Notice that Ezra devoted himself to three things.

1. He devoted himself to studying the Law of the Lord.

If we want to really get to know God and His ways, we must devote ourselves to God and His Word, [2 Timothy 2:15](#).

2. He devoted himself to the observance of the Law of the Lord.

If we want people to take us seriously, we must practice what we preach, we must not only listen to what God says but do what He says, [James 1:22-25](#).

3. He devoted himself to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

Teaching God's Word to others comes with great responsibilities because people's souls are at stake. If we're going to teach God's Word, we must take God's Word seriously, [James 3:1](#).

KING ARTAXERXES' LETTER TO EZRA

'This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel: Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, teacher of the Law of the God of heaven: Greetings. Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem. You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God. Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God. And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you are responsible to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury. Now I, King Artaxerxes, decree that all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates are to provide with diligence whatever Ezra the priest, the teacher of the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of you—up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cors of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of olive oil, and salt without limit. Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons? You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.' Ezra 7:11-24

In Artaxerxes' letter to Ezra, which was to go with him to Jerusalem, we see that the king commissions helpers, a copy of the Law, and gifts for the temple. It's clear that the king sees Ezra as an expert in God's laws and it's clear that the king himself and his seven advisors were sending Ezra to Jerusalem to gather information about Judah and Jerusalem.

Notice Artaxerxes refers to the 'volunteers' who wanted to go to Jerusalem. He obviously wanted others to go to Jerusalem with Ezra so that every effort could be made for Ezra to do what he needs to do.

The king also authorised the giving of many silver and gold gifts to the temple, [Ezra 1:7-11](#), along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests.

It's an incredible thought, the amount of money, [2 Kings 23:33](#), which was given to Ezra by the king, he had to be careful how he spent it. The money was to be spent on sacrificial animals and the promotion of temple worship in Jerusalem.

There's no doubting Artaxerxes' generosity to Ezra and the work in Jerusalem, this is seen in the fact that he's allowing Ezra to draw on the king's treasury for whatever he needed. Along with giving some tax relief to those who work in the temple.

Notice that Artaxerxes says, 'Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons?' He comes across as though he is desperate to help Ezra in his efforts and with everything concerning the temple.

The reason he comes across as desperately trying to help the Jews out is simply because all the kings of Persia, after conquering a nation, wanted to appease all the gods, of all the people they had conquered, [Acts 17.22-34](#). By doing so, the Persian kings believed that the people in turn would be more loyal to them if they had the religious freedom to do so.

‘And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.’ Ezra 7:25-26

Notice also that Ezra is given some legal power to enforce God’s Law, we see this in how the priests and other workers at the temple were to be given some tax relief. Using wisdom from God, [James 1:5](#), Ezra is also given authority in civil administration as he was to set in place magistrates and judges, using God’s wisdom.

Ezra is also given authority to teach those who returned from captivity, especially those who don’t know God’s laws. It must be noted that Ezra’s authority to punish anyone for disobeying God’s laws or disobeying the king’s law may be too much authority for one man.

‘Praise be to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king’s heart to bring honour to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended his good favour to me before the king and his advisers and all the king’s powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.’ Ezra 7:27-28

There’s no doubt that Ezra knew that what Artaxerxes was doing was a result of God’s blessings, hence why he gives thanks to God. God had moved the heart of Artaxerxes, in the same manner, He moved the heart of Darius, [Ezra 6:1-12](#) / [Proverbs 21:1](#).

No wonder Ezra is feeling encouraged because everything which Artaxerxes had done and was doing, was clear evidence that God was supporting and blessing Ezra himself.

If we learn anything from this chapter, we learn that Ezra did such a great job in sharing God’s Word and His laws with Artaxerxes, that Artaxerxes felt moved to understand the spiritual importance of God’s law. He understood how important it was for God’s people to become educated in God’s laws, to such an extent, that he made a new decree and went over and above the normal to help Ezra and God’s people.

EZRA 8

INTRODUCTION

‘These are the family heads and those registered with them who came up with me from Babylon during the reign of King Artaxerxes: of the descendants of Phinehas, Gershom; of the descendants of Ithamar, Daniel; of the descendants of David, Hattush of the descendants of Shekariah; of the descendants of Parosh, Zechariah, and with him were registered 150 men; of the descendants of Pahath-Moab, Eliehoenai son of Zerahiah, and with him 200 men of the descendants of Zattu, Shekariah son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 men; of the descendants of Adin, Ebed son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men; of the descendants of Elam, Jeshaiiah son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men; of the descendants of Shephatiah, Zebadiah son of Michael, and with him 80 men; of the descendants of Joab, Obadiah son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men; of the descendants of Bani, Shelomith son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 men; of the descendants of Bebai, Zechariah son of Bebai, and with him 28 men; of the descendants of Azgad, Johanan son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 men; of the descendants of Adonikam, the last ones, whose names were Eliphelet, Jeuel

and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men; of the descendants of Bigvai, Uthai and Zakkur, and with them 70 men.’ Ezra 8:1-14

LIST OF THE FAMILY HEADS RETURNING WITH EZRA

You will notice that only the heads of the families are listed here, that is the fathers. The actual number of people returning with Ezra, including the Levites and the temple servants varies from one commentator to the next.

Some suggest a total of 1,773 males, others suggest a total of 9,000, which is an average of five people per family and others suggest a total of 5,000.

We must remember that most of the names listed here were very common Jewish names, names such as David, Daniel, Jonathan, Joab and Zechariah. Although these names may be listed in different lists, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are the same person. The names listed here are referring to those who arrived with Ezra during this period.

One name worth noting from this list is, ‘Hattush of the descendants of Shekaniah’. He was a descendant of David, 1 Chronicles 3:22, through Shemaiah, he was Zerubbabel’s great-great-grandson.

THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM

‘I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there. So I summoned Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, who were leaders, and Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of learning, and I ordered them to go to Iddo, the leader in Kasiphia. I told them what to say to Iddo and his fellow Levites, the temple servants in Kasiphia, so that they might bring attendants to us for the house of our God. Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah’s sons and brothers, 18 in all; and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 in all. They also brought 220 of the temple servants—a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name.’ Ezra 8:15-20

After camping for three days at a canal, you will notice that Ezra found no Levites among the people. A similar problem came up at the time of the first return. While more than 4,000 priests returned with Zerubbabel, only 341 Levites did, including singers and gatekeepers, Ezra 2:36-42.

Perhaps they reckoned the Levitical role as lacking in prestige as compared with the priestly office, Malachi 2:1-2. And maybe, with settled lives in Babylon, they did not want to go embark on a life of service and hard work in a faraway, undeveloped land. Yet, as noted above, about 40 Levites did answer the recruiting efforts initiated by Ezra, Ezra 8:16-19.

After making another appeal, many Levites did join Ezra, along with the ‘temple servants’ who were originally Gibeonites, Joshua 9:23.

‘There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, ‘The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.’ So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, namely, Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brothers, and I weighed out to them the offering of silver and gold and the articles that the king, his

advisers, his officials and all Israel present there had donated for the house of our God. I weighed out to them 650 talents of silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold valued at 1,000 darics, and two fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold. I said to them, ‘You as well as these articles are consecrated to the LORD. The silver and gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your ancestors. Guard them carefully until you weigh them out in the chambers of the house of the LORD in Jerusalem before the leading priests and the Levites and the family heads of Israel.’ Then the priests and Levites received the silver and gold and sacred articles that had been weighed out to be taken to the house of our God in Jerusalem.’ Ezra 8:21-30

Ezra now proclaims a fast, this was a common way of seeking God’s favour, [Matthew 6:15](#) / [Matthew 8:14](#), especially when the leaders wanted the people to focus their minds on the spiritual, [Acts 13:1-3](#).

Notice that Ezra was ‘ashamed to ask the king’ for an escort of soldiers to protect them. The reason he didn’t ask the king for protection was probably to prove to the king that God’s people didn’t need any protection because God was with them.

After the fast, Ezra says that God answered their prayers, which possibly means they received some kind of confirmation of His protection.

It’s possible they came across Scriptural promises of protection during the fast. It’s also possible that God helped them to pick out a safer route. We don’t know exactly how God protected them, but Ezra tells us that God did, [Ezra 8:31](#).

Notice how much money they were carrying with them, the 650 talents of silver weighed nearly 25 tons and the 100 talents of gold weighed over three tons. This would have been a staggering amount of money and weight, not to mention the value of all those other articles.

The proof that God was with them is seen in the fact that they made it safely to Judea without being ambushed by robbers and thieves. Also notice that Ezra says, ‘You as well as these articles are consecrated to the LORD.’ This is a fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy, [Isaiah 52:11](#). This again was proof that God indeed was with them and protecting them.

‘On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way. So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days. On the fourth day, in the house of our God, we weighed out the silver and gold and the sacred articles into the hands of Meremoth son of Uriah, the priest. Eleazar son of Phinehas was with him, and so were the Levites Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui. Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time. Then the exiles who had returned from captivity sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs and, as a sin offering, twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD. They also delivered the king’s orders to the royal satraps and to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, who then gave assistance to the people and the house of God.’ Ezra 8:31-36

The journey which Ezra and his company made was around 900 miles and would have taken four months, [Ezra 7:9](#). It’s not surprising that when they arrived in Jerusalem they rested for three days because the journey was long and filled with many dangers. It’s worth noting that Nehemiah did the same thing, [Nehemiah 2:11](#).

After resting for three days, they got with the task ahead of them, they weighed out everything they brought with them from Babylon. They were very careful what they did with all the contributions they brought with them and weighed it all out in front of witnesses, as well as recording everything in writing.

After placing all the items in the temple, they then offered sacrifices. Matthew Henry, in his commentary, suggests that these offerings ‘for all Israel’ indicated that, ‘the union of the two Israels’ was then accomplished, as prophesied by [Ezekiel 37:22](#).

Ezra also delivered the royal orders to the regional governors, which would have taken some time. But Ezra didn’t just deliver Artaxerxes’ decree, he secured the support of Artaxerxes’ satraps and governors, [Ezra 7:11-24](#) / [Ezra 9:1](#).

EZRA 9

INTRODUCTION

‘After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, ‘The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.’ When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.’ Ezra 9:1-4

EZRA’S PRAYER ABOUT INTERMARRIAGE

In this chapter, we read about a problem with intermarriage, where we find that some Jews had married Gentile women, [Exodus 34:11-16](#) / [Deuteronomy 7:1-4](#). It’s possible there was no copy of the law in Judah, hence they acted in ignorance because they didn’t know any better.

Part of Ezra’s ministry was to teach the law to God’s people, especially to those who didn’t know it, [Ezra 7:25](#). After hearing God’s law concerning intermarriage with Gentiles, and learning that their practice was detestable to God, they were convicted in their hearts.

They now understood that marrying Gentiles would lead to a loss of identity as God’s chosen people. It was Israel as a nation that God would fulfil His promise to Abraham concerning the Messiah, [Genesis 12:1-3](#).

The list of names here was the seven of the Canaanite nations mentioned in the law, [Exodus 3:8](#) / [Exodus 23:23](#) / [Deuteronomy 7:1-26](#), five of whom are mentioned here. The Ammonites, Moabites and Egyptians are here mentioned in addition to five of the seven Canaanite races.

The injunction against marriages with all of these groups, under existing circumstances, was absolutely necessary. Some Jews had married the Gentiles of the land, but by doing so, they were risking their faith and God’s plans for them.

We all know the dangers of being married to someone who isn’t a part of our faith, this was one of the downfalls of Solomon, [1 Kings 11:1-8](#).

Ezra obviously saw this happening all over again even before he arrived in Jerusalem. Because they were marrying people from other Gentile nations, there was a real danger that they would be led away from God and commit idolatry again.

Notice Ezra’s reaction to the bad news, he now only tore his tunic and cloak, he also pulled hairs from his beard and head, [Job 1:20](#) / [Ezekiel 7:18](#). He was deeply grieved by what had happened.

Notice also that Ezra’s appeal was both moral and religious, Ezra could have ordered the needed reforms and enforced them even with the death penalty, [Ezra 7:26](#), but he chose the better way, [Deuteronomy 23:7](#).

‘Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed: ‘I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been

subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today. ‘But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. ‘But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.’ ‘What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? LORD, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.’ Ezra 9:5-15

The ‘evening sacrifice’ took place about 3:00 pm, [Exodus 12:6](#) / [Acts 3:1](#). Ezra was so deeply moved that he rose from his self-abasement, fell to his knees and prayed to God, [1 Kings 8:54](#) / [Psalm 95:6](#) / [Daniel 6:10](#) / [Matthew 17:14](#).

His prayer is one of humbleness, as he confesses the people’s sins, and is aware of how Israel has relied on God’s grace in times past. Because his people married foreign wives, Ezra knows that they were testing God’s grace again and they needed God’s mercy.

Ezra’s prayer is deeply moving, he can’t even bring himself to look up to God because their sin and guilt have reached the heavens, [Nehemiah 9:29-35](#) / [Daniel 9:5-8](#). When Israel returned from Babylon, they appear to have a new attitude toward God and sin.

Ezra offers no excuses and not even an explanation because he knew their conduct was indefensible and disobedient to what God commanded by His servants the prophets. Ezra also wisely appealed to God’s righteousness, especially in leaving a remnant in fulfilment of His prior promises, [2 Chronicles 30:6](#) / [Isaiah 10:20-22](#).

If the Jews wanted God’s mercy and grace, they were going to have to amend the problem of intermarriage.

EZRA 10

INTRODUCTION

‘While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. Then Shekariah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, ‘We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.’ Ezra 10:1-4

THE PEOPLE’S CONFESSION OF SIN

In this chapter, we find Ezra still praying, [Ezra 9:5-15](#), and it appears his prayers have been answered. His prayers had a huge impact on God's people as they too gathered around him and wept bitterly in repentance.

There is now hope in Israel, as they begin to obey the law, this is seen in that people, through Shekariah, suggest that they make a covenant with the Lord to put away their wives. God's promise to Abraham concerning the Messiah would soon be fulfilled, [Genesis 12:1-3](#).

It's important to note that they didn't 'kriythuwth' them, that is divorce their wives, they simply 'yatsa' them, that is put them away.

In other words, they 'put them away', and still had to provide for their wife and children's needs, but because they didn't give them a legal 'bill of divorcement', they were still legally married to them, [Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#), which also means they had to pay the dowry back, [1 Kings 9:16](#).

This practice of putting away their wives, without giving them a bill of divorcement was still being practised at the time of Jesus, [Matthew 5:31-32](#).

It's clear that this small remnant of God's people understood what the law says concerning marrying foreign women, this is seen in their actions and covenant with God.

'So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath. Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles. Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain. Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, 'You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now honour the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.' The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: 'You are right! We must do as you say. But there are many people here and it is the rainy season; so we cannot stand outside. Besides, this matter cannot be taken care of in a day or two, because we have sinned greatly in this thing. Let our officials act for the whole assembly. Then let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us.' Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah, supported by Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite, opposed this. So the exiles did as was proposed. Ezra the priest selected men who were family heads, one from each family division, and all of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to investigate the cases, and by the first day of the first month they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women.' [Ezra 10:5-17](#)

The people now put into practice what they agree in their covenant with God. Despite being opposed by just four people, [Ezra 10:15](#), they now go ahead and put away their foreign wives.

It's important to note that the people themselves decided how to move forward concerning their wives and Ezra simply advised them by preaching God's law to the people.

They had to voluntarily gather in Jerusalem within three days, but they had a choice, either to forfeit all their property, [Leviticus 27:28](#), and be expelled from Israel, or put away their wives. Those who didn't put away their wives reaped the resentment of the Jews which lasted until the time of Christ, [John 4:9](#).

Ezra was simply God's messenger and he taught what the law of God said to God's people. Sadly, not everyone agreed to the measures that were put forward in this context, because Nehemiah also had to deal with the matter of marriage to foreign women, [Nehemiah 13:23-31](#).

THOSE GUILTY OF INTERMARRIAGE

‘Among the descendants of the priests, the following had married foreign women: From the descendants of Joshua son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah. (They all gave their hands in pledge to put away their wives, and for their guilt they each presented a ram from the flock as a guilt offering.) From the descendants of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. From the descendants of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uziah. From the descendants of Pashhur: Elieoenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasa. Among the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah and Eliezer. From the musicians: Eliashib. From the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem and Uri. And among the other Israelites: From the descendants of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malkijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malkijah and Benaiah. From the descendants of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth and Elijah. From the descendants of Zattu: Elieoenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad and Aziza. From the descendants of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai and Athlai. From the descendants of Bani: Meshullam, Malluk, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal and Jeremoth. From the descendants of Pahath-Moab: Adna, Kelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui and Manasseh. From the descendants of Harim: Eliezer, Ishijah, Malkijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Malluk and Shemariah. From the descendants of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh and Shimei. From the descendants of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, Benaiah, Bedeiah, Keluhi, Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Mattenai and Jaasu. From the descendants of Binnui: Shimei, Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, Maknadebai, Shashai, Sharai, Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, Shallum, Amariah and Joseph. From the descendants of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel and Benaiah. All these had married foreign women, and some of them had children by these wives.’ Ezra 10:18-44

Whitcomb, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Seventeen priests, ten Levites, and eighty-six others; and each of these put away his foreign wife and offered a ram as a guilt-offering. Some of the versions support this count of 113 in all.’

The number of people who married foreign women isn’t as important as who they actually were. The Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and many of the religious leaders had married foreign women who had the potential of introducing foreign gods, just like Solomon did many years before, [1 Kings 11:1-8](#), which would then lead to idolatry all over again.

Remember the Jews were God’s chosen people and the preservation of Israel was important to God. He had promised that the Messiah would come through Abraham, [Genesis 12:1-3](#). God said they weren’t to marry Gentiles, simply because an Israelite remnant of society had to be preserved through whom God would bring the Messiah into the world.

The very fact that these Jews had faith in God to restore the nation of Israel once again, shows us just how committed to God they were. We also mustn’t forget that when they put away their foreign wives, along with the children, they would have made some kind of provisions for them, just as Abraham did with Hagar, when he put her and Ishmael away, [Genesis 21:14-16](#).

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Drastic as this solution of the problem assuredly was, ‘a comparison of [Nehemiah 10:30](#), [12](#) years later, and of [Nehemiah 13:23](#), [30](#) years later, shows that the evil was not permanently eliminated. Long association with heathen neighbours made such a separation difficult.’

Let’s finish by reading Williamson’s comments from his commentary.

‘Israel’s mission could make headway only if she maintained the servant identity that separated her from the nations to which she was commissioned to reveal God’s will.’

‘In exactly the same way, Christians individually, and as the Church, are called to be ‘light’ and ‘salt,’ elements that function effectively precisely because of their difference from the setting in which they are placed. ‘But if the salt has lost its savour?’ [Matthew 5:13-16](#).’