

EZRA, NEHEMIAH
and
ESTHER

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BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOK SERIES

EZRA
and
NEHEMIAH

by
Ruben Ratzlaff

ESTHER

by
Paul T. Butler

College Press, Joplin, Missouri

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College Press

ISBN 0-89900-000-2
ISBN 0-89900-014-2

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Preface for Ezra and Nehemiah

This book is prepared with the interested Bible School teacher, church leader, Bible College student, or minister especially in mind. Its purpose is to make the content of Ezra and Nehemiah more practically useful to the church of today, and the people and events of Ezra-Nehemiah more understandable and contemporary to our culture.

As to the format, the questions at the beginning of each chapter are of a discussion nature; read them, then look for answers in the Bible text, the comments, or in your own judgment. There may not be hard and fast answers for every one of them. The outline will seek to call attention to the major topic or topics of the chapter, and to break each chapter down into small enough units to observe the development of ideas. The text itself is from the New American Standard Bible; we make no effort to evaluate which is the best translation available today, but we have observed that the NASB is widely used among the readers for which this book is designed. Some use of the Hebrew text is made in the preparation of the comments, but the only use of the Hebrew will be in English transliteration in the Word Studies when it is deemed helpful to the reader. It is hoped that the Word Studies may spark an idea for development in teaching or exposition, or may clarify some symbol in the text itself; they are not all at the same stage of development. The summary hopefully will put each chapter into focus so that its whole message can be seen in one overview. The questions at the end of the chapters are of a factual nature, to test recall.

This book is being written from a position of faith. It is the author's conviction that the history described in the Bible text was a part of the whole fabric of events and visitations by which God was revealing Himself and preparing a people for the coming of His Son.

Questions relating to the authorship of this material, insofar as they seek to go beyond what is made known in the text, have their importance (an educated person will have his curiosities), but are second to the content of the message itself. We have found that it is impossible, in the first place, to speak with certainty beyond what His Spirit has chosen to reveal; we have,

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

secondly, found little spiritual or practical nourishment in these questions and suspect that the Spirit made a wise choice of what to include and what not to include.

It is hoped that this book will make a contribution to our total knowledge of Bible truth and of God's ways of working with His children, that our lives might be improved by seeing more of the details of our possible fellowship with and service for Him.

Ezra

INTRODUCTION

THE MAN

Ezra is a man of no small stature among the heroes of the Old Testament. His name itself means "Help." We may reflect on the number of ways in which he "helped" his people.

He was first of all a priest who could trace his descent from Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5); and every priest was a mediator between man and God, a messiah, God's messenger to His people.

One tradition is that he assembled the books of the Old Testament which were written before his time, to comprise the early canon of Hebrew Scripture. It is likely also that he made the transition from one alphabet (as on the Moabite Stone) to another (more similar to modern-day Hebrew), in the writing of the Sacred Text, and that he made certain modifications particularly in the style of the language to bring it up to date. By way of comparison, English poetry from 1,000 years ago is hardly intelligible to us; yet the O.T. was written over an equal span, and the language is essentially the same. Perhaps we have Ezra to thank for this. If he were a man inspired as God's spokesman, as a priest would be in his dispensation, and as his book further demonstrates, then this would not be objectionable; he was equally as guided by God as Moses or David had been.

Another tradition is that he helped organize the early Sanhedrin, the "Seventy" who governed Israel even as late as Jesus' time. He may have helped with the development of the Synagogue, whose existence is never hinted at in the O.T., and whose presence is so conspicuous in the New.

[We observe in passing that the pattern for public worship in the O.T. was not weekly worship on the Sabbath, but assembly for feasts three times yearly (later four, with the addition of Purim in Esther's time). We read our system back into their times if we suppose the Sabbath was a day of assembly for worship; rather it was a time for rest (Shabbath) and devotions in their private dwellings (Lev. 23:3). Those who insist that our worship today must be on the Sabbath, i.e., Saturday, to

conform to the commands in the O.T. have apparently missed this point. In fact, the people were forbidden to make a journey of any significant length (Ex. 16:29, especially in the New Catholic Edition: "On the seventh day everyone is to stay home and no one is to go out"), which predetermined that the synagogue must always be small. The Sabbath meetings arose, then, not from any recorded command of God, but possibly from the needs which the people sensed during the Captivity to continue to teach their children the Law even in an unfriendly environment; Ezra would most likely have been involved in that.]

Ezra's name is also linked by tradition to the beginnings of the Pharisees, particularly the group of them called "Scribes," whose duty it was to copy and to teach the Scriptures. Before we recall what the N.T. says of these groups, let us note that they were the "Back to the Bible Conservatives" of their day, separating themselves (literal meaning of Parash: "Pharisee") from the world to obey God and His Law. These were vital institutions which should not have been allowed to degenerate, but which served an essential function originally.

For an accurate portrait of Ezra's devotion and purpose, see Ezra 7:10; and for his method of speaking, Neh. 8:1-3.

THE BOOK

The book of Ezra (and Nehemiah and Esther) is not included in the part of the Hebrew Bible which includes Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, which we label "History." It rather follows Daniel in the section including Job, Psalms, and Proverbs, which they called "Writings." Why was Ezra not listed with the "Historical" books in the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible?

Jesus makes reference to the threefold structure of the Old Covenant in Luke 24:44: Law, Prophets, and (Writings whose most prominent book was) Psalms. The Prophets would be divided into Early (Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings) and Latter. The Latter would be further divided into Major (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and Minor (Hosea to Malachi,

INTRODUCTION

"The Twelve"). Note that there is no division, hence no essential difference, between history and prophecy; if God has spoken, it is equally certain whether it is past or future. The Hebrew language had no clear way of distinguishing between past and future. This is not to detract from its history, but to show the positive nature of its prophecy.

Now, Joshua is remembered as a prophet: he was a successor to Moses, who was a prophet (Deut. 18:15ff.). The last of the Judges, Samuel, also doubles as a prophet (I Sam. 3:20). Hence his two books would fit the category of prophetic writings, even without the assistance of Nathan and Gad. Since Samuel was also a judge (I Sam. 7:15), perhaps for consistency the other judges are included in the same section. Since I and II Kings deal particularly with Elijah and Elisha, they also fit this mold, especially if the tradition is true that Jeremiah was the author.

But Ezra is not a prophet. He is, in fact, a prominent priest. He is most notable for his exercise of civil authority (Ezra 7:6, 21, 25); note the comparison with Daniel. Therefore, Ezra's book is not in the section identified with prophets, but rather with kings or rulers: David, Solomon, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel, and a desert chieftan named Job.

This is not to suggest that the material in the book of Ezra (or in any of the other books among the Writings) is unhistorical. There is history in the section called "Law," yet it is separated from the books called "History." Ezra's classification with the Writings is only an indication of the rank of the man who was its subject, or its author, or both.

We are also reminded that the inspiration of the Scriptures does not apply necessarily to the arrangement of the books; men have arranged them differently at different times for various reasons.

AUTHORSHIP

No great purpose would be served by taking our present readers through the multiplied theories held by all ranks of believers or disbelievers in the Scriptures, relative to the authorship

of Ezra. The "I" passages particularly in chapter seven sufficiently identify Ezra with the writing of at least part of the book. Most likely, the book of Ezra is a parallel to the book of Acts, whose author also is a participant in the latter part of the book as indicated by his use of the first person, and who writes the first part also in order to make the latter part of the account understandable and to fit into a sequence of developing events.

Some of the book (4:8—6:18) is in Aramaic, the official language of the Persians; but this poses no problems, as Ezra is described as being equally at home in both cultures, and this section deals especially with Persian court affairs and records, which would normally be in Aramaic.

TIME

The book traces events beginning in 536 B.C., when Cyrus of Persia instituted procedures for Israel's return from Captivity under the Babylonians, whom Cyrus had defeated in 538. Ezra is introduced in the narrative at chapter 7:1. According to E.J. Young,¹ this sets the date of the writing of the book during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). The events in the book fit into two time slots: the first, identified with Israel's return from Captivity, and the second following a gap of more than seventy years. The returned captives, small in number and still disheartened, are having a struggle, and Ezra accompanies another band of the returnees (7:7) to help bring encouragement and to assist in re-establishing the institutions of the Law of Moses.

CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCENE

One of the oddities of the book of Ezra, shared with the other equally late books in the O.T., is that mention is made of the return of a "Son of David," namely Zerubbabel, preserving the

1. E.J. Young, *An Introduction to the O.T.*, p. 406.

INTRODUCTION

continuity of the kingly line even through the Captivity. (Zerubbabel, however, bears only the rank of Governor, since the nation is still under Persian authority, hence subject to the king of Persia.)

Nevertheless, Zerubbabel quickly vanishes from view, and no further descendant of his is mentioned as Israel's ruler till Jesus stands in this line (Matt. 1:12, 16). What has happened; and why the silence? It had been predicted that the tribe of Judah should continue to provide the ruler for Israel "until Shiloh come" (Gen. 49:10).

There are two obvious explanations for this oddity.

1) The prophecy cannot be pressed to mean that a king from the tribe of Judah must always, without interruption, be on Israel's throne. It was centuries (perhaps as many as eight) after the prophecy before Israel had a king at all. Then, the very first one, Saul, was of the tribe of Benjamin rather than Judah (I Sam. 10:20f.). It is enough that the line was preserved, that one of the tribe of Judah and its line of kings (Jesus) might one day sit on its everlasting throne.

2) The Word of God specifically makes provision for this interruption, and for the tribe of Levi to assume the role of leadership. Zech. 3:5-7 states that the priests beginning with Jeshua would rule the nation as long as they walked in God's ways. History demonstrates that during the era between the Old and New Testament, the priesthood returned to such prominence that the O.T. contains the writings of no prophets during this period of our centuries; the channel of God's communication through the priests was regarded, then, as adequate. History also recounts the rule over Israel by the Maccabees, of the tribe of Levi and of the priestly line, for a century during this intertestamental period. It is a reminder that all prophecy may be conditioned on man's reaction and co-operation (Jer. 18:7-10), and that God, being a Person, has the ability to decide on different courses of action as circumstances vary, in order to accomplish His purposes. God stated that He had chosen the priests as rulers of the nation, and that is what happened.

If we go back through Israel's apostasy to the time of Eli and

Samuel (I Sam. 2 and 8), we see the responsibility of being God's spokesmen (Messiah, "Anointed") moving from the priesthood because of their shortcomings, to lodge briefly with a prophet and then to be carried on at length by kings. Subsequently the responsibility returns to the prophets, from Elijah to Malachi. Now, when apostasy has extracted its price and the nation has been healed, it is fitting that leadership returns to the order of priests; it is God's pride that His people will one day be known as the whole world's priests (Isa. 61:6; cf. 66:21). Ezra was of this line.²

In due course of time the kingship reverts to the line of Judah, and Jesus becomes Messiah (King) of Israel, and of all God's Creation. Appropriately enough, He also becomes the high priest of the people (Heb. 2:17) though He is not of the priestly tribe (Heb. 7:13-15). So in one era God gives the rulership of Israel to men of Levi in place of Judah; and in another, He gives the duties of the priesthood to One Who came from Judah, in place of Levi.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

The contents of the book of Ezra may be summarized under the following headings, chapter by chapter:

I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (chapters 1, 2)

Ch. 1 Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish are allowed to return to Israel.

Ch. 2 This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees.

II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (chapters 3 - 6)

Ch. 3 The altar is built, and the foundation laid.

Ch. 4 The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.

Ch. 5 The work is resumed in the reign of Darius.

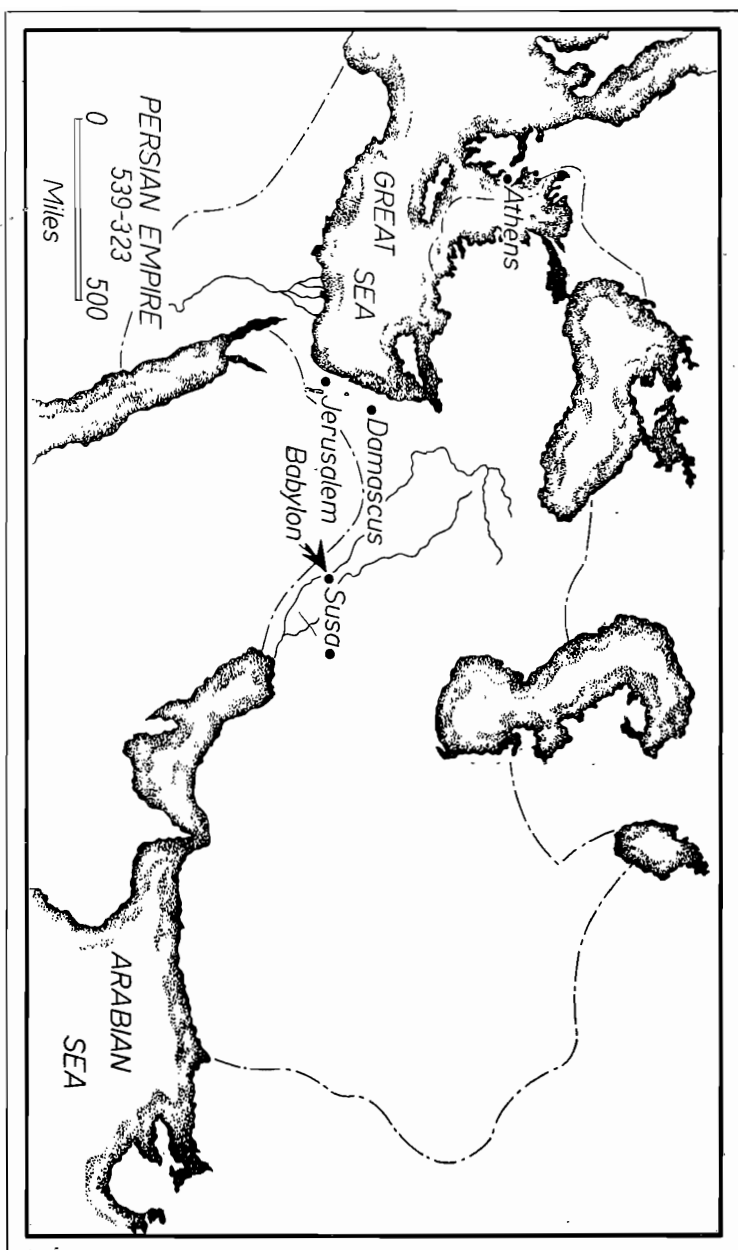
Ch. 6 The Temple is completed and dedicated.

2. Note in the N.T. the position of the priests as rulers: John 18:12-14; Acts 22:30—23:5.

INTRODUCTION

III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (chapters 7 - 10)

- Ch. 7 Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.
- Ch. 8 Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
- Ch. 9 Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
- Ch. 10 The community is cleansed, and a list of the offenders is given.



Chapter One

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

See if you can find answers to these questions, or figure them out for yourself, as you read the first chapter of this book, and the first chapter of Ezra in your Bible.

1. How did it come about that a completely defeated people were freed to return to their homeland and to rebuild?
2. What types, and what percentage, of the people do you think actually took advantage of the opportunity to return?
3. What might have motivated Cyrus to this generosity?
4. What help did the returnees get from their kinsmen who chose to remain where they were?

OUTLINE

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1—2:70)
 - A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish to return to Israel.
 1. Cyrus issues a decree (vss. 1-4).
 2. The people return and begin to rebuild (vss. 5-11).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1—2:70)
 - A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish to return to Israel.
 1. Cyrus issues a decree.

TEXT, 1:1-4

- 1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,
- 2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
- 3 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah,

and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

- 4 'And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.' "

COMMENT

Verse 1. Note the similarity of Ezra 1:1, 2 to II Chron. 36:22-23. This gives support to the idea that both of these books have the same author, i.e., Ezra. The word "now" is the word usually translated "and," to indicate continuation of a narrative; however, several of the O.T. books (including Ruth and Joshua) begin with this same word, so it cannot be concluded with finality that this is but the continuation of a more lengthy work. It may be only the author's device to indicate at the beginning that his record presumes a set of events previous to it, and that he is consciously seeking to preserve this sense of continuity of events whose record was begun by someone else. The Hebrew notion of time is involved here; while the Greeks thought of time as moving in repetitive, indecisive circles, the Hebrews thought of it as a progression of events added together, moving in a line toward an eventual goal, or purpose, or final outcome. This may explain the frequency with which the word "and" or "now" is used throughout the O.T.

"The first year of Cyrus" indicates the year following his conquest of the Babylonians, therefore his first year of rulership over the total Persian kingdom including Israel. From Israel's point of view, then, it was his first year. This event, of the making of the decree that follows, is usually dated in 536 B.C.: the first full year of Cyrus' rule over Babylon and Israel.

"The word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah" refers to Jer. 25:11, 12; and especially Jer. 29:10, predicting that the people of Judah would remain in captivity 70 years. But if the people went into bondage in 586 B.C., this adds up to only 50 years. We recall, however, that Jerusalem suffered three invasions: in 606, when Daniel and his three friends were among

the captives taken; in 597, involving Ezêkiel; and finally in 586 when the remainder of the city was destroyed and the bulk of the captives taken. In this we see the generosity of God: He obviously gave them full credit toward the 70 years from the time the first persons were captured: thus, 606 to 536.

The real basis for Cyrus' proclamation is that God moved him to do it. God's power may work through persons of any rank or nationality or religion; God may be responsible for many good impulses even among pagan people throughout history.

Josephus¹ credits Isaiah's "prophecy from 140 years before the temple was demolished" (Isa. 44:28) in which Cyrus is mentioned by name, with influencing the surprised and grateful Cyrus to release the Jews to return to their homeland.

The decree was set forth both orally and in writing; what we read at this point in Ezra may have been the oral version which the Jewish communities heard in their own language.

Verse 2. Cyrus himself gives credit to Israel's God as being supreme ("of heaven") and as ordering his release of these prisoners. Two observations follow: 1) While Cyrus was not a convert to Judaism nor a worshiper of their God, yet he made such statements as a regular policy; he makes similar reference to the gods of the Babylonians,² for example. This quotation from Cyrus in Ezra is known to be in harmony with his character, as seen in his own writings. 2) It was also a regular policy of Cyrus to liberate prisoners taken by the nations which he conquered; this is verified by contemporary documents, including the Inscription of Cyrus. After listing nine or ten lands, Cyrus speaks of "the cities (beyond) the Tigris, whose sites have been founded of old—the gods who dwelt in them I returned to their places, and caused them to settle in their eternal shrines. All their people I assembled and returned them to their dwellings. . . . May all the gods, whom I have returned to their cities, pray before Marduk and Nabu for the prolonging of my days, may they speak a kind word for me. . . ." (Evidently he

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of The Jews*, Book XI, chap. 1.

2. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Hardback edition), p. 200.

3. G. A. Barton, *Archaeology and The Bible*, p. 485.

wanted as many friends as possible in supernatural circles, and sought to ingratiate himself to all the gods of whom he had heard, to be entirely safe!)

So again Cyrus' own records, recently excavated, confirm the description of his character and actions as they are described in the Bible.

Verse 3 contains the decree giving permission for the Israelites to return and rebuild their Temple at Jerusalem. The language reflects Cyrus' polytheism, implying his belief that there is one god who presides in Jerusalem, and other gods in other lands.

Verse 4 encourages all who remain (people of Judah and Israel who remained in the land of their captivity) to contribute to the returnees for two purposes: to finance their journey, and to make offerings to the Temple; thus having a share in these two projects.

2. The people return and begin to rebuild.

TEXT, 1:5-11

- 5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.
- 6 And all those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.
- 7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods;
- 8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.
- 9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;
- 10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind, and 1,000 other articles.

- 11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

COMMENT

Beginning with *verse 5*, these projects are set in motion. From descriptions of their conditions in captivity given prophetically by Jeremiah (29:4-7) and historically in Jewish documents, it can be concluded that they had not fared so badly in Babylon; they were able to own their own homes, operate their own businesses, continue their previous religious practices at least in a limited way, educate their own children, and live quite normal lives. Many of them would prefer to continue in their present condition rather than risk an uncertain future.

Those who chose to return would be largely motivated by religious reasons. Isaiah and others had foreseen the return of a "purified remnant"; in actual fact, it would have been predominantly the most Godly who returned, though not altogether. Health or age may have prevented the return of many equally religious persons.

As noted in *verse 5*, the returnees were chiefly from Judah and Benjamin, tribes which had been closest to the Temple: plus a disproportionate number of Levites and especially priests, who had been most intimately identified with Israel's religious affairs.

In *verse 6*, the gifts to the travelers are again put into two categories: (1) those which would assist in financing the journey, and (2) those which are offered to God, possibly to be used in sacrifice and in reconstruction of the Temple. It is appropriate that free-will offerings were given for the Temple. Its early predecessor, the Tabernacle, had been built with free-will offerings exclusively (Ex. 35:22).

The list of vessels taken from the Temple by the Babylonians and now restored to Israel to be used once more in the renewed Temple (vss. 7, 9-11) is a reminder of the splendor of the Temple in previous times. These had been preserved by the captors and not melted down for other uses; the ancients

frequently demonstrated a fear of misusing things which had been dedicated for sacred uses, and regarded them as "unclean" for common or profane use. If the number of vessels seems excessive, we need to remember that (1) they were for the use of the entire community of priests, and (2) temples in ancient times were often used as the "government banks"; that is, temples were expected to be the repositories for the wealth of the state.

The "Sheshbazzar" of *verses 8, 11* is not clearly identified; he is mentioned in the Bible by Ezra only. Matthew Henry⁴ regarded this as another name for Zerubbabel. G. E. Wright⁵ takes it as a variant spelling of "Shenassar," mentioned as one of Jehoiachin's sons in I Chron. 3:17-18, hence one of the royal family. The *Living Bible* would allow the interpretation that he was merely a leader of the returning exiles. Any of these three views would be an honest possibility; the first would seem to be the most likely. This will be discussed more fully when it comes up again at Ezra 5:16.

In *verse 9*, two things are obscure. The word "dishes" ("chargers" in the KJV) and the word "duplicates" ("knives" in the KJV) occur only here in the O.T. Other ancient translations (Septuagint, Syriac, Talmud, and Vulgate) disagree on the translations of these terms. It is difficult, then, to know exactly what the articles were which had these names in Ezra's day.

The word for "duplicates," for example, is *machalaph*; the word for "knife" used in other places is *maakeleth*; one might suspect that the similarity of sound of the two words, though they are completely different, may have influenced the earlier translation.

While this word never occurs as a noun elsewhere in the O.T., the verb form (*chalaph*) does. Its meaning is to slip or glide; hence to glide along, or pass through or pierce; therefore to change, or exchange. A slaughter-knife may be suggested because it glides or passes through the flesh. A censor may be

4. Matthew Henry's *Commentary On The Whole Bible*, in loc.

5. G. E. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

indicated because it is pierced, to exude smoke or incense. Or a duplicate of another piece may be indicated by the idea of changing, or exchanging. None of these explanations is totally convincing, so it is impossible to know with certainty what the item was. While this explanation will not brush away the obscurity or relieve our curiosity, it will perhaps indicate why the obscurity is there. Fortunately it is a small detail that really doesn't affect the story.

Verse 11 contains another obscurity. The total number of articles is given as 5400; when we add the list in the previous two verses, it comes to but 2499. One suggestion is that one of the figures has become corrupted in transmission. This is the position taken by the translators of the Revised Standard Version; therefore they substitute figures taken from I Esdras 2:12, 13,⁶ where the list and the total agree.

A simpler solution is that Ezra only named major articles in the previous list, but included many others in the final total. We will see that he does the same kind of thing in the next chapter with a list of names and numbers, and then a grand total.

WORD STUDIES

Some of the names involved have interesting meanings.

EZRA: the name comes from a verb meaning to surround or enclose: to protect, as with a wall; hence he was a "help," or "aid." The word, in feminine form, is used of woman as man's "helper" in Gen. 2:18. It also occurs in the proper name, Ebenezer ("stone of help") in I Sam. 7:12, where Samuel raises a monument to memorialize God's having helped them against the Philistine armies.

PERSIA: one possibility as the base meaning is to separate, or spread out (the feet): hence, "horseman." This is how they appeared to their contemporaries. The same word is used in Daniel 5:25 ("Upharsin") and 5:26 ("Peres"), and is translated, "divided."

6. I, II Esdras in the *Anchor Bible*, or in the *New English Bible with Apocrypha*.

CYRUS' name possibly is the Persian word for the sun. The name contains the same consonants as the Greek word "Lord" (kyrios). (The Hebrew was written without vowels at this time.) Cyrus is the one foreigner referred to as a "Messiah" in the O.T. (Isa. 45:1).

SUMMARY

During the first full year that Israel was under the rulership of Cyrus, the Persian king, Cyrus, was led by God to publish a decree allowing exiles from Judah (also called Israel) to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. This was a fulfillment of prophecies by Jeremiah that the nation would survive the captivity and be restored. Those who did not choose to return should contribute to bear the expenses of those who did, and to finance offerings and repairs to the Temple. A number of exiles, chiefly of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (including priests) subsequently set out, bringing with them also a quantity (some five and a half thousand) of valuable items from the first Temple, thanks to Cyrus' generosity.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who, and what kind of person, was Cyrus?
2. Who was Sheshbazzar?
3. What nation freed the Jewish captives?
4. What other nation or nations were involved?

Chapter Two

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose this list of names and numbers was regarded as important enough to be included in the Bible?
2. Does this list give you any mental image of the kinds of people that made the trip?
3. Do you suppose they all remained, after they arrived?
4. What can you figure out about their financial status?
5. How does their number compare with those who came originally from Egypt into the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua?

OUTLINE

- B. This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees.
1. Their leaders (vss. 1, 2a).
 2. Men of the people (vss. 2b-20).
 3. Men of certain towns (vss. 21-35).
 4. Men of certain classes: Priests, Levites, Temple servants (vss. 36-58).
 5. Some whose ancestral records were lost (vss. 59-63).
 6. Totals (vss. 64, 65).
 7. Number of their livestock (vss. 66, 67).
 8. Their offering for restoring the Temple (vss. 68, 69).
 9. Their location in the land (vs. 70).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

B. This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees

1. The introduction of the list gives the names of their leaders.

TEXT, 2:1-2a

- 1 Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king

of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city.

2a These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

COMMENT

Verse 1 "Now, these are the people," refers to the total list, to verse 63. The phrase, "people of the province," reminds us that the returnees were not free, nor were they returning to a free land. The Judah to which they returned was still a province of Persia, and the people still subjects of the Persian king. Judah was one subdivision of the Fifth Persian Satrapy.¹

The significance of this migration contrasted sharply with the Israelites' original coming into the land of Egypt, from slavery to freedom. "The first exodus witnessed the birth of a nation: the second saw only a migration within the boundaries of an empire, sanctioned by the ruler because it did not include the deliverance of the subject people from servitude."²

Yet the Prophets had emphasized it as something that would surpass even their coming up out of bondage in Egypt (Isa. 43:18-21, for example)! But it is still a remarkable story; how many other examples can be given of a people so completely subjugated, who became a significant nation again?

No account is given of the people who had been left in the land, and who may or may not have been on hand to greet those now returning. The ones who had come through the experience of the Captivity preferred to ignore those who had remained in Judah, and to treat them as inferiors.

Their return "to Jerusalem, and Judah, each to his city," would indicate that Jerusalem was the end of the expedition: the first center at which they arrived, and which they restored to habitable condition.

The phrase, "each to his own city," need not be taken absolutely literally. It may indicate the pattern which they followed

1. See *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 576.

2. W. F. Adeney, *Expositor's Bible*: "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," p. 37.

next, of proceeding as far as possible to restore and settle in many of the individual towns of their ancestry. Or it may indicate that they had been assigned to repopulate certain areas before they left Babylon.

Many of the ancient settlements were not reoccupied at this time, judging from archaeological remains. Even if every returnee actually sought out his ancestral town and settled there, it would be unlikely that every ancient town would have enough representatives among the returnees to receive a significant settlement. They were a pitifully small number compared with the population when the land had been conquered and its people carried off by Nebuchadnezzar.

Verse 2. Here we plunge into a long list of names and statistics. We are tempted to ask, "Why are such lists frequently included in the Bible? Didn't the authors realize how boring these tend to become? This doesn't make for easy reading, or especially rewarding either, from the standpoint of Spiritual enrichment."

Three things could be cited to justify this list, and all such lists in general, in the Bible.

1) Names and events are a part of the fabric of history, and their inclusion is a reminder that the events were historical: that one generation at least could have verified or questioned their authenticity. Judaism and Christianity share the distinction of being historical religions; there is a finality and decisiveness to historical events. Books of pretended history may also contain such lists, but they would have little value if the books did not exist during or shortly after the lifetime of the persons involved in the making of the events and statistics which they record.

2) Archaeologists, philologists, and other technicians in the study of history find these to be amazingly informative; the fact, for example, that few of the names resemble those from the earlier parts of the Bible may indicate the completeness of the break with the past which the Hebrew people underwent in the Captivity. The philologist will note that many of the names actually contain foreign words; this speaks eloquently of the foreign surroundings in which the previous generation

had grown up. Many of the names are more Babylonian than Hebrew.³

3) If your name and the names of your intimate friends or relatives were on this list, you would find it quite interesting. We tend to minimize the importance of church rolls, but the Holy Spirit of God may value them quite highly. Judging from these Biblical examples, He obviously feels that such memorials have their place, possibly to teach respect for the significant makers of history in the past, and to remind us of His concern for the individual.

Having noted this, however, we will not call further attention to most of the names, but will only point out some patterns that occur.

Verse 2. These are the names of their leaders. The omission of two names may be as significant as the eleven which are included. First, we had heard of Sheshbazzar (1:8); though he was referred to previously as the prince of Judah to whom the holy articles were committed by the Persian treasury, his name is not included here. Has he died in the interim? Or is he simply called by another name, i.e., Zerubbabel? We will hear Sheshbazzar mentioned again in Ezra 5:16; his omission in the verse before us now strengthens the likelihood that the one person was known by either name.

Secondly, an almost identical list of names appears in Neh. 7:7. One difference is that Nehemiah includes a twelfth character, Nahamani. Why is he omitted here? The verse before us ends with a reference to "the people of Israel" (not merely Judah). Twelve names, reminders of the twelve original tribes, would be so appropriate here. Was this one man's name dropped because of some action which he took later on? Then what was the thing which he did, which caused Ezra to drop his name? Did he fail to complete the trip, or forsake the returnees soon after the return to Babylon? Or are we being reminded that it is an incomplete list, and there may be many reasons why some individuals are not mentioned?

3. A detailed treatment of this list, with the foreign components of some of the names, is available in Keil and Delitzsch's *Commentary on The Old Testament*, on this chapter of Ezra.

The first explanation for the omission that would come to mind is a copyist's error; at some time in antiquity when all copies were produced by hand, someone left out this name inadvertently. Of course this is a possibility; almost no one would say all these copyists were inspired against error; except that we feel this explanation is made use of much too often, where no evidence for it exists, either to avoid some difficulty in the text or to get rid of something that doesn't fit the commentator's theories. Other explanations, where they can reasonably be made, are certainly preferable.

The most natural explanation, or guess, is that he died or was incapacitated before completing his full round of duties.

Whatever the reason, he was one of the leaders and Nehemiah gives us adequate justification for including him. An omission of a name is not necessarily an error or discrepancy; such omissions occur even in genealogical lists.⁴ It apparently was not regarded as important to include every detail in every instance.

Further comment on the significance of the twelve names to the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the difference in these names in Ezra and Nehemiah will be reserved till we arrive at Nehemiah seven. For the present, each difference can be accounted for as a normal variation in spelling.

Another question that arises about verse two is its punctuation, and therefore the relationship between these names. The King James Version (KJV) has a semicolon after Zerubbabel, thus indicating his primacy in leadership. Many of the more recent translations have a comma, suggesting the equal share which all of this group had in leadership, though Zerubbabel's name still heads the list. It is a subtle distinction, but it does say something. (The Hebrew text can be translated either way, with equal accuracy.)

For example, is this a list of contemporaries, or does it include leaders of later expeditions? Some note the names of Nehemiah and Mordecai, which would fit a later period. Also,

4. Amaziah's name is omitted by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus; cf. Matt. 1:8, II Chron. 25:25; 26:23.

Ezra's name may be hidden in a longer form, Seraiah; and Bigvai is the name of a governor of Judah under Darius II.⁵ However, it is more likely that the persons in verse two are other men of the same name, and not the persons better known to us from later times. The flow of the narrative itself, eventuating in the observance of a religious festival in Ezra 3:1ff., suggests that we have here a description of one historic event, at one point in time, and that these were the leaders who shared in that one event.

2. The list really begins with "laymen," simply
"men of the people of Israel."

TEXT, 2:2b-20

- 2b The number of the men of the people of Israel:
 3 the sons of Parosh, 2,172;
 4 the sons of Shephatiah, 372;
 5 the sons of Arah, 775;
 6 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab,
 2,812;
 7 the sons of Elam, 1,254;
 8 the sons of Zattu, 945;
 9 the sons of Zaccai, 760;
 10 the sons of Bani, 642;
 11 the sons of Bebai, 623;
 12 the sons of Azgad, 1,222;
 13 the sons of Adonikam, 666;
 14 the sons of Bigvai, 2,056;
 15 the sons of Adin, 454;
 16 the sons of Ater of Hezekiah, 98;
 17 the sons of Bezai, 323;
 18 the sons of Jorah, 112;

5. *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 577.

- 19 the sons of Hashum, 223;
20 the sons of Gibbar, 95;

COMMENT

Just one comment on this section: the term, "sons of," could also be translated "descendants of." Emphasis here, as usual in the O.T., is on the social unit, the family, rather than the individual.

3. Next it includes people identified
mainly by their towns.

TEXT, 2:21-35

- 21 the men of Bethlehem, 123;
22 the men of Netophah, 56;
23 the men of Anathoth, 128;
24 the sons of Azmaveth, 42;
25 the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743;
26 the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621;
27 the men of Michmas, 122;
28 the men of Bethel and Ai, 223;
29 the sons of Nebo, 52;
30 the sons of Magbish, 156;
31 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254;
32 the sons of Harim, 320;
33 the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 725;
34 the men of Jericho, 345;
35 the sons of Senaah, 3,630.

COMMENT

Note that the phrases, "the men of," and "the sons of," are used interchangeably. The proper names are all, or nearly all, the names of communities, though Elam in verse 31 presents a puzzle. The same name, with the same number of persons, is mentioned in verse seven, among the individuals. This may be

only a remarkable coincidence, though some regard it as a repetition; the Bible writer himself indicates that he is aware of the similarity of the name at least, for he uses the phrase, "the other Elam," in verse 31.

We are particularly interested in the mention of some of the towns in this list. Here is Bethlehem (*verse 21*), never very large, but memorable as the ancestral home of David and his royal descendants.

And Anathoth (*verse 23*), once the home of Jeremiah. Here the prophet had bought a piece of property at God's direction (Jer. 32), in the face of his own predictions of the destruction and captivity of his nation. This was his way of showing his faith, and God's assurance, that the land would be valuable again. So he had invested in the future for his nephews and nieces; now his faith and his obedience is being vindicated!

Here is Ramah (*verse 26*); Samuel had judged his people at Ramah (I Sam. 7:17).

And Geba (*verse 26*). At least once this is another spelling of Gibeah,⁶ just a few miles from Ramah. At Gibeah Saul had set up the kingdom of Israel. Most likely Geba and Ramah are grouped together because they were close to each other, as were Bethel and Ai in verse 28.

Bethel (*verse 28*) would recall the lives of Abraham and Jacob; both of them had built altars there (Gen. 12:7; 35:1).

Nebo (*verse 29*), across the Jordan, afforded Moses his only view of the Promised Land before he died (Deut. 34:1). Here, however, it probably denotes a small town in Judah.

The walls of Jericho (*verse 34*) had echoed the march of Joshua and all Israel shortly after (Joshua 6).

So the people who returned would have remembered many other hallowed events from their past, as they took up residence once more in the land of their ancestors.

6. Judges 20:10 in Hebrews; also 20:33, where Maareh-geba may be translated "field (or plain) of Geba." Note that the surrounding verses all deal with Gibeah.

4. Also important enough to be mentioned were certain people connected with the Temple and religious worship.

TEXT, 2:36-58

- 36 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973;
 37 the sons of Immer, 1,052;
 38 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247;
 39 the sons of Harim, 1,017.
 40 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74.
 41 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128.
 42 The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, in all 139.
 43 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth,
 44 the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon,
 45 the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub,
 46 the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmai, the sons of Hanan,
 47 the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah,
 48 the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam,
 49 the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai,
 50 the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim,
 51 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur,
 52 the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha,
 53 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah,
 54 the sons of Nezhiah, the sons of Hatipha.
 55 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda,
 56 the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel,
 57 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami.
 58 All the temple servants, and the sons of Solomon's servants, were 392.

COMMENT

The priests (*verses 36-39*) are the first in rank among those connected with the Temple. Of the four clans or households which follow, three are identifiable as being among the twenty-four courses appointed in David's time to serve in rotation at the altar: I Chron. 24:7, 8, 14 mention Jedaiah, Immer, and Harim. (Pashur may have been a replacement for one of the other groups, or an alternative name of one of them; it is identified with the priesthood elsewhere.)

This gives a clue to the source of the names in this list; it is possible that many are the names of clans, or "family names," going back to the time of David and the organization of the Kingdom of Israel. We may wish for names more easily identified, which can be traced to specific tribes; but that may not be necessary since all the priests would be of the tribe of Levi, and since we have been told previously (Ezra 1:5) that the other returnees were of the tribe of Judah and Benjamin, at this time.

Jeshua, the high priest, is identified with the clan of Jedaiah (*verse 36*). More extensive mention of him is made by Haggai (1:1) and by Zechariah (3:1): both spell his name "Joshua." He was the priest whose leadership, along with the governor Zerubbabel's, brought about the reconstruction of the Temple.

Verse 40. Of the Levites in addition to the priests, only seventy-four are mentioned. The "Jeshua" in this verse is apparently a second man by that name, rather than the priest mentioned previously. It is likely that the Levites, not being as directly involved in religious duties as the priests, were not as a group as excited about returning. It is also possible that, since Ezekiel 44:9-16 predicts the demotion of the Levites from some of their responsibilities because of their previous sins, this reduction of their size is a consequence. It is further possible that, since their functions were primarily teaching instead of ministry through ritual, many of them would remain in Persia to furnish needed instruction to the majority of their brethren who remained there.

Singers (*verse 41*) are mentioned next. These would be important to ancient worship, as attested by Egyptian plaques found

at Megiddo in Israel.⁷ The name of Asaph in this list also goes back to the organization of the worship in David's time (I Chron. 15:17, 19). The name, either of the individual or his descendants, is identified with the authorship of twelve of the Psalms (50, 73-83).

The sons of the gatekeepers (*verse 42*) may not have had a lofty calling, but they had their significance. A holy man once expressed his preference to "stand at the threshold of my God, Than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psa. 84:10).

The temple servants (*verses 43-54*) would have even a humbler task. Perhaps these would include descendants of people whom Israel had subjected either by war or by treaty; two examples are given in Num. 31 (Midianites) and Joshua 9 (Gibeonites); note especially Josh. 9:27.

Solomon's servants (*verses 55-57*) were apparently a similar group added later to the temple servants, with whom they are classed (*verse 58*). Solomon's activities (I Kings 9:20, 21) reduced some of Canaan's former tribesmen to servitude. If the pattern set in Num. 31 was followed, then a percentage of these also, along with other war captives added from time to time, ended up in the service of the Temple, and their descendants would be included among the voluntary returnees from captivity.

Does this seem ironic, that many free citizens of Israel now choose to stay in the land of their captivity, while some who had been enslaved by Israel are now freely choosing to return to the land which had enslaved them? This speaks well of the treatment they had received from Israel, and of the Spiritual appeal of service in the Temple, that they still want to maintain their identity with them though it began as forced servitude. There are surely parallels today among children compelled to attend religious services against their will, or of young lovers enduring religious obligations to be near the object of their affections, and then finding something in the services which calls them to full voluntary dedication to the things of God.

7. J. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 263.

5. There follows a list of those whose ancestral records had been lost.

TEXT, 2:59-63

- 59 Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households, and their descendants, whether they were of Israel:
- 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 652.
- 61 And of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name.
- 62 These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and were excluded from the priesthood.
- 63 And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.

COMMENT

In *verse 59* the settlements in Babylon from which they came are mentioned; then the names of their families, first of the common people in *verse 60*, and of those who claimed to be of the priesthood in *verse 61*. Dr. Ironside compares these priests with "some now, who cannot trace their genealogy but nevertheless insist on the Christian place as rightfully theirs." He cautions against presumptuously denying that they are born of God, yet says "we cannot own them as such till they can give clear evidence of being indeed of the priestly company and partakers of the divine nature."⁸

Should these be censured for having lost the important records

8. H. A. Ironside, *Notes on The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, p. 22.

of their ancestry, thus their birthright and identity as God's children and servants? Or should they be praised for the religious fervor that set them apart from those content to stay in Babylon, in spite of their lack of documents which would guarantee them the worldly benefits which their companions could claim? Enough that they were going back to scenes and circumstances reminiscent of their forefathers' close walk with their God!

Those particularly who claimed priestly backgrounds had a special problem: they would be presiding over Israel's religion as well as deriving their support from it, so great care must be taken to insure the correctness of their religious backgrounds. Priests, prophets, and kings were all "messiahs": that is, they were anointed of God as His representatives to the people. No person who came from a foreign land could become a prophet of Israel; he must be "from your own countrymen" (Deut. 18:15, 18). The king also must be a native (Deut. 17:15); the wisdom of this requirement is recognized even in the American Constitution, which specifies that no one can become president of the United States who is not a citizen by birth.

The priest must meet an additional requirement: he must be not only an Israelite by birth, but he must be taken from the descendants of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi (Ex. 28:1ff). No one must take this office on himself (Heb. 5:4). It had been one of the Levites above any of the other tribes who had demonstrated loyalty to Israel's God against heathen gods and customs during the Wilderness Wanderings, at Baal-Peor (Num. 25:5-13); therefore they were chosen above the firstborn of all Israelites to serve in the house of the Lord and to protect the purity of the worship. It was essential then that priests be able to trace their descent from this tribe.

Verse 63. But for those of the priestly line who had lost evidence of their descent, there was a door left slightly open. They were not simply disfellowshipped. God had spoken through His priests in time past by means of Urim and Thummin, objects in the custody of the priests (Ex. 28:30, I Sam. 28:6). If God wished the services of any of these men, He would

restore the Urim and Thummim which seem to have been lost in the Captivity, that He might be consulted about each of these individuals. There is no record of the priests' possession of these after the return from Captivity, therefore many authorities, though not all,⁹ suppose that these men were never granted a full status as priests.

6. Verses 64, 65 give the totals of the returnees.

TEXT, 2:64, 65.

64 The whole assembly numbered 42,360,
65 besides their male and female servants, who numbered 7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women.

COMMENT

This grand total of 49,897 may be contrasted with the 601,730 plus the 23,000 Levites (Num. 26:51, 62) who paused on the edge of the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua, and with the 1,570,000 plus the tribes of Levi and Benjamin in David's time (I Chron. 21:5). It was indeed only a remnant, a few survivors, that returned: as Isaiah had prophesied (Isa. 1:9; 10:20f).

In *verse 65*, the singers are other than those for the Temple, in *verse 41*.

The actual lists given previously add up to only 29,818; this is a reminder that the lists are only partial.

9. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 22.

7. Next is a listing of their livestock.

TEXT, 2:66, 67

- 66 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245;
 67 their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720.

COMMENT

This is not a very large number of animals for the amount of people. All of the animals are beasts of burden, and at best there is but one for every six persons.

8. Their offerings for restoring the Temple are recorded.

TEXT, 2:68, 69

- 68 And some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation.
 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas, and 5,000 silver minas, and 100 priestly garments.

COMMENT

It is interesting that the drachma in particular is a Persian coin (another subtle reminder of their contact with Persia):¹⁰ the mina is a unit of weight used in Israel, Babylon, and Persia. We may see a hint that coins are beginning to be used to simplify monetary exchange, but their use has not become universal.

10. An example is portrayed in G. A. Barton's *Archaeology and The Bible*, Plate 63, Figure 189.

According to the *Living Bible* on this passage, the 61,000 drachmas would be \$300,000, and the 5,000 minas, \$170,000. This would average out to almost \$10 each; *verse 68* tells us however that this amount came from only some of the leaders, and *verse 69* says that they gave according to their ability. Perhaps the others would have given equally if they had been able; the trip must have been a severe financial drain on many of them. Or perhaps those who wished to give were not discouraged by the failure of others to share in the contributions.

It is impossible to make any accurate judgments of the actual value of these sums; we are only comparing amounts of metal in the coins or measures. We know how rapidly money can change its value, even within one lifetime, and especially in a country undergoing great social change. It could be helpful, however, to think of their average as a generous half a month's wages.

In contrast, the travelers accompanying Moses had contributed \$1,250,000, by some estimates, for the building of the Tabernacle, and had to be restrained from giving more (Ex. 35:21-29; 38:24-31). That would average out to \$2! But then, those who left Egypt were going out from a house of bondage; these were leaving established businesses and had gained a significant measure of wealth and freedom.

9. Their location in the land is stated.

TEXT, 2:70

70 Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

COMMENT

Their dwelling within (walled) cities was probably required by the need for mutual defense, assistance, and encouragement. Note that they think of themselves as "all Israel," and not a remnant of a few tribes.

WORD STUDIES

ZERUBBABEL: "a seed of Babylon": a reminder that God preserved a seed of His people through the Babylonian Captivity, from which His nation would once again spring to life.

TEMPLE SERVANTS (verse 43): literally, the Nethinim: "those given." The word is a plural form; it comes from the word "Nathan." These were the persons "given" to the priests to assist with the menial tasks of preparing for sacrifice and worship.

JESHUA, or its variant, **JOSHUA**: "Jehovah is Salvation," or "Salvation from Jehovah." This is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek name, "Jesus."

MINA: the basic meaning is to divide out, or measure out, or number. Money originally had to be measured, or weighed, at each transaction. This is the word "Mene" in the handwriting on the wall, in Dan. 5:25f. Note that the consonants are the same as those in our word "money," and in reverse order, the first two consonants in "number." Can you find the two letters hidden in the "denomination" of a bill? In "numismatics"? Now you are looking at the building blocks of language!

SUMMARY

There you see the brave band of marchers: small in number, of meagre resources, threatened by many dangers on the trip and even after they arrived; yet there is no denying that they made the trip. They will be joined by others who will come in small groups as time goes on; but even when the N.T. opens, they are still a pitifully small nation. A disproportionate number of them, about one in ten, are priests, and we can understand why priests would be more likely to treasure hopes of returning to the service of God in the temple at Jerusalem. But for now, they must all unite in the physical work of rebuilding.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Is Ezra named among the returnees?
2. Who is the one most prominent person mentioned?
3. What groups of people were mentioned?
4. How would you have changed the order of these groups, if you had been writing the story?
5. What reminder is in the list, of a prophecy of Jeremiah? of Isaiah?

Chapter Three

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. How much time has passed since the events beginning in Ezra 1:1?
2. How much time is consumed by the events in Ezra three?
3. According to 3:1, the people gathered "as one man." Do you think this means that everyone came, or that those who came had one will and purpose?
4. Why do you suppose they started their rebuilding with the altar, instead of some other structure?
5. How many things that they did in this chapter reflect a knowledge of God's Law given through Moses, or of other sacred institutions?

OUTLINE

Chapters three to six are titled in our outline for the book, "The Temple Is Rebuilt." This is most generally seen as the main topic of the book; this, then, is the heart of its message. Our outline for chapter three:

II. The Temple is Rebuilt (3:1 — 6:22)

A. The altar and the foundation laid

1. The altar and the sacrifices are restored (vss. 1-7).
2. The foundation of the new Temple is laid (vss. 8-13).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

Chapter three begins the topic of the Temple's reconstruction by describing the building of the altar, the making of the first regular sacrifice, and then the construction of the foundation. Nothing could emphasize more sharply the centrality of sacrifice to worship. The altar was the reason for erecting all of the rest of the building: it was the object for which all else existed.

Now, Jesus is our Temple (John 2:19-21). His greatest work on earth was to be our altar (Heb. 13:10, 12). We love Him because He offers us forgiveness, and cleansing, and consecration, and fellowship. We see in Him the glory that speaks of His Father's glory.

We, too, are building a temple, as described in I Cor. 3:16; 6:19f. and I Peter 2:5: *we* are that temple. It would be well for us to begin in like fashion with the altar of sacrifice. Notice what Heb. 13:13-16 enumerates as our sacrifices: especially praise and sharing.

II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (3:1 — 6:22)

A. The altar is built, and the foundation laid.

1. The altar and the sacrifice are restored.

TEXT, 3:1-7

- 1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.
- 2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.
- 3 So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.
- 4 And they celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required;
- 5 and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.
- 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.
- 7 Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

COMMENT

Verse 1: "Now when the seventh month came." This would correspond roughly to our September; though that is our ninth month, the name comes from the Latin for "seven" (septem). There is no year stated, so it must be in the same year as the previous events. Verse eight will confirm this, since it refers to the start of the second year after their return. They had barely had time, at best, to set up residence in cities when this busiest month of the year in terms of religious obligation arrived: the month of Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles. In Ezra 7:8, 9 the same trip from Babylon required four months, and their getting ready for the trip must have taken a substantial part of the other two, so the events of this chapter must have followed very closely their arrival in their homeland.

The number seven would be significant to Israel: the word itself signifies completion, or taking a vow. Every seventh day was holy; seven weeks separated two other feasts (Passover and Weeks) from each other; the seventh month as noted was particularly marked for religious observances; every seventh year was a Sabbath Year, and seven sevens of years (the fiftieth year) brought them to the Year of Jubilee.

Their assembling at Jerusalem would not have been a great hardship, for all the towns in which they had resettled were within a 25-mile radius of the Holy City.

In *verse 2* Jeshua and Zerubbabel are mentioned again, with their brothers. Obviously, all Jeshua's brothers would be priests also. Zerubbabel is called the son of Shealtiel; this presents a problem. I Chron. 3:16-19 calls him the son of Pedaiah, who is the son of King Jeconiah. Since Jeconiah's oldest son is Shealtiel, we can assume that this is an illustration of the Levirate law (Deut. 25:5ff.); when an heir would die without children, his wife was to marry his next brother, or his nearest available kin, and the first son of that marriage would be legally the heir of the woman's earlier husband. The story of Ruth (2:2) and of Tamar (Gen. 38) are examples of this principle. Thus Zerubbabel probably was legally the son of Shealtiel, but actually the son of Pedaiah.

But the center of focus in verse two is the altar. Since a second smaller altar was also located in the original Temple and used exclusively for incense offerings, it is necessary to specify that the altar which they built was the one for burnt offerings (animal sacrifices).

It is further specified that the pattern for their offerings was the Law of God given through Moses. One of the reasons for their bondage was that the Law had been neglected; now they set themselves scrupulously to observe it.

The timing for constructing the altar may need further explanation. Verse six indicates that sacrifice began on it on the first day of the seventh month; verse one says that they assembled in the seventh month, and then verse two describes the building of the altar. We may wonder how they could make sacrifice on it the first day if it was built during the month.

One possibility is in the translation of these words; they could just as accurately be rendered, "Now Jeshua . . . and Zerubbabel . . . had arisen and built the altar . . ."

A second possibility is that the altar which they constructed may have been temporary and very simple: a pile of dirt or stones as specified in Ex. 20:24f. Elijah had built a similar altar in a small part of a day (I Ki. 18:20ff.).

Verse 3 speaks of setting up the altar on its foundation, which would not need to be said unless to indicate that it was on the same foundation as the previous altar. This emphasizes their effort to be in continuity with the past. The reason given for it is their fear of the neighboring peoples; we will shortly see how justified this fear was. Stated positively, they were convinced that if they would complete this obligation to God, He would consequently protect them from their enemies.

With this verse begins a list of the different offerings and celebrations which they observed. The first of these, the burnt offering, is regarded as the most ancient and noble; it was placed first in the descriptions of sacrifices in Lev. 1-7, and it required the most expensive, most perfect animal. It is also appropriate as the first because it portrays dedication, or consecration, where the others speak more particularly of fellowship

or of expiation; so it would be most useful at dedications, or beginnings.

Verses 3, 4, 5 each mention the daily, or continual, burnt offering made morning and evening (Num. 28:3). Thus each day was made holy to God. In *verse 4* this is also said to be "according to the ordinance." A reading of Numbers chapters 28 and 29 will explain the different offerings and celebrations alluded to here.

Verse 4 also mentions their celebration of the Feast of Booths; this was one of the three major feasts of the year. If we wonder why they should begin their observance of the yearly feasts with this instead of with the Passover for example, an answer is quickly found. It was the first one that came up on the calendar, after their arrival in the land.

But what is undesigned by man may be designed by God. The Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) was the one which relived the experiences of Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan. Now they had arrived at home at the end of a similar journey, and the parallel would be especially meaningful. Matthew Henry¹ calls it "the feast . . . which had a peculiar reference to gospel times," and notes Zech. 14:16-18, a prophecy incidentally which was written very close to this same time. If the Passover found its fulfillment in the event of the Cross at the Passover season (John 19:14; I Cor. 5:7), and if the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) was fulfilled for the Christian in the birth of the church at a Pentecost celebration, perhaps the Feast of Booths can speak to us of the age in which we live, as sojourners or ambassadors separated from but moving toward our permanent home which we will receive at the end of our journey or at our Master's return.

Verse 5, in addition to the burnt offering, speaks of the monthly or new moon offerings (Num. 28:11) and of the other festivals which are described in Num. 28, 29. Added also are the freewill offerings which were not restricted to any special times

1. *Commentary on The Whole Bible*, p. 1037.

or circumstances, but which arose out of the spontaneous gratitude and affection of the offerers; there is never a time when they are not appropriate.

Within *verses 3, 4, 5* are described offerings which came each day, each month, each year, and whenever the offerer chose. One periodic offering most conspicuous by its absence here is that which came each week, and marked each Sabbath (Num. 28:9, 10). Strangely enough, Ezra nowhere specifically mentions the Sabbath. However, it would be included in the phrase, "all the fixed festivals" (verse five).

Verse 6 states clearly that the sacrifices were renewed beginning with the first day of the seventh month; this was one of the lesser feasts, the Feast of Trumpets, though it is not mentioned here. The subject of the last half of the chapter is anticipated in the statement that the Temple foundation had not been laid; this stresses once more that they did not wait for a temple to be completed, or even started, before they began worship through sacrifice. (As noted in the *Interpreter's Bible*, David also had an altar without a temple.)²

Verse 7 continues this transition by showing the preparations made, the gathering of materials, for the beginning of construction. The citizens are paid with money for their work; the foreigners receive goods (food, drink, and oil) instead, which would be more useful to them. Food is a better international currency than money.

The materials were brought from Lebanon, as the materials had been originally in Solomon's time; we recall Hiram of Tyre. These would have consisted of timber; the stones of the old structure probably still remained. Sidon (also called Zidon) was close to Tyre, and had assisted also with the earlier structure (I Ki. 5:1, 6). Then, Hiram of Tyre and Solomon had been bound together by friendship; now both lands were under the heel of Cyrus. Joppa, as any reader of the book of Jonah would be aware, was the seaport closest to Jerusalem.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 588.

2. The foundation of the new temple is laid.

TEXT, 3:8-13

- 8 Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD.
- 9 Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.
- 10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.
- 11 And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." 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.
- 12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy;
- 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

COMMENT

Verse 8 refers to the following year, the second month: our April or May. Their religious year began with the beginning of

Spring, which would be easy to justify. No work had been done during the Winter months, but with the arrival of seasonable weather the construction began. This was also the month in which Solomon had begun his building (I Ki. 6:1).

Again we have the names of the two leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, this time in reverse order from verse two. Perhaps the author is emphasizing their equality in importance and honor. They were assisted not only by their relatives and by the whole band of Levites, but by the total company who had returned to Jerusalem. There would be no restriction on the other tribes' entering the Temple till it was dedicated.

We may be surprised that the Levites were put to work beginning at the age of twenty (nineteen by our reckoning, since an Israelite was one year old through the first year of life). Previously we have been told that their responsibilities began at the age of thirty (Num. 4:46f.), or twenty-five (Num. 8:24). But David reduced this age to twenty (I Chron. 23:3, 24-27). They are the only group for whom the age requirement is made; perhaps this is to tell us of their care in conforming to the sacred ordinances. Also, it made good sense to assign the Levites, the tribe of priests, to positions of overseership as they would be more familiar with the services for which the House of God was designed, and they would be the ones making greatest use of these facilities.

In *verse 9*, the identity of Jeshua is not as simple as we might suppose. G. Coleman Luck³ believes him to be not the high priest, but the Levite named in 2:40, where he is also associated with Kadmiel, and where the name Hodaviah (very similar in its Hebrew spelling to Judah) also appears. Young's *Concordance* lists five different Jeshuas mentioned in Ezra!

This is certainly a possibility. Nevertheless, the mention of Jeshua the high priest with his kin in the previous verse leads more normally to seeing him here, setting an example to others by his involvement in the construction. Holy hands are not defiled by heavenly work.

3. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 28.

Verses 10 and 11 call attention to the revival of another long-standing tradition. King David had divided some of the Levites into twenty-four groups to provide music, each in their turn, at the House of God (I Chron. 6:31-48; 25:1-31). On the completion of the foundation the successors of these groups, with musical instruments and with their voices and accompanied by the priests, praised and gave thanks to God. This was another function of the Temple, and it was resumed without waiting for the building to be completed. The service of song has its God-given usefulness, as do the sacrifices, in inspiring and purifying the worshipers.

In *verse 11*, the words of their song are reminiscent of several of the Psalms: 106:1, 118:1, and 136, every verse, all speak of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, "For he is good, for his lovingkindness is everlasting." The words, "toward Israel," could be deduced from Psa. 118:2. The response of the people was a great shout in celebration of the finishing of the foundation.

Verse 12 further describes this reaction as being of two kinds. Some of them, the more aged people, could recall seeing the previous Temple; it had been but a few more than fifty years since it had been destroyed and they had been led to Babylon. What they saw now must have been a pitiful reminder of the splendid Temple they had known before (Hag. 2:3). Or for some, even the small beginnings would bring a flood of holy memories that would be expressed in tears; they need not all be the tears of sadness. For some, this was the end of fifty years of frustration. And from others (even of the elderly; the verse does not specify that the younger persons had a monopoly on the rejoicing) rose a great shout of joy.

Verse 13 concludes the scene as the two emotions, the shout of joy and the sound of weeping, are blended into one indistinguishable but impressive tone. For in worship there is a place for both: the tears of sorrow, and the shout of joy.

WORD STUDIES

LAW: Torah ("Law of Moses," verse 2). The idea of legalism is not present in this word. It is possible that the word is derived from a verb, "throw": hence, to throw out the hand, to point out, to direct or instruct. It is more likely that it comes from the verb, "give light": hence, enlightenment or instruction. "Law" in the O.T. is the kind of loving instruction which a father gives to his children to help them avoid unhappy consequences of bad choices, or to enable them to live happy lives.

ALTAR: Mizbeach. The verb from which it is taken means "slaughter," either for food or for sacrifice. Most of the meat or food which was sacrificed in Israel, specifically of the peace and thank offerings, the meal or grain offerings, trespass or guilt offerings, and even certain sin offerings, was eaten by the offerers, or by the priests, or by both (Lev. 7). This excludes only the burnt offerings. Sacrifice in Israel was a time of festivity and fellowship.

TABERNACLE: Sukkah, or Sukkoth ("Feast of Tabernacles"): tent, booth, hut, or temporary shelter made of green boughs. This was the housing of the Israelites on their trek from Egypt to Canaan, and they were commanded to keep it fresh in their memories by living in such structures one week of each year.

LEVITE: the basic idea is to join, or cleave, or entwine. It was the function of the Levites to join the people to God, to cause them to cleave to Him, or to be entwined with Him.

SUMMARY

What a variety of material in one small chapter!

Ezra has informed us of the prompt and effective religious action of the people and their leaders. He has singled out for emphasis the one most important article in the holy surroundings: the altar. He has stressed the part played by the Law of the Lord in their renewal, and has taken us through a brief but detailed review of the ancient ritual. If he has left out

an item or two, we have not been offended; his number of the vessels in chapter one had included many which he had failed to name, and his final total of the returnees in chapter two was more than the names and numbers he had previously given.

Then he has shown us the gathering of materials and workmen, and the beginning of construction of the new Temple. We have thrilled to the sound of music, and we have felt the surge of a variety of emotions as they observed the first small results of their labors. So far there has been no significant opposition, and no enemy has been singled out by name.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long was it after Israel returned before they began public worship?
2. Who were the individuals most responsible for the restoration of worship?
3. What observances or ceremonials did they keep?
4. What part did music fulfill in their renewal?

Chapter Four

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What would have been the result if Israel had accepted the help of their neighbors?
2. What was the most effective tool which Satan used to stop the Lord's work?
3. Can you find any errors in the letter written by their enemies, and if so, how do you account for them?
4. Why was the Persian king so easily influenced?
5. Do you see any ways in which the people of Israel could have improved their methods?

OUTLINE

- B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
1. Opposition develops, (vss. 1-5).
 2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding (vss. 6-16).
 3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped (vss. 17-22).
 4. This brings the restoration to a halt (vss. 23, 24).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
1. Opposition develops.

TEXT, 4:1-5

- 1 Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel,
- 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

- 3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us."
- 4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building,
- 5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

COMMENT

In chapter four we see opposition finally appearing and becoming clearly identifiable. It can be anticipated that when God's people get busy, Satan will raise opposition.

It is not just history we are reading, for "these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Cor. 10:11). If the O.T. teaches us valuable lessons about the nature and works of the Eternal, All-powerful, All-loving God, it also has something valuable to say about the nature of our enemy, and of the methods which he still uses.

Verse 1 mentions the enemies; they are more fully described in verses 2, 9, 10. We recognize them primarily as the Samaritans, known to us from the N.T. From this and other passages of the O.T. we can understand why the Samaritans were so bitterly resented by the Judeans in the N. T.

Verse 2 shows that the strongest opposition for God's people is from the half-godly.¹ The Samaritans claimed first that they worshiped the same God as Israel. While they called Him by the same name, they understood His nature in a much different way and their worship followed very different patterns. Their second claim will explain this: they asserted that they had been sacrificing

1. For N.T. parallels, see Rev. 3:9, 15ff.

to Israel's God since the days of Esar-haddon, 150 years earlier. When Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 or 721 B.C., the Assyrians had taken many of the people, especially the well-to-do, with them into captivity; then they imported other conquered peoples into their land, as a means of discouraging revolt. By shuffling populations around, they sought to put all of them into strange environments thus making revolt more difficult and unlikely. II Ki. 17 gives the full story of the beginning of these policies; note especially verses 24ff., and 33. This was followed by 1) marriages between the Israelites remaining in the land and the heathen immigrants, which God had forbidden; and 2) natural calamities in the land. The Assyrians sought to minimize these calamities by returning priests of the God of Israel to the land to teach proper forms of worship on the premise that there are many gods, each possessing different territories, and each god must be worshiped on the soil identified with him (compare II Ki. 5:17) or he would become angry and vent his rage on the land.

Sargon had been king of Assyria when Israel's capital, Samaria, fell. His policy of deportations was continued by the next two kings, Sennacherib and Esar-haddon. The persons speaking in verse two identify themselves as among the later groups of people imported into Israel's former territory, possibly after the fall of Tyre to Assyria in 671 B.C. These peoples and their successors continued to use only the books of Moses in their religious practices, even to modern times. The Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets furnishes an illustration of some of their likenesses and differences compared to Judea (Jn. 4:20, 25).

The Samaritans may have had a political motive for their actions as described here. "By joining the new Jewish group in their venture the Samaritans may have sought identification with them and thus a salvaging of something of their political position."²

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 596.

In *verse 3*, the response of Israel's leaders has been criticized as unnecessarily severe and uncharitable.³ However, some things may be said in their defense. 1) It was this same intermarriage with the people of the land, the Canaanites, and intermingling of Israel's religion with their heathen neighbors which had brought about their downfall (Jgs. 1:27ff.; 2:11ff.). Solomon's marriages to many foreign wives and his subsequent building of temples where they might worship their various gods (I Ki. 11:4-11) had sown the seeds that grew to the kingdom's division and eventual destruction. Note that Solomon built more than one temple. 2) The leaders of Judah and Benjamin had already shown a willingness to use the help of foreigners. They were not so ungracious as to refuse to employ foreigners for labor, or to refuse their contributions. The people of Tyre and Sidon had already given assistance (Ezra 3:8), and in an earlier era money had been received from Manasseh and Ephraim (II Chron. 34:9). This was not the issue. The real problem apparently was the character of the building, i.e., its control and leadership, and worship to which it would be put. 3) We might also question the sincerity of the Samaritans, who hadn't restored the Temple during the time when they were in total possession of the land.

Verse 4 marks the virtual halt of the project, because of 1) discouragement, and 2) fear. The account will continue to elaborate on the steps taken by their enemies, but the injury has already been done; the opposition has been effective.

In *verse 5*, the counselors have been compared to lobbyists in our times, hired to influence those who form government policies.⁴ The era from Cyrus to Darius, mentioned here, would include also the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 595. The writer conditions this on p. 599, questioning if, without these policies, "Judaism and the law and the prophets alike, (would) have survived amid the rising flood of Hellenistic syncretism through the centuries between the O.T. and the N.T."

4. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 31.

2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding.

TEXT, 4:6-16

- 6 Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.
- 7 And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.
- 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows:
- 9 then wrote Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,
- 10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River. And now
- 11 this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: "To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now
- 12 let it be known to the king, that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.
- 13 "Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.
- 14 "Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king,
- 15 so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books, and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past

days; therefore that city was laid waste.

- 16 "We inform the king that, if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River."

COMMENT

The Ahasuerus of *verse 6* is taken to be a title rather than a name; Young's *Analytical Concordance* gives its meaning as "King." He is identified as Cambyses in Persian history. The designation, Ahasuerus, is used again of a later king throughout the book of Esther, and of an earlier king in Dan. 9:1. No disposition of the letter mentioned here is recorded in the Bible; possibly it was ignored by the king.

Likewise in *verse 7*, Artaxerxes may be a title meaning "Great King," according to the same source. Another Artaxerxes will appear in Ezra 7, a generation later. These instances reinforce the likelihood that both of these are titles and not personal names.

The Artaxerxes of *verse 7* is thought to be Pseudo-Smerdis, who pretended to be a son of Cyrus and who usurped the throne for about seven months. We see the appropriateness, then, of the phrase, "in the days of," in place of the phrase, "in . . . his reign," applied to the former king in the previous verse. Thus the Bible subtly records the fact that the legitimacy of his rule was questioned. This dates the correspondence in 523 B.C., thirteen years after the work on the Temple had begun.

Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel are unidentified in any contemporary historical source. Tabeel, judging from his name ("God is good") was a worshiper of God as the Samaritans would be. These three were apparently various officials of the Persian territory between the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea (*verse 11*). Their letter is reproduced in *verses 11-16*. Reference is made to the text in Aramaic; the portion from 4:8 to 6:18 is in Aramaic, probably because the bulk of it is taken from official Persian documents, to which Ezra would have had

access. The language used by the Persians for their international correspondence was Aramaic.

While Aramaic is very similar to Hebrew, as Dutch is to German or Portuguese is to Spanish, nevertheless they are different languages. During the Captivity the common people of Israel began to speak in Aramaic; only the government officials had been acquainted with it before (II Ki. 18:26). Consequently the Hebrew spoken in Judea in the N.T. was actually Aramaic, as can be observed from some of the words used by Jesus ("Raca," Mt. 5:22; "Bar-jonah," Mt. 16:17; "Talitha Kum," Mk. 5:41; "Ephphatha," Mk. 7:34).

Rehum, in *verse 8f*, is not to be identified with the man in Ezra 2:2, who was a leader of the returnees. His title, "commander," would make him a counsellor of the Persian king. The next name mentioned, Shimshai the scribe, would be the royal secretary. Obviously, then, the lesser officials named in *verse 7* ("the rest of the colleagues" in *verse 9*) had gotten these more influential figures, closer to the king, to sign the actual letter.

Verses 9, 10 are the salutation of the letter. Erech, Babylon, and Elam (with Susa as its capital) in *verse 9* were some of the conquered peoples whom the Assyrians settled in Samaria. Osnappar in *verse 10* is probably a shortened form of Ashurbanipal, known as Esar-haddon's successor. The region beyond the river, as already noted, would be the territory ruled by Persia between the Euphrates River (Babylon) and the Mediterranean Sea, and under one general administration. The words, "And now," are used in Aramaic correspondence of that age to mark the transition between the salutation and the body of a letter.⁵

Verse 11 summarizes the salutation and concludes again with the customary phrase, "and now." Note that the writers identify themselves to the king as "Your servants": a claim to loyalty in contrast to the disloyalty which they claimed to warn him against.

5. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 599.

Verse 12 shows the bias and exaggeration of these foes. The words, "rebellious and evil city," are intended solely to discredit; there was nothing in Israel's conduct that warranted this judgmental title, at that time. The following words are of the same piece; God's people are accused of rebuilding the city walls, when they were authorized only to rebuild the Temple. In fact, the accusation treats with silence the work being done on the Temple. Lies are the Devil's progeny, as Jesus informs us (Jn. 8:44, 55). It is not until the time of Nehemiah, a half century later, that the Bible speaks of an organized effort to restore the city walls.

The exaggeration is all the more evident in that the words "are finishing" may be translated just as correctly "have finished," as in the KJV. The falsehood is obvious. In verses 13, 16, the letter itself acknowledges that the walls had not actually been finished.

We do not mean that every example of exaggeration is an evidence that a person is deliberately working for the Devil; exaggeration is used for a variety of purposes. A well-meaning Christian on occasion may innocently or unintentionally use this device. But it is God's nature that His speech coincides with reality and with constructiveness (Heb. 6:18 states this principle, and Gen. 1:3 gives an example); and the Christian seeks to be as much like God as possible (Lev. 11:44; I Pet. 1:16).

What we have in the verse before us, however, is a designed misstatement intended for destructive purposes.

Verse 13 reveals the equally false assumptions drawn from the first falsehood. Tribute, custom, and toll are different forms of taxes.⁶ The word "revenue" in verse 13 is a conjectural translation. It is more likely that it should read "at length"; thus, "at length (eventually) damage will be done to the king."⁷ Their method thus was to aim at the king's self-concern.

Verse 14 enlarges on this. The phrase, "we are in the service of the palace," is most expressive; literally it reads, "we eat the

6. For more detail, see "Word Studies," end of this chapter.

7. Ellicott's *Commentary on The Whole Bible*, III, p. 467.

salt of the palace.” This is first of all a recognition of their dependence on the king: our word “salary” incidentally comes from the Latin word for salt, and reflects the government policy of paying its servants with salt. But it is also a reference to the binding nature of a salt covenant (Num. 18:19; II Chr. 13:5).⁸ They were claiming that they were bound by covenant loyalty to reveal these threats to the king.

In *verse 15* they assert that a check of the records will verify their charges. Esther 6:1 shows how carefully the events of the palace were recorded and consulted. Similar Babylonian records were also available, and are indicated by the phrase, “your fathers (predecessors).” The “Babylonian Chronicle” has been recovered, and even lists food rations for the captives from Judah, including Jehoiachin by name.

Observe that there is no charge of contemporary wrongdoing in this part of the letter, for which they claim any substantiation. It is all what they have done “in past days”; they charge that this was the reason Jerusalem was laid waste after its defeat, some sixty-five years before.

Verse 16 concludes that if Israel is allowed to continue its rebuilding, the result is that they would undermine the Persian government’s control of the total area from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. That is crediting the people of Jerusalem with tremendous military power or influence far beyond reason. It might easily be argued that the building of an army could lead to military action or revolt; it is hard to see how defensive measures, such as building a wall, would be a threat to the peace of neighboring nations.

8. Oriental custom required that when persons had eaten salt together, they were brothers and must defend one another at all costs. Note what a long-standing and binding custom Judas violated when he broke bread with Jesus and went out and betrayed Him the very same hour (Jn. 13:21-30). Consider also the meaning of the church’s breaking bread together.

More on this in “Word Studies,” end of this chapter.

3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped.

TEXT, 4:17-22

- 17 Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River: "Peace. And now
- 18 the document which you sent us has been translated and read before me.
- 19 "And a decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it,
- 20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom, and toll were paid to them.
- 21 "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that the city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.
- 22 "And beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?"

COMMENT

Verse 17 is the heading and salutation of the letter. Rehum and Shimshai (cf. verse 8) are identified with the lands of Samaria and its neighbors. "Peace" (Shelam) would be the common greeting of their culture. Here again is the "And now" separating the salutation from the body of the letter.

Verse 18 acknowledges receipt of the Samaritans' letter. There is no mention of any defense offered by or sought from the people of Jerusalem. The handling of this case by Artaxerxes, who accepted the letter from Jerusalem's enemies at face value and did not go beyond the walls of his palace to check it for factual accuracy or to gather information from the other side, reveals something of the character of this man who had no

legitimate claim to the throne but who pretended to be someone whom he was not.

Verses 19 and 20 give us the results of the search. Usually when one looks for something long enough, he can find it; so evidence of Jerusalem's rebellious character was uncovered. It would be hard to find a record of any city in history which at some point had not resisted its conquerors.

The record of Jerusalem is unfortunate, however, in that much of the resistance and rebellion had been useless and ill-advised. The Prophets, and specifically Jeremiah, had cautioned against it from the times of Jehoiakim to Zedekiah (Jer. 21:8, 9; 27:1-23). Their disobedience to God at that point surely added to their burden now: More than a half century has passed, and God's people still pay a price for the sins of their leaders. In truth, it had been the failure of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah to keep their words to their conquerors that had caused their city to be totally reduced to rubble. (II Ki. 24:1, 12, 20).

The mighty kings of *verse 20* most likely were David and Solomon. It is interesting that Babylon had noticed and recorded the extensiveness of their reigns. Apparently the Persian king believed that David and Solomon's collecting tribute, custom and tolls justified the charge made in vs. 13, that a healthy Jerusalem would endanger his ability to collect these for himself from this whole territory.

Verses 21 and 22 order the official issuance of the command to stop all work, and require strict compliance in carrying it out.

4. The work comes to a halt.

TEXT, 4:23, 24

- 23 Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.

- 24 Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

COMMENT

Verse 23 speaks of the total stoppage of work by force of arms. It was now 520 B.C.; judging from vs. 4f., it had virtually stopped a minimum of nine years before.

In *verse 24* it is the cessation of work on the Temple that is spoken of specifically; yet it was the wall and the city that were mentioned in the complaint. God's enemies often work by indirection and by subterfuge. Fortunately, it was but a few months till Darius, a more worthy king, ascended the throne. By the second year of his rule, his character would be known by his subjects even in Jerusalem, setting the stage for the events of the next chapter.

WORD STUDIES

1. **ENEMY:** Tsar: verse 4; the basic idea in the word is to exert pressure: hence, to press in on, or oppress. It is the word used in Psa. 23:5. Of course, most of the people who do this are our enemies; but even our friends or relatives, consciously or unconsciously, can add pressure to us. Many of Israel's most bitter enemies were peoples most closely related to her. God "prepares a table" (provides) for us in the midst of all these situations.
2. **DISCOURAGE:** Meraph Yadim: vs. 4; literally, as in KJV, "weaken the hands." It means to make the hands hang down, to relax, let fall, or weaken: thus, to discourage. The word is in the repetitive participial form indicating continuity of action; they "continuously again and again weakened the hands."
3. **TRIBUTE:** Mindah: verse 13; has the basic idea of a gift,

i.e., the kind of a gift measured out; it is always used of another nation, for example to avoid military attack.

4. CUSTOM: Belo: verse 13; payment in kind; i.e., a portion of the crops. This tax would usually be paid by a nation's own citizens.
5. TOLL: Halak: verse 13; "privilege to walk"; hence, payment for passage through a land.
6. SALT: Melach: verse 14. Possibly it means to be rubbed small, or pulverized. Since salt is used to preserve, it was used as a symbol of an enduring, permanent agreement, forever sacred and inviolable. Salt must always accompany offerings (Lev. 2:13), as a symbol of a perpetual bond of friendship and loyalty.

SUMMARY

In chapter four, the Samaritans and other neighbors of Jerusalem offer their assistance to rebuild the Temple, but their help is refused. They therefore seek to interrupt the project by using influence in the Persian court, especially by having a deceptive letter written. Their complaint was that the people were rebuilding walls as a threat of rebellion; they made no mention that the Temple was being built. This resulted in a sixteen-year period of progressively intensified delay, and the eventual order to stop all work. The report of the stoppage in verse 24 may be intended to cover more than one single incident; it was the objective of the continued efforts throughout the time period of this chapter, and was the result of all these incidents. Thus matters stood till the second year of Darius' reign.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Of what nationality were the people most opposed to the building?
2. What four kings of Persia are named?
3. What is meant by "beyond the River"?
4. How long was the work stopped?
5. What past kings of Judah were the cause of an extra burden to them now?

Chapter Five

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What historical events or changing circumstances made it possible to resume construction?
2. How does Darius' character compare with the previous king's?
3. What part did the people credit to God in their varying fortunes?
4. Do you think the letter of Tattenai was written to seek instruction and information or to direct and influence opinions: to help or to hinder the reconstruction?

OUTLINE

In chapter five, the work of rebuilding the Temple is resumed.

- C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius.
1. The work gets under way (vss. 1-5).
 2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation (vss. 6-17).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius.
1. The work gets under way.

TEXT, 5:1-5

- 1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them,
- 2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.
- 3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree

to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

- 4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.
- 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report should come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

COMMENT

Verse 1 mentions the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah which prodded the people into resumption of the Temple reconstruction. To see how this was accomplished, read the books which bear these prophets' names, especially Hag. 1:4-11 and Zech. 1:16, 17. Zechariah is called the son of Iddo; actually he was his grandson (Zech. 1:1). This word, "son," is used in this way frequently in genealogies. Note again that the meaning of the word, "prophecy," is not restricted to foretelling, but has to do with the conveying of the total message of God: with being God's spokesman.

Speaking in God's name, as is mentioned here, meant more than affixing His name to the proclamation. "Name" indicates "character" in the Bible; to know one's name signifies a knowledge of one's character. The message of Haggai and Zechariah, then, reflected the character of God, according to Ezra's statement.

This verse is peculiar in that it contains several names for God's people: Jews, Judah, Jerusalem, and Israel, all used interchangeably. This could not have been done in every age, especially during the Divided Monarchy, but it was done from Ezra's time on; therefore it is the policy we will follow herein.

Some cultists today try to distinguish between Judah and Israel. They contend that the Jews rejected Jesus but Israel did not; they attempt to link the British (and Americans) with Israel, genealogically, and to say these are God's Chosen People today. It is obvious that Ezra knew nothing of such a distinction. Many other passages in Ezra call the returnees by the name

of Israel (or Sons of Israel): see 2:2, 59, 70; 3:1, 11; 4:3; 6:16, 21. He even calls them "all Israel" in 6:17, which see. We gather from the N.T. (Rev. 3:9) that God is not pleased with those who call themselves Jews and are not. Or Israelites, or Christians, we presume.

Those who returned from captivity were predominantly of the former tribe of Judah, with a healthy sprinkling of persons from the tribes of Benjamin and Levi. It is reasonable to suppose that many from Israel who were carried away by the Assyrians also joined the returnees from Babylon, particularly in the later expeditions. Even without these, however, the company of Judah contained representatives of the other tribes of Israel, who had not been able to go along with the Northern Kingdom's corrupted religious practices during the period of the Divided Monarchy, and who therefore fled to the Southern Kingdom of Judah long before the Captivity had begun (II Chr. 15:9).

This terminology is continued in the N.T., where Matthew (3:5) tells us that "all Jerusalem and Judea" went up to hear John the Baptist, and Luke (Acts 13:24) speaks of John the Baptist's preaching to Israel; and Paul, of the tribe of Benjamin, still refers to himself as an Israelite (Rom. 11:1).

For an explanation of the meaning of these names, see the Word Studies at the end of this chapter.

The main import of *verse 2* is that the influence of four persons, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai, and Zechariah, was combined to resume the rebuilding of the House of God. One of the events of history that probably affected it was that Darius had become king of Persia, as noted in Ezra 4:24. He was a man of much greater stature and nobility than the previous two; he was more in the mold of Cyrus, a decade earlier.¹ This may have

1. Historians are particularly generous in their estimates of Darius' reign. For a discussion of the comparative merits of these four rulers in Ezra, see Will Durant, *Story of Civilization*, "Our Oriental Heritage," p. 353, where Darius is called the greatest monarch whom Persia ever produced. In the National Geographic Society's *Everyday Life in Bible Times*, p. 291, it is said that at his death he left the greatest empire the world had ever known.

fostered a confidence that they would receive more generous treatment and support in the future.

In *verse 3* Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are both known from, and their names and offices verified by, contemporary Aramaic correspondence.² Tattenai was governor of all the province west and south of the Euphrates River; on a map this triangle of land would include everything from the border of Babylon to the northeastern tip of the Mediterranean Sea, and down to the border of Egypt. The governors of Syria, Samaria (former Israel), and several other lands would be under his supervision. Shethar-bozenai seems to have been his secretary. The nature of their question was apparently not so much censure as a request for information. Governmental systems such as the Persians are always embarrassed if something is accomplished without their direction and control.

The reply, in *verse 4*, indicates the Jews' willingness to reveal the names of their leaders, with no effort to escape the consequences of their actions. The "we" in this passage is a puzzle, since Ezra was not involved at that stage. One suggestion is that this should be amended to "they"; there would be only a slight difference in the Aramaic, and the change could be accounted for as a scribal error. Or Ezra may be copying official accounts here, and the "we" may be the original participants. Or Ezra may be speaking of his nation as including himself; as a sports fan may say of his team, "We won the game." The fact is, the language of the O.T. abounds in such changes in the use of pronouns; the people did not make the precise differentiations which we are accustomed to in English. An example would be Psalm 23, with its switch from third to second person and back to third person again.

Translations differ also on whether the reference to the names of the men is a statement or a question, as in the KJV. If a question, then it would appear to be saying that they gave adequate answer, and then listed the question which they answered. The text indicates that they were asked the name of

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 608.

the person who authorized the construction; they replied with the names of the builders in charge of the reconstruction. Verses 9, 10 will show that both questions were asked by Tattenai.

Verse 5 relates that it was God's approval and power which was basically responsible for the continuation of the work without obstruction. All was being done under His watchful eye. They were determined now to continue their work unless prevented by official action of Darius in written form. Tattenai therefore allowed the work to go on while he continued his investigation.

2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation.

TEXT, 5:6-17

- 6 This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king.
- 7 They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace.
- 8 "Let it be known to the king, that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.
- 9 "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'
- 10 "We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head.
- 11 "And thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

- 12 'But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.
- 13 'However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.
- 14 'And also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor.
- 15 'And he said to him, "Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place."
- 16 'Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet completed.'
- 17 "And now, if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter."

COMMENT

According to *verse 6*, what follows is an actual copy of Tattenai's letter. It is not accusative nor angry; in fact, it praises Israel's workmanship. It appears to be an honest inquiry concerning a situation which had arisen, for which the governor had insufficient instruction to act.

In the KJV, the "Apharsachites" are mentioned. The KJV has a similar name at Ezra 4:9. Some see this as the name of an unknown tribe. The term is translated "officials" in the NASB. The problem here stems from the fact that the Hebrew alphabet has no separate capitals, therefore it is always difficult to tell

when such a word is a proper noun and should be transliterated, and when it is a description or title and should be translated. However, in the Hebrew text the word has the definite article, which usually means it is to be translated. Thus, "the officials" is preferred, as in the NASB.

Verse 7 gives the heading and salutation of the letter. The phrase, "All peace," is interesting; it is obviously an abbreviated form of a longer greeting such as, "I wish for you all the things that are included in the word, peace," or even, "In all your realm, may there be peace." It may have the force of our "Heartiest greetings."³ The salutation, "Peace," has been used before (4:17), without the additional "all." It has been called the most beautiful word in the Hebrew language. Its Greek equivalent appears in the salutation of almost every letter in the N.T.: in fact, more often than its usual twin, "Grace"! For a fuller treatment of its meaning, see the Word Studies which follow.

Verse 8 states the problem which caused the letter to be written: the resumption of construction on the House of God. A question arises about the placement of the adjective: is it the house which they called great, or is it God? To some, it seems more likely that foreigners would speak of the great temple, instead of the great (Hebrew) God.⁴

But the Temple was not an especially large building. Its dimensions, about 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high (I Ki. 7:2), would provide floor space equal to a basketball gym seating a few hundred spectators, though it would be quite a bit taller. Many ancient buildings, particularly kings' palaces, were much larger than that. On the other hand, even these foreigners could acknowledge the greatness of the God who, from the testimony of the Jews, had influenced the mighty Cyrus to command the reconstruction of His Temple.

A description of the progress on the building follows. The basic material was stone. The wood beams probably were laid

3. Luck; *op. cit.*, p. 40.

4. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 610.

across to support additional floors and the roof. The writer also speaks with commendation for the quality and dispatch of the construction work.

Verse 9 shows their dilemma and repeats their question from verse 3. Rulers must be in charge of everything in their realm; something was going on without their leadership; therefore they must inquire into the authorization back of it.

The purpose of *verse 10* was to demonstrate to their superiors in Persia that they were faithfully looking after Persian interests, and were prepared to provide information about guilty persons if any crime was being committed.

In *verse 11 to 16*, the letter conveys the answer which the Jews gave to justify their actions. Three reasons are cited.

First, their action was a service to the Supreme God over all: heaven and earth (verse 11). The Persians would understand the reference to the God of Heaven; they used the phrase frequently themselves.

Secondly, verse 11 continues, they were only repeating what one of their great kings (Solomon) had previously done. (The "thirdly" is in verse 13.)

Verse 12 is an answer to an unspoken theological question: if their God is supreme, why had He permitted His Temple to be destroyed in the first place, and made necessary the work they were doing at present? Their answer, that God had become angry with them and was punishing them for their sins, shows that they had indeed come to believe the message of their prophets (cf. Amos 2:4, 5 for example), which had seemed so futile when it was given.

Verse 13 gives the information for which the letter seeks confirmation or disproof. Thirdly, then (see verse 11), their action was claimed to be backed by the authority of a decree issued by Cyrus.

Verse 14 repeats the information of Ezra 1:7, 8 regarding the temple utensils. Sheshbazzar is named as the governor at the time. Now, and in verse 16, we hear once more the name of Sheshbazzar.

Verse 15 records the instructions that Cyrus gave to Sheshbazzar about the disposition of the utensils; this detail is lacking in the first chapter.

With *verse 16* the answer of the Jews is concluded. Sheshbazzar, we note, is credited with laying the foundations of the House of God. Yet Ezra 3:8-10 credits Zerubbabel with this act. Are these the same person, or are they two persons who successively held the same office? This is the last mention of either one in the book of Ezra; all the other references to Zerubbabel in Scripture (in Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah) recite incidents that occurred earlier; Sheshbazzar is mentioned nowhere else in the Scriptures. So at this point we have seen all that the Bible tells on the subject.

Every reference to Sheshbazzar has been in Babylonian or Persian surroundings. His name is itself an indication of Babylonian influence; it is a Babylonian name. In Ezra 1:8, 11 he is placed in charge of the returnees by Cyrus before they leave Babylonia. In Ezra 5:14, 16 his work is described in a letter to the Persian officials.

On the other hand, every reference to Zerubbabel is in Jewish surroundings. The name itself is Hebrew. He is listed in the genealogies of Hebrew kings in I Chr. 3:19. Ezra (2:12; 3:2, 8; 4:2, 3; 5:2) identifies him with the return to Jerusalem and the leadership in the reconstruction of the Temple. Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah also deal with the return and reconstruction from the Jewish point of view, and use only the name, Zerubbabel. Further, there is no passage in which both names appear together. Since the Jewish account of the laying of the foundations uses the name, Zerubbabel, and since the letter addressed to the Persians and written by a Gentile uses the name Sheshbazzar in describing the same event, it seems logical that these are but the Babylonian and Hebrew names of the same person.

Verse 16 closes with the information that the Temple was not yet completed; in the next chapter, verse 15, its completion will be reported.

In *verse 17*, Tattenai closes his letter with the request that

the government files be opened and search be made to see if Cyrus had indeed given such an order to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. Since it involved people who had been held by the Babylonians and who were being freed from bondage to them, therefore the logical place to look for the letter would be in the Persian offices in Babylon, which was one of the cities from which the Persians ruled their farflung empire.

WORD STUDIES

PEACE: Aramaic, Shelam; Hebrew, Shalom: verse 7. The main idea is wholeness; the verb form is used of being whole, sound, safe, secure, or perfect. Some verses where it is used emphasize health; some, completion; some, peace or friendship; and others, prosperity or reward. Thus the whole round of things, physical and spiritual, that comprise one's well-being, are included in this word.

JERUSALEM: the name was possibly derived from a phrase meaning either "Possession of Peace" or "Foundation of Peace." Some also suggest that the first part of the word may come from the word, "light." Abraham's home town of Ur had this as its name, possibly from the light of many windows, or of fires where people gathered to form a community. It became the word for "city"; coupled with the word just discussed above, it would mean, "City of Peace."

JEW: Yehudi: the adjective form of **JUDAH:** Yehudah. It means, "celebrated, lauded, praised" (of God).

ISRAEL: "Warrior (soldier) of God." The first three letters mean to set in a row: hence, when used of people, to strive or contend (as rows of soldiers do). The ending, El, is the title, God. The person who would set troops in rows would be their chief, or prince: hence the name can mean, "Prince of God," or, "God is Chief."

In two locations (Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26; Isa. 44:2), Israel is called by a nickname: **JESHURUN**. In Israel's early alphabet

both names would begin with the same letters. The word, Jeshurun, means, "Little straight ones." There may be a contrast between the "straightness" in this word and the "crookedness" in the name, Jacob, which follows.

JACOB: the basic meaning is "heel." It was used of "one who took another by the heel" to trip him up in order to "supplant" him. Since the heel is where there is a crook in the foot, it also meant "crooked, deceiver, one who defrauds." Also, since the heel is the last part of the body to leave a spot, it meant, "end, wages, recompense." So Jacob, who took his brother by the heel to supplant him, became a deceiver and eventually received the natural recompense: he himself was deceived. After this happened, he wrestled with God's messenger and was "straightened out." Perhaps the O.T. shows us similarities between the man and the nation which descended from him: first in their relations with God, and then in their history.

HEBREW: this word comes from the preposition, "beyond," appearing for example in Ezra 4:10; hence it describes the people who came from beyond (the Euphrates, Abraham's original home; Gen. 14:13). The name is derived also from Eber (Gen. 10:24f.) who was one of Abraham's ancestors. The verb form means "to pass over"; appropriately enough, God had allowed them to pass over the Red Sea and the Jordan River in going from Egypt to the Promised Land. Now once more they were coming from beyond the Euphrates.

The name is used interchangeably with "Israel," except that the term, "Hebrew," appears to be the name by which they were known to foreigners, and "Israel" was the name which they called themselves.

The last two terms, Jacob and Hebrew, do not appear in this chapter directly, but are discussed here to give a complete picture.

SUMMARY

After years of inactivity, work on the Temple was resumed when two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, showed this to be

God's will. This raised questions among the next echelon of officials between them and Persia. The Jewish builders did not back down, but insisted that they had authority from the highest Persian ruler for their action, and that their subjection to the Supreme God further required it. A check of official documents was therefore initiated, while the construction work continued.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Identify the following persons, showing how they were related to the reconstruction of the Temple:

1. Cyrus
2. Darius
3. Haggai
4. Nebuchadnezzar
5. Sheshbazzar
6. Shethar-bozenai
7. Tattenai
8. Zechariah

Chapter Six

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. How did the building that Cyrus authorized compare with the one which Solomon had built?
2. Can you find anything which Darius did, which Cyrus had not done?
3. What do you see in the story that reflects the religious training which was maintained during the captivity?
4. How did the sacrifices compare with those made at the dedication of the first temple?
5. What feasts or offerings are particularly mentioned, and how were they appropriate for the occasion?
6. What help did God give them in this enterprise?

OUTLINE

- D. The Temple is completed and dedicated.
1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction was found (vss. 1-5).
 2. Darius consequently issued a decree directing the construction (vss. 6-12).
 3. The work was completed and the building was dedicated (vss. 13-18).
 4. Services were resumed, especially the Passover (vss. 19-22).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

D. The Temple is completed and dedicated.

1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction is found.

TEXT, Ezra 6:1-5

- 1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.
- 2 And in Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum—

- 3 "In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits;
- 4 with three layers of huge stones, and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.
- 5 'And also let the gold and silver utensils of the temple of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

COMMENT

Verse 1 speaks of Darius' directing the search for the document in question at the government library in Babylon, as requested in 5:17. It was not an unusual place to look for Persian records; here the "Cylinder of Cyrus" was found by recent archeologists. Nevertheless, their search was unproductive.

The fact that the archives were kept in the treasury building is characteristic of the times; the temples themselves often served the functions of our libraries in preserving ancient volumes, of our county courthouses in storing legal documents, and also of our banks in guarding the government funds and in making loans to the needy.

Verse 2 gives the location where the document was found: at Ecbatana (Achmetha). Cyrus had divided his time each year between three capitals, the one in Media being located in Ecbatana, the one in Persia at Susa, and one in the city of Babylon.

What follows in *verses 3-5* is either an extract or the full official written version of Cyrus' original order. Ezra 1:2-4 probably gives the oral version which was announced in Babylonian cities where the Hebrew captives lived.

Verse 3 gives the proposed dimensions of the reconstructed temple; it would have been twice as high, and three times as wide as Solomon's original (I Ki. 6:2). Since this is much larger than what was actually constructed, these figures must have been intended as maximums. Its size would have been most imposing: 90 ft. high, and 90 ft. wide; the length is not stated, but would presumably be double the width. The length of the former building would have become the width of the new.

Verse 4 duplicates the details of construction of the original edifice given in I Ki. 6:36. Work was to be financed from Persian government funds: this detail apparently was never carried out.

Verse 5 relates the order for the restitution of the temple furnishings, which the first returning captives brought with them (1:7-11). Darius would honor this decree of Cyrus, for reasons explained in Esther 1:19.

2. Darius' decree ordering the reconstruction.

TEXT, 6:6-12

- 6 "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from there.
- 7 "Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.
- 8 "Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.
- 9 "And whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail,

- 10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.
- 11 "And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.
- 12 "And may the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence."

COMMENT

Verse 6 begins abruptly, suggesting that the introduction of Darius' letter has been omitted, to get immediately to the issue. In effect, Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are commanded in *verses 6 and 7* not to interfere. The phrase, "keep away from there," apparently was an Aramaic legal formula for such occasions.¹

Verse 8 specifies that tax money is to be provided from the general area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River to pay the total cost. We may wonder why a Persian ruler would give first priority to this project; verse ten will furnish an answer.

Verse 9 lists the various items for Israel's sacrifices that were also to be furnished daily and financed from the public treasury. Evidently they had inquired of Israel's priests what would be needed. Since every day was to begin and end with a burnt offering (Num. 28:3-6), this need was specifically anticipated. Wine was a frequent part of offerings (Ex. 29:40f.; Lev. 23:13). And so was oil; it is mentioned particularly at the anointing of priests for service (Lev. 8:30). Incidentally, Darius is known to have ordered a similar list of supplies for the Hebrew community in Egypt.²

1. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 50.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 618.

This list is notable in that it corresponds exactly with instructions in Leviticus: bulls, rams, lambs (Lev. 1:5, 10), accompanied by wheat and salt (Lev. 2:1).

In *verse 10*, two reasons are given for Darius' action. For the benefit of the community of Israel, the offerings would be pleasing to their God. For the benefit of the Persians, the priests were asked to pray for the king and his sons, that is, the total officialdom. This would not have been considered unreasonable; Jeremiah (29:7) had urged prayers for the Babylonian rulers when many of Israel's citizens were under this authority. Paul recommends the same course of action in the N.T. (I Tim. 2:1, 2) respecting Roman rulers. The surprise is that the mighty Persian ruler would request a handful of subjugated, impoverished people whom he was befriending to pray to their strange God for him!

Verse 11 threatens any violator with painful death, and the reduction of his home to an outhouse. This comes as a shock if we have become acclimated to expecting kindness from the Persians. The Assyrians and Babylonians were noted for their sadism, including the impaling of victims on pointed posts to induce lingering death; but the Persians followed a policy of benevolence toward their enemies to encourage rapid surrender. But this is another matter, having to do with the enforcing of justice.

It is obvious from Persian accounts that they were acquainted with both impalement and crucifixion as a means of punishing criminals. Herodotus,³ the Greek who recorded Persian history, speaks of Persian crucifixions, though they are like those with which Julius Caesar⁴ later punished pirates, in that the victims were first killed and then affixed to crosses.

In *verse 12* Darius invokes a curse in the name of Israel's God on anyone who would change his decree so that the temple would be destroyed. Dr. Ironside⁵ mentions that this curse was

3. *Great Books of The Western World*, Vol. VI, p. 123.

4. Suetonius, *The Lives of The Twelve Caesars*, p. 48.

5. Ironside, *ibid*, p. 55.

fulfilled in the case of Antiochus Epiphanes, of Herod (who altered the Temple), and of the Romans in AD 70. However, there is no need to insist on a literal fulfilment here; after all, the curse is only the pronouncement of the pagan Darius. (Nevertheless, the same idea is expressed in Gen. 12:3.) We may ask, has God bound Himself to carry out the curse pronounced in His name by a pagan? It is noteworthy that when Solomon dedicated the previous Temple, he recognized that God might destroy it because of the people's sins, and Solomon did not pray for the destruction in turn of its destroyers: only for Israel's restoration if they returned to God (I Ki. 8).

The mention in *verse 12* that God "has caused His name to dwell there" may be supported by Deut. 12:5, 11 and I Ki. 5:5. Here again the "name" means more than a word written on the front of a building; it is a promise of His personal presence.

3. The completion of the building, and its dedication

TEXT, 6:13-18

- 13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent.
- 14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.
- 15 And this temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.
- 16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.
- 17 And they offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of tribes of Israel.

- 18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

COMMENT

Verse 13 shows the result which Darius' decree had made: it was meticulously obeyed.

Verse 14, like the dedication plate on a new post office, lists all the people responsible for the construction, from the God of Israel who commanded it, through three administrations of kings, two prophets, Israel's governor and high priest, and down to the elders. The name of Artaxerxes raises questions. Surely this is not the Artaxerxes of 4:7, 23, who held up construction!

One alternative is to see a reference to the Artaxerxes of the next chapter (7:12, 21), whose cooperation gave life to the ceremonies in the new building. So Ezra may include him here because the restoration would have been incomplete without his contribution.

Another possibility is that all three names may be different titles for Darius.⁶

But the first idea is not impossible; it was a fact of history that a part of the construction had taken place during his rule, before he blocked its continuation. His being mentioned out of sequence and placed last may be just as an afterthought, suggesting his little importance to the project.

Verse 15 gives the date for its completion. Adar would be the twelfth month, about our February-March. Construction has occupied four and a half years.

In *verse 16* the description of the dedication begins. There are no tears as in 3:12: only joy. Dedications after extensive repairs had also been conducted by Josiah (II Chr. 30:17) and Hezekiah (II-Chr. 35:11).

6. *Anchor Bible*, p. 50.

Verse 17 describes two kinds of sacrifice. The one for dedication would be the burnt offering (Lev. 1), in which all of the edible meat of the animals would be consumed in fire, thus representing total consecration. This offering was always appropriate at dedication services.

The other, the sin offering, would be appropriate as they draw the curtain over the long years of suffering in exile because of their sins, as they celebrate God's forgiveness. We can't help noticing the number twelve, a goat for each of the tribes of Israel (cf. Num. 7). Again it is obvious that they regarded themselves as the remnant of all the tribes. It was an appropriate gesture, for this was the first time in almost four centuries, since the division of the nation under Rehoboam and Jeroboam, that all Israel had been able to worship together in one temple.

Admittedly, Elijah had called attention to the twelve tribes which had received God's word, when he built his altar of twelve stones (I Ki. 18:31). And some seventy-eight years before the incident recorded here, Israel had rejoiced together (Ezra 3:1-3, 11). But in neither case were they worshiping in a temple.

The 100 bulls, 200 rams, and 400 lambs (total 700) of the burnt offering may be contrasted by Solomon's 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (total, 144,000) in I Ki. 8:63.

Also, there was no mention of fire descending from heaven, as at Solomon's dedication service (II Chr. 7:1, 2). But the people may have reflected on encouraging words from Haggai (2:9) that the temple would be more glorious in the future than it had ever been in the past.

Verse 18 witnesses the reinstatement of the priests and Levites to their duties in the House of God, as specified by Moses (Num. 3:6, 10; 8:9).

With verse 18, this Aramaic portion of Ezra ends.

4. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread observed

TEXT, 6:19-22

19 And the exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month.

- 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.
- 21 And the sons of Israel who returned from the exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover.
- 22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

COMMENT

Verse 19 takes us to the next major event at the Temple: the observance of the Passover in the following month, after the pattern of Ex. 12. We see the appropriateness of the feast for the occasion as it is a reminder of the event which gave birth to their nation; now they were celebrating its rebirth.

Verse 20 reports a deviation from previous practice relating to the Passover: the Levites now slaughtered the lambs as a service to the people and even the priests.

In *verse 21*, it is not clear whether the sons of Israel and those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations are the same or two different groups. This could refer to Israel and to the Gentile proselytes or else Jewish backsliders. Or it could be commenting on the fact that Israel was now at last cleansed from her impure associations with the heathen. Since the second group joined the first, to seek Israel's God, it would be more reasonable to see here a host of foreigners, similar to the mixed multitude (Ex. 12:38) when Israel left Egypt, who joined with them now in the worship of the true God.

In *verse 22*, the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread followed and was a continuation of the Passover. As the removal of all

leaven from their houses symbolized the purging out of all their old sins, so now they were wiping the slate clean of heathen involvement going all the way back to the Canaanites and the conquest under Joshua, and which had reached its logical end in their being led away by foreigners.

The prayer of Solomon (I Ki. 8:50) was now answered, as God turned the heart of the king in sympathy toward them.

One problem remains: what is the king of Assyria doing here? This may be a way of referring to the king of the Persian empire, which had conquered the conquerors of Assyria and whose empire now succeeded and encompassed theirs. This loose kind of reference was common in that day, so it is possible. But why would the author choose the confusing term, king of Assyria, in place of the simple term which he had been using previously, i.e., the king of Persia? It may be a deliberate effort to remind the reader of that series of events that began with the Assyrian invasion of Israel, and that the entire era had now come to a welcome close. What one king of Assyria had begun to destroy, God caused another king over the land of Assyria to repair.

One further comment on the chapter: note the joy in verses 16 and 22. This we are assured was the result of their keeping the Lord's commands, and will be the result equally of our attention to His Word.

WORD STUDIES

DARIUS: Preserver, conservator. His name very aptly describes the character of his reign. Cyrus had brought the nation to greatness, and Darius preserved and extended that which Cyrus had begun.

BURNT OFFERING: that which ascends. (The base of this word appears in the second component of the name of the Israeli airline, EL AL.) Two ideas may be present: (1) the total offering ascended in smoke to God, or (2) the priest ascended to the altar with the offering.

PASSOVER: (Pasach: the word, "Paschal," comes from this.) To leap over, or pass over (a stream, for example). When God passed over the doors of the Israelites, they were spared, or delivered (Ex. 12:13, 27). Therefore the word almost always refers to this sparing or deliverance.

UNLEAVENED: (The word, "matzoth," comes from this): the word imitates the sound of sucking something out with relish: hence, something sweet, i.e., unleavened or unfermented.

SUMMARY

Darius initiated a search that turned up Cyrus' original order for the rebuilding of the Temple with government funds. He therefore ordered the co-operation of the officials in the total Beyond-Euphrates area, of which Israel was a part, in collecting funds and in permitting the reconstruction.

Violators were to be punished with the full severity of which the law was capable. All ranks of leaders in Israel, religious and secular, institutional (priests) and individual (prophets), got behind the project and speeded it to completion in a little more than four years. With joy the citizens of Israel celebrated at the dedication ceremonies; sin offerings, and renewal of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. All of these were done to follow the pattern of worship handed down by Moses.

Because this chapter marks the end of an era, some regard it as the end of the seventy years of captivity prophesied by Jeremiah. The beginning would be counted from 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was finally overthrown and the last of the captives carried off.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was Cyrus involved in the Temple's restoration?
2. Where was Cyrus' decree found?
3. How had Cyrus wanted the work to be financed?
4. How long did it take to complete the work?
5. Whose writings guided them in their sacrifices?

Chapter Seven

The one theme which runs through chapter seven is the qualifications, or credentials, of the man Ezra. A new age is being born. As in the days of Moses, or David, or Elijah, or Jesus, attention must be focused on the question of legitimacy, or authority, of the new leader or new forms. Of course the forms need no confirmation: they are simply those from the time of Moses, being reinstituted; but the man must be subjected to scrutiny.

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Ezra put so much emphasis on his credentials? Who would have questioned these?
2. Why do you suppose Ezra wanted to go on this mission?
3. What qualifications did he have for the assignment?
4. What help did he get from God?

OUTLINE

Through chapters 7 - 10 we see Ezra's involvement in the restoration of Israel and its religious forms.

III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (7:1 — 10:44)

A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.

1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing (vss. 1-10).
2. Authorization from King Artaxerxes (vss. 11-26).
3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance (vss. 27-28).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (7:1 — 10:44)

A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.

1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing.

TEXT, 7:1-10

- 1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah,

- son of Hilkiah,
 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub,
 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth,
 4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki,
 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.
 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.
 7 And some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.
 8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.
 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.
 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

COMMENT

In the fifty-seven-year break between the close of chapter six (515 B.C.) and the beginning of chapter seven (458 B.C.), the events of the book of Esther have taken place. Israel has been spared once more, and has responded by introducing the Feast of Purim.

Verse 1 takes up the story then with Artaxerxes (Longimanus), son of the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. This is a different Artaxerxes from the one mentioned in 4:7. Ezra for the first time is mentioned as a participant of the events in the book. In this section he lists at least six qualifications or credentials which authorized his action. (1) In verses 1 through 5 he traces his ancestry back to Aaron, from whom all priests must be

descended. Like many of the genealogies of the O.T., it included only the more significant names; there are frequent omissions. By reversing the order of the names in Ezra 7:1-5 and comparing them with those in I Chr. 6:7-14, it will be seen that Ezra includes one name not in Chronicles, and Chronicles has seven names not in Ezra. "Son of" therefore often indicated "descended of" in the language of their time.

For example, in verse 1 Ezra is called the son of Seraiah. Seraiah is mentioned as the high priest during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, several generations before (II Ki. 25:6-10, 18-21). Ezra was a priest; this is specifically stated in verse 11, and in 10:10. Josephus¹ calls him the principal priest among the Jews in Babylonia, which is called Babylon in our next verse. It is to be observed, however, that the Bible text never calls him the high priest; the holder of that office is not named.

(2) *Verse 6* speaks of his personal skill in handling the law of Moses. This is the first mention of a scribe in the Bible: an order which Ezra may have helped to create. It would be his function not simply to make copies of the law, but to be an expositor of its meaning. The scribes are frequently mentioned in the N.T.

We note also the assertion that God had given the law to Moses.

(3) *Verse 6* continues by testifying that his authority came from the king, who approved his request for permission to go.

(4) *Verse 6* then adds the information that he had the favor of God Himself, and this had caused the king to approve of him.

(5) *Verses 7 to 9* say that he passed the pragmatic test: he succeeded. The group which accompanied him is described in *verse 7* as containing much the same kinds of people as in the first band, in chapter two.

Verse 8 states the time of their arrival, just four months after their departure as stated in *verse 9*. This was a reasonable amount of time for an expedition made up of people of various ages, although it is reported that merchants would make the trip in twenty-five days.² Total distance was about 900 miles, which

1. *Antiquities*, XI, 5.1, p. 271.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 641.

would indicate a speed averaging nine miles a day.³

(6) In *verse 10*, there is the further authority that comes from adequate preparation. Three things Ezra had set his heart (i.e., mind, as also in vs. 27)⁴ to do, and these are models for any who would serve God today. He determined to begin intellectually by studying God's law. Added to that was action: to obey, or do, or practice it. Then he would share it with others; he would teach these statutes and ordinances to his brethren.

2. The letter of Artaxerxes

TEXT, 7:11-26

- 11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:
- 12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now
- 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.
- 14 "Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand,
- 15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem,
- 16 with all the silver and gold which you shall find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem;
- 17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls,

3. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 72.

4. In the O.T., the heart thinks and makes decisions: the feeling comes from the abdomen.

rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their libations and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.

- 18 "And whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God.
- 19 "Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem.
- 20 "And the rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.
- 21 "And I, even I King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently,
- 22 even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.
- 23 "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, lest there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.
- 24 "We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God.
- 25 "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them.
- 26 "And whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment."

COMMENT

Verse 11 introduces us to Artaxerxes' letter giving Ezra his authority. Ezra is identified in full, by both of his positions, as a priest and a scribe.

Verse 12 is the salutation of the letter. Verses 12 through 26 are in Aramaic, indicating again that Ezra has inserted an official document. Artaxerxes is called king of kings, a title he may have borrowed from the Babylonians (Dan. 2:37).

Verses 13 and 14 are the heart of the letter, declaring authorization for Ezra to go, and to be accompanied by as many as desired, of his brethren.

Verse 14 has a reference to the structure of the government; the seven counsellors are also referred to in Esther 1:14.

Verses 15 to 20 portray the articles which they were to transport back to their homeland. *Verse 15* emphasizes that the king and his counsellors made a healthy contribution; this is another recognition by the state of the value which religion has in maintaining a wholesome society.

Verse 16 adds to this the free-will offerings particularly of their remaining brethren in Babylon, plus what they could find throughout the province: probably contributions from Babylonian individuals and businesses as a gesture of good will to these people who had been their neighbors for the past few generations.

Verse 17 recommends that they purchase necessary materials for sacrifice; the king could have learned from Ezra what would be acceptable; the list resembles that in 6:9.

Verse 18 gives them some leeway to make personal decisions, in harmony with the pleasure of their God, in the use of any superfluous funds for the decoration of the Temple. There is always a place for a little extra flourish in worship.

Verse 19 specifies that these articles must be faithfully delivered in Jerusalem.

Verse 20 gives authorization to call upon the royal treasury for any additional funds which they may need. The royal treasury would belong to the king himself; thus they are promised access to the highest government source of all.

Verses 21 to 24 give instructions to all the treasurers of the surrounding provinces to give Ezra their co-operation, within certain financial limits as specified.

The 100 silver talents of *verse 22* would come to a weight of

650 pounds;⁵ the 100 kors of wheat would be 1167 bushels; the 100 baths of wine, 900 gallons; the same amount of oil; and don't spare the salt!

These governments would have a ready store of such supplies to assist the travelers because much of their taxes were collected in produce rather than money.

Verse 23 explains the reason for this generosity: the Persian ruler would hesitate to incur the wrath of any deity lest his kingdom suffer the consequences. In fact, "Egyptian records reveal both Persian interest in the sacrificial cultus of their subjects and Persian generosity in supporting it."⁶

It was also their policy to try to keep their subject peoples contented, to assure the continued peace and prosperity of their empire. It may, indeed, be that God approved and blessed this policy, for "In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, B.C. 458, the tide of success turned for Persia against the Athenians in Egypt."⁷

Verse 24 adds the further support to the cause of religion that all of Israel's religious officials be totally exempted from taxation.

The last part of the letter, *verses 25 and 26*, were addressed directly to Ezra.

In *verse 25*, he was to be guided by the wisdom (i.e., laws) of God in appointing rulers and judges throughout his country. In this way Ezra was placed over all the Jews, that is, those who knew the law of his God. He could also instruct those who were ignorant⁸ of these laws; either he was given authority to seek to recover all Jews who had backslidden and had forsaken the law, or to proselytize all others within their country's borders who had other religions. In many ways these scriptures describe the Persian government as one of the most generous and enlightened of ancient times.

Verse 26 gave Ezra the right to employ the full weight of

5. These figures are taken from *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 629.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ellicott's Commentary on The Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p. 473.

8. See "Word Studies," end of this chapter.

government to punish all who violated either the religious or the civil law. The description which we have of Ezra's character suggests that he would be reluctant to use such powers.

3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance

TEXT, 7:27, 28

- 27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem,
28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

COMMENT

In *verse 27* Ezra pours out his heart in gratitude to God for inciting the king to do so much for the Temple at Jerusalem. Note the personal tone of these words!

Verse 28 continues Ezra's thanks, now for God's graciousness to him personally. Because the hand of God was upon him to bless (for the opposite expression, where the hand of God is against someone, see Ruth 1:13), Ezra was strengthened and encouraged to lead the band of returnees back to their homeland.

The reference to leading men from Israel is taken to be a designation of laymen, as opposed to Levites:⁹ see Ezra 2:2, 7:13. The next chapter will begin with this distinction.

9. H. E. Ryle, D.D., *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra and Nehemiah," p. 98.

WORD STUDIES

SCRIBE: (vs. 6): to scratch, scrape, write; thus a secretary or scribe; then it became a designation of one skilled in the sacred books and in the law.

TEACH (vs. 10): Lamad (“Talmud” comes from this word). To beat with a rod, chastise, hence to train, teach, accustom. It is the name of the twelfth letter of the Hebrew or Aramaic alphabets, and in its early form it looked like a whip. This is apparently a recognition that to be taught, one must often be willing to accept some discomfort and discipline.

TEACH (vs. 25): Yeda: to cause to see, perceive, understand, know. Our word, “idea,” may come from it.

IGNORANT (vs. 25): not to know (see above). Some are ignorant because they have had no opportunity to know. Of course, some have rejected the opportunity to know (Hos. 4:6). One who simply does not know is an excellent prospect for teaching. This would be a good description of Gentiles, in the O.T.

(This is a different word from that used of “sins of ignorance” [Lev. 4:2], which indicates wandering or straying unconsciously.)

SUMMARY

Ezra chose to go up to Israel from Babylonia, taking more of the exiles with him. He was qualified as a leader since he was a priest, descended from Aaron. He had further prepared himself by study and practice, that he might be a leader of his people. God gave him favor before the king, who recognized his capabilities, approved his mission, and contributed substantially to the fund for supplies and furnishings for the Temple. Ezra proved his qualifications because the trip was successful; he brought the returning exiles, with the contributions from both the government and private sources, to Israel.

King Artaxerxes furnished Ezra with a letter permitting the transportation of all these materials, and ordering the full

co-operation of the neighboring tribes in the province in providing supplies for the expedition. Ezra is then put in charge of selecting officials and judges to govern Israel and to teach his religion throughout the community. Ezra expressed his gratitude to God, whose will he saw being done in all of this.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the king who commissioned Ezra to go to Israel?
2. List the three goals that Ezra had set for his life.
3. What responsibilities of government were placed upon Ezra?
4. What two reasons did Ezra have to be thankful to God?

Chapter Eight

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the figures in vss. 3-14 are round numbers or exact numbers? How many do not end in a zero?
2. Do you think Ezra would suggest (vs. 22) that the church rely less on government help, and more on God's care? Are the two always mutually exclusive?
3. Note the meticulous care that Ezra takes to organize everything, and to put others in charge of all valuables. Whom was he doing this for?
4. How was God's help apparent to them in making this trip?

OUTLINE

In chapter 8, details of the trip are given: the leaders of the returnees are listed, along with the treasures which they brought with them.

- B. Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
1. The list of exiles returning with Ezra (vss. 1-14).
 2. Addition of Levites to the company (vss. 15-20).
 3. Leave-taking ceremonies (vss. 21-23).
 4. The treasures, and how they were handled (vss. 24-30).
 5. The journey, and arrival at Jerusalem (vss. 31-36).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- B. Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
1. The list of returnees is given.

TEXT, 8:1-14

- 1 Now these are the heads of their fathers' households and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes:
- 2 of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush;

- 3 of the sons of Shecaniah who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah and with him 150 males who were in the genealogical list;
- 4 of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah and 200 males with him;
- 5 of the sons of Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel and 300 males with him;
- 6 and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan and 50 males with him;
- 7 and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah and 70 males with him;
- 8 and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael and 80 males with him;
- 9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel and 218 males with him;
- 10 and of the sons of Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah and 160 males with him;
- 11 and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai and 28 males with him;
- 12 and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan and 110 males with him;
- 13 and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, these being their names, Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah and 60 males with them;
- 14 and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud and 70 males with them.

COMMENT

Verse 1 states the intention of listing only the names of heads of households, and identifying the families, or clans, from which they were descended.

Verse 2 begins the list with three persons in a special category: priests and royalty. Note the contrast with the list in chapter two, which ended rather than began with priests.

Two lines of priests were descended from Aaron: one through his third son, Eleazar, and his grandson, Phinehas: Ezra was

included in this line (7:1-5). The other was through Eleazar's younger brother, Ithamar. Both lines had a representative here.

Royalty was represented by a descendant of David.

Although no numbers are given, there were obviously other members in these three families in this first group. Twelve other priests are alluded to, two by name, in 8:24.

Verses 3-14 apparently name the "leading men from Israel" mentioned in 7:28. Twelve groups are included, possibly as reminders of the twelve tribes, though not necessarily descended from them; no effort is made to link each with a separate specific tribe. While the names of individuals are new, all but one of the clans (i.e., Shelomith) are among those mentioned in Ezra 2:1-15. The total of all the families is 1496, plus Ezra and the three names of verse two.

2. Levites are added to the company.

TEXT, 8:15-20

- 15 Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days; and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there.
- 16 So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers.
- 17 And I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what to say to Iddo and his brothers, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, that is, to bring ministers to us for the house of our God.
- 18 And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men;
- 19 and Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men;
- 20 and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name.

COMMENT

Verse 15 names the staging area: the river to Ahava. While its precise location cannot be identified, it may have been a canal close by Babylon, possibly at a fork in the trade routes leading north and west. Here the Israelite worshipers may have been accustomed to meeting, for such sites are mentioned elsewhere. Psalm 137:1, for example, is descriptive of Israel's days in captivity:

"By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion."

Much later, a Jewish traveling preacher far from home sought out a riverside, supposing he would find others of his religious background there; and yes, there was such a faithful company gathered for prayer; and among them was Lydia (Ac. 16:13).

A look around the encampment uncovered a startling fact: no one was there of the Levites, those assigned by God to be servants in the Temple. There were only people and priests, in the verses above. Ezra, as a priest, would be painfully conscious of this omission.

Verse 16 gives his solution to the problem: leaders were chosen to seek out recruits. Only two of the names are the same as those in vss. 3-14, showing that these were farther down in the ranks of leadership.

In *verse 17*, these leaders are sent to Casiphia (location unknown) where a number of Levites and temple servants resided. The verse is a reminder that "minister" is another word for "servant."

Verses 18-20 tell the result: the names of leaders, and number of those who decided to accompany them (total, 258). We may wonder why this group of people would be willing to cut themselves off from their homes and surroundings so abruptly, and how they could start off on a four-month trip with just a few days' notice. There would certainly be job security for them in employment at the Temple. There is always the basic desire to do something pleasing to God. While it may not be easy for

everyone to be ready to travel at a moment's notice, there are a few in any society who are capable of this. Those who were willing to go are certainly worthy of our attention and admiration.

Mahli, in *verse 18*, is the son of Merari, and the grandson of Levi according to Ex. 6:19. This demonstrates again how the term, "son," was used in genealogies.

Verse 19, oddly enough, does use the name of Merari, which was omitted between Levi and Mahli in the previous verse.

Verse 20: the order of the temple servants, assigned to the tribe of Levi by David, has been mentioned before in 2:43.

3. Leave-taking ceremonies were conducted.

TEXT, 8:21-23

- 21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.
- 22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him."
- 23 So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.

COMMENT

Verse 21 mentions that they fasted as a mark of their humility, in seeking God's care for their journey. Here we have definite mention that children were included in their band.

Verse 22 states Ezra's reticence to ask the king for any help further than what was already given. The reason expressed is that they had spoken of the great power of God, and to ask for

a guard would imply distrust in God's power to protect. Had Ezra opened his mouth rashly, and now found himself too embarrassed and too proud to seek necessary military protection? Was he forcing God to go to unusual measures to protect them? If this was the case, it would sound much like tempting God. It may well be that his action rose also out of a distrust of any military escort which may have been furnished; some have been known to be as thieving as any marauders they might encounter on the road. At any rate, Ezra's trust in God was greater than any trust in human help. If he had to choose between one or the other, we would judge he made the wiser choice.

Verse 23 indicates that God confirmed this decision of Ezra's.

4. They took along certain treasures, which were entrusted to priests on the journey and were delivered safely at Jerusalem.

TEXT, 8:24-30

- 24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers;
- 25 and I weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel present there, had offered.
- 26 Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents, and gold talents,
- 27 and 20 gold bowls, worth 1,000 darics; and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold.
- 28 Then I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the utensils are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.
- 29 "Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leading priests, the Levites, and the heads of the fathers' households of Israel at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD."
- 30 So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

COMMENT

Verse 24. Ezra sets a good example for preachers by putting all the valuables into the hands of others (more than one; twelve in fact) to assure their safe arrival, to avoid being suspected of dishonesty, or as a matter of record to give account to his Persian superiors. His choice of priests as the custodians may have been governed by several factors. If anyone were trustworthy, they would be. The articles were all for the use of the priests later on; they might as well have them in their keeping now. Also, he may have felt that marauders would be more hesitant to attack priests than ordinary citizens.

Verse 25 repeats the information of 7:15f., that the valuables were contributed by the king, his counsellors, and the people from Israel who lived in Babylon.

Verses 26, 27 give the amount and description of these valuables. *The Living Bible* converts these into American money: \$1,300,000 in silver; \$200,000 in silver utensils; \$3,000,000 in gold; and twenty gold bowls worth a total of \$5,000; plus two bronze or brass items whose purity and design made them as valuable as gold. Total weight would be about 30 tons: no small item for this band of travelers.

Verses 28-30 relate Ezra's charge to the twelve priests. Holy utensils must only be handled by holy men; what better reason for putting them into their safekeeping? The money likewise was given as an offering to God. They were responsible for them till delivery was made to the priests, Levites, and leading citizens at the Temple in Jerusalem.

5. The journey is made, and the goods are delivered at Jerusalem.

TEXT, 8:31-36

31 Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.

- 32 Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.
 33 And on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui.
 34 Everything was numbered and weighed, and all the weight was recorded at that time.
 35 The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, 12 male goats for a sin offering, all as a burnt offering to the Lord.
 36 Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps, and to the governors in the provinces beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.

COMMENT

In *verse 31* the journey is resumed after eleven days spent at the staging area; once more the book speaks of the hand of God: and the mention of the enemy and ambushes shows that God's protection was very necessary and very real.

Verse 32 speaks of three days, perhaps suggesting a time for rest and reorganization, or possibly a Sabbath observation before they reported their arrival and officially handed over the treasures.

Verses 33, 34: see the care taken in this entire operation. Of those who received the valuables, four men are named and identified by family and position. Everything is weighed as it is changing hands. Every piece receives a number, and all information is recorded on the spot.

The mention of Meremoth raises some interesting speculation. Here he is called the son of Uriah the priest. In Neh. 3:4, 21 he is further identified as the grandson of Hakkoz. The sons of a man by the same name are mentioned in 2:61 as unable to supply genealogical records; therefore they were excluded from

the priesthood until the deficiency could be amended by God's answer through Urim and Thummim. Perhaps they were able to find the missing records; perhaps God corrected the deficiency and made His acceptance known; or perhaps there were two men named Hakkoz, and only one lacked proper credentials; at any rate, here is Meremoth, grandson of Hakkoz, discharging a high responsibility as a priest.

Verse 35 again stresses the number twelve and its multiples, as the new arrivals made an offering in behalf of all Israel; only the number 77 varies from the pattern.

We have seen that there were about 1500, plus 258, or roughly 1760 men on the trip; they sacrificed almost 200 animals; assuming that the total number of men, women, and children was about 7,000, that would be an animal for every nine men, or thirty-five people: a respectable offering.

With *verse 36* the mission is completed; all records are turned over to the officials whom the Persians had appointed over the Beyond-Euphrates area. Ezra had fulfilled his responsibility to the king (7:14), to his people and to God.

WORD STUDIES

AHAVA (vss. 15, 21): possibly means "water"; it may be akin to the Latin, "aqua."

BABYLON (vs. 1): gate, i.e., court, of Bel (the god of the Babylonians).

CASIPHIA (vs. 17): this comes from a word meaning "pale, silver, white, or shining." Perhaps it was a city known for its brightness, or for its money.

HOLY (Kodesh: vs. 28): pure, consecrated, separated. Because a thing was entirely or purely separated to one purpose, it was sacred for that use. With little change the word is used of men devoted to pagan temples and practicing the lowest vices and perversions. It makes a great deal of difference to what purpose, or God, a person devotes his life.

SUMMARY

The eighth chapter of Ezra furnishes details of the trip described in chapter seven. One note runs through it: there was a division of responsibility.

As the company prepares to leave Babylonia, we are made conscious of two priests, a descendant of royalty, and twelve heads of clans in charge. When Ezra needs recruits from among the Levites, he sends nine men and instructs them how to get them. When the trip begins, he calls for fasting and prayer and lays their whole safety in the hands of God. The treasures for the Temple he entrusts to twelve of the priests. When the trip is ended and everything has been turned over to the Temple officials, they celebrate with sacrifices and a full report is turned over to their superiors, along with the original orders.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How much time was spent getting the expedition underway?
2. How many leaders did Ezra select to go up with him?
3. What kind of persons did he trust with the gold and silver?
4. How many persons made the trip, and how did this compare with the company in Ezra two?

Chapter Nine

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Where in the Bible have Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Amorites been mentioned before?
2. What marks of a good leader did Ezra show when he was confronted with the people's sins?
3. What does Ezra's prayer reveal about Israel's economic conditions at this time?
4. Do you think Ezra was racially biased?

OUTLINE

In this chapter Ezra is made aware of the problem of mixed marriages: marriages of the people of Israel to foreigners.

- C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
1. Ezra is informed of the problem (vss. 1-5).
 2. Ezra prays about it (vss. 6-15).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
1. Ezra is informed of the problem.

TEXT, 9:1-5

- 1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.
- 2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for

themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands or the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness."

- 3 And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.
- 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.
- 5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;

COMMENT

Verses 1, 2 reveal how Ezra received the information.

Verse 1 indicates a space in time since the previous verse: it could have been a few weeks, but it couldn't have been much more than four months (cf. 10:9). It was the princes, the civil authorities and not the religious leaders who came to Ezra. They indicated that the three groups mentioned earlier in the book, the people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, were all involved. They may have mentioned the people of Israel first to soften the blow for the priests and other religious leaders, or else because it was the group of which they were a part.

The people of the lands were of two kinds: (1) people who had not been driven out of Palestine when Israel had settled there originally, but who had remained even through the period of Israel's exile (Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites. Josh. 9:1); and (2) neighboring nations (Moabites, Egyptians, and Ammonites). These had introduced abominations into Israel's culture.

The problem of mixed marriages has already been discussed in reference to the Samaritans at Ezra 4:3. It was nothing as simple as a marriage between a Baptist and a Presbyterian, or even between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic or a Jew.

These foreign people worshiped other gods in ways that were incompatible with Israel's worship, i.e., by sacred prostitution and human sacrifice. Remains of infants buried alive in jars throughout the land testify to the reality of this evil.¹ Thus the things that were most religious to them were absolutely irreligious to Israel. The O.T. never sanctions freedom of religions in this context.

For a further description of the sin involved in these marriages to foreign (strange) women, and of the warnings against them, see Prov. 1-9, especially 2:16; 5:20; 7:5, where "foreign" is used as a synonym of "adulterous."

There was a way to marry a person of another ethnic background, as the story of Ruth illustrates, if conversion had taken place. Rahab, the harlot at Jericho, entered the Messianic line (Mt. 1:5), and Uriah the Hittite married a Jewish girl (Bathsheba, later David's wife) and became one of the thirty most respected men in David's army (II Sam. 23:39). In the O.T. nationalities of persons are more descriptive of their religions than of their citizenship or ethnic origins.

Some of these people of the land may have been outside landholders,² and therefore wealthy. We know from Malachi (2:11, 14) that at a date not too far from Ezra a number of Israelites divorced their first wives, who were of their race, to marry foreign women. If this is the situation which Ezra is describing, then there was a second sin, of unfaithfulness and violation of a previous marriage, involved as well. The temptation would be strong; intermarriage would offer the people of Israel a chance to move up economically; it would offer the foreign peoples a way to enter the approved social structure of the country and solidify their holdings. In the process, spiritual and human values would be crushed.

It was all the more disgrace that the nation's leaders, religious as well as civil, were the leaders in this evil.

1. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (abridged), p. 12, mentions these, but minimizes them. Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*, devotes an entire chapter to the "abominations of the heathen," p. 270ff.

2. *Anchor Bible*, op. cit., p. 77.

Verses 3 to 5 portray Ezra's reaction.

Verse 3 shows Ezra alone, but in public view in the Temple compound, expressing his dismay. The tearing of garments was a method frequently used throughout the Bible for this purpose (Num. 14:6; Ac. 14:14). Pulling out a part of his hair and beard would be a much less frequent mark of profound humility, sorrow, or disgrace, since the beard in particular was a symbol of one's age and therefore wisdom and honor (Isa. 15:2). Note that Mephibosheth neglected his beard at a particularly evil time (II Sam. 19:24).

His sitting down and showing his horror (cf. Job 2:13) would continue to impress his feelings on the public.

Verse 4 testifies of the effect this had on the community. All of those who feared, i.e., revered God (trembled at the words of God), who were similarly dismayed at the conduct of the evil-doers, gathered about him as he continued to sit in an attitude of apparently speechless astonishment into the middle of the afternoon.

Verse 5 portrays Ezra's taking the problem to God in prayer, torn robe and all. Stretching forth the hands was the attitude of petition.

2. Ezra's prayer is set down for us.

TEXT, 9:6-15

- 6 and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads; and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.
- 7 "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day.
- 8 "But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to

give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.

- 9 "For we are slaves; yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.
- 10 "And now, 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 which you are entering to take possession of is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.
- 12 'So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.'
- 13 "And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since Thou our God hast requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us an escaped remnant as this,
- 14 shall we again break Thy commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Wouldst Thou not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?
- 15 "O LORD God of Israel, Thou art righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before Thee in our guilt, for no one can stand before Thee because of this."

COMMENT

Verses 6-9 rehearse the story of the captivity to Ezra's time. *Verse 6* records his embarrassment over the people's sins.

Though he had not committed them, yet he uses the first person, "our," indicating his full identification with the people. This was the function of a priest, as a mediator, interceding in behalf of his people. This is the mark of any great leader, understanding those whom he leads, and sharing in their fortunes. So Moses had asked God to include him in any punishment of His people (Ex. 32:32).

Note the parallelisms so characteristic of Hebrew poetry in his prayer; "iniquity" paralleled by "guilt"; "risen" or "multiplied" paralleled by "grown"; "above our heads" paralleled by "to the heavens."

Verse 7 is particularly a confession of the sin of the people; by praying it in public he would hopefully be voicing or shaping the thoughts of all who heard. Ezra acknowledged that their military defeat and captivity had been occasioned by their sin. It may not be possible to say positively today that the nation which does not sin would be spared military defeat, but it would at least remove one of the causes.

Next, in *verse 8*, is a mention of God's grace, which must ever follow the acknowledgment of sin. By God's grace a remnant had been able to return from exile. By His grace they had been given a firm hold, or abiding place (this is the significance of the peg, or nail, driven in securely, on which other things could depend), within God's house. So the table of showbread with its twelve loaves (Lev. 24:5-9) within the Tabernacle and Temple had been a reminder that the twelve tribes had a place before God and were on His mind continually. By His grace the sparkle would be brought back to their eyes (that is what enlightenment accomplishes) and they would be renewed.

Verse 9 tells us that their bondage was not completely over. Their nation was still very much under the control of the Persians, and all their activities could only be undertaken with their permission. The wall referred to here is not the physical wall of stone which surrounded the city; that had not yet been rebuilt; it was that protection with which God surrounded His people. That protected not Jerusalem alone, but all Judah as well.

Verses 10-15 deal with the situation which was before Ezra at that very moment.

Verse 10 acknowledges that what the people had done was a violation of the commandments which God had made known previously to them.

Verses 11, 12 are a composite, made up of quotations from many Scriptures. The *Anchor Bible* lists a number of different passages:

- a) the land you are going to possess: Dt. 4:5ff
- b) a polluted land, polluted by the peoples of the lands: Lam. 1:17; Lev. 18:25ff; 20:22ff.
- c) their abominations: Dt. 18:9; II Ki. 16:3; 19:2; II Chr. 28:3; 33:2, and Ezekiel often.
- d) have filled it from one end to the other: II Ki. 21:16.
- e) do not give your daughters: Dt. 7:3.
- f) do not even seek their peace or welfare: Dt. 23:6.
- g) that you may be strong: Dt. 11:8.
- h) eat the good things of the land: Isa. 1:19; Gen. 45:18.
- i) bequeath it to your sons forever: Ezek. 37:25b.

This says something of Ezra's knowledge of the Scriptures, and of his expectation that they would be available or familiar to his hearers.

Moses is quoted (Dt. 7:3) among the prophets, for this is how he spoke of himself (Dt. 18:15). Add this to the fact that the books of Kings were classified among the prophets in the ancient Hebrew canon, and every one of these phrases can be found among the writings of the prophets.

Verse 13 calls to mind two gracious acts of God. (1) The punishment of the Captivity was merciful; it was less than they deserved. This evaluation varies from Isaiah's (40:2), who proclaims that God had meted out double for Israel's sin. There is no conflict between the two: Isaiah is speaking of the fact that God has counted the debt more than paid, and they may rest in the enjoyment of forgiveness. Ezra is showing humility in acknowledging that God would have been justified if He had required more. The person standing in the place of the sinner can

never claim that forgiveness is deserved or earned; he has no right, being the offender, to say what is a reasonable repayment for his offense.

(2) The second gracious act of God was in allowing them to return from captivity. History does not record the names of many nations as completely vanquished as Israel was, who have been spared and given another opportunity to rise to worldwide significance. Ezra has already listed the many ways in which God led a foreign power to assist their reconstruction.

Verse 14 draws the conclusion therefore that it would be most unwise for them to repeat the selfsame error that brought them to captivity before. It would be presuming too much to expect that God would spare them and deliver them again, or that He would leave the slightest remnant of their nation the next time.

Verse 15 repeats the conviction that God is righteous in the things He has done for them. The last half of the verse is in the frame of reference of a court scene; Israel stands before God having been taken in the very act of sin and known to be guilty. No one can stand, i.e., abide or be acquitted (cf. *Psa. 1:5* for similar language) before God, the judge from whom no transgression is hidden.

WORD STUDIES

PEG: Nail, tentpeg (vs. 8, Yathed): the basic idea is of that which is driven in firmly, or fixed fast, to render something stable. A good ruler or prince, on whom the welfare of the state depends (i.e., hangs down), would be described as a tentpeg (*Zech. 10:4*).

BONDAGE (vss. 8, 9): condition of laboring, working, serving. A servant or a slave would be described by this term. It occurs in the name Ebed, or Obed; remember David's grandfather in *Ruth 4:17*? It is used of tilling the ground also (*Gen. 4:2*). In slightly different form it is used in a religious sense, of our service or worship.

WALL (vs. 9, Gader): that which surrounds or encloses. The

three consonants appear in different order in our words “guard” and “garden.” So God guards His people, as His garden.

OFFERING (vss. 4, 5, Minchah): for a description of this particular offering see Ex. 29:38-46. The word emphasizes its nature as a gift or present. Although it can describe offerings of either meat or grain (it is used of both Abel’s and Cain’s offering, Gen. 4:3, 4), it usually designates the meal (grain) offering. By its nature as a gift, its chief purpose was to portray fellowship between God and His people.

SUMMARY

Ezra was informed by the rulers that a number of the people, including religious leaders as well as citizens and rulers, had violated God’s law and married foreigners. This would involve the introduction of pagan religion into their culture, and would endanger their social structure. Ezra reacted by tearing his clothes, pulling his hair, sitting in silence, and finally praying. People gathered about him as he confessed his countrymen’s sins, as he recalled how God had dealt with similar infractions in the past, and as he acknowledged that they had no excuse for their action and no reason for believing they could escape punishment.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the particular sin the people were committing, and who were involved?
2. How did Ezra react to news of their sin?
3. What can we learn from Ezra’s prayer to make our own prayers more meaningful?

Chapter Ten

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What particular idea do you think brought the people to tears?
2. Do you think Ezra was justified in advocating divorce?
3. Why do you suppose the priests are mentioned first among those who had committed this sin, and again of those who corrected their conduct?
4. Do you think the list of names is placed here as a means of punishing those who had sinned, or of honoring those who had repented?

OUTLINE

Topic of the chapter: How the problem of mixed marriages was resolved.

- D. The community is cleansed, and a list of offenders is given.
1. A decision is reached by those who heard Ezra pray (vss. 1-4).
 2. The decision is shared by the leaders, and an assembly is ordered (vss. 5-8).
 3. The decision is accepted by all, in the assembly (vss. 9-15).
 4. The decision is carried out (vss. 16-19).
 5. A list is made of those who complied (vss. 20-44).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

D. The community is cleansed, and a list of the offenders is given.

1. A decision is reached by those who heard Ezra pray.

TEXT, 10:1-4

- 1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession; weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women, and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly.
- 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our

- God, and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.
- 3 "So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.
- 4 "Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act."

COMMENT

In *verse 1* there is a switch from the first to the third person; we have observed (see comments on 5:4, where Ezra uses the first person where we would expect the third person) that this is frequently done in the O.T., sometimes for no discernible reason. It is always hazardous to build great critical theories on something as small as a personal pronoun, especially in Hebrew.

As Ezra wept, many others were attracted to the gathering (9:4 has already spoken of a number who had been attracted by Ezra's conduct) and joined him in weeping; probably because they joined him in making confession. Perhaps some were realizing for the first time the consequences which their sins could have for the entire nation, for sin and disobedience to God is never a merely private affair. They had probably gathered out of sympathy or curiosity, because of Ezra's obvious pain; but they would surely not have responded thus unless they were as convinced of the critical nature of the problem as he was.

Verse 2: Shecaniah came forward and took the lead in acknowledging the wrong, although he is not named among the offenders, nor was he a priest. Rather, he was of the family of Elam (8:7), of the people of Israel (common people distinguished from priests and Levites), though not its leader. The name of his father, Jehiel, appears again in vs. 26, also as one of the family of Elam; this raises the possibility that Shecaniah's own father was among those whose sin Shecaniah was confessing. It was a common name, however, and this cannot be said with certainty.

Verse 3 suggests the making of a covenant. This was an elaborate and serious process. More detail will be given under the

Word Studies for this chapter. It was suggested that the covenant require divorce ("putting away") as a solution to the problem. Certainly this was no easy solution nor was the problem an easy problem. When sin enters the picture there are bound to be some tragic results.

Reference has already been made (see 9:2) to the possibility of conversion to maintain the marriage.

Those who tremble at God's commandment have been mentioned before, at 9:4, assembling about Ezra as he began his prayer. The trembling may express a number of things in the O.T. In I Sam. 13:7 it is used of fear before a battle. In II Ki. 4:13 it is used of care and concern that a servant girl had for her master. There is still a place for fear as a part of reverence toward God as we think of the consequences of violating His word.

There were two groups, then, who gathered about Ezra: the public minded religiously concerned of 9:4, and the more diversified group in 10:1.

Verse 4 pledges the support of all those people for whom Shecaniah was the spokesman, in supporting Ezra in his demands before the country's leaders.

2. The decision is shared by the leaders, and an assembly is ordered.

TEXT, 10:5-8.

5 Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.

6 Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread, nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

7 And they made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem,

8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles.

COMMENT

His next step was to invite compliance by all of the nation. He first got the support of the leaders of each of the three groups: priests, Levites, and all Israel. These were required to take an oath; for more on this, see the Word Studies that follow.

According to *verse 6* he spent the night in fasting and mourning in the quarters of one of the priests in the Temple. Here in all likelihood the two worked out the details of their course of action.

Some speculation has arisen whether the Jehohanan of this verse is the high priest Johanan mentioned in the Elephantine Papyri. The idea is tremendously fascinating, but if it is so it would require dating this part of Ezra fifty years later than we had supposed: later, in fact, than Nehemiah. As it is, the Jehohanan of verse 6 is not identified as the high priest; in fact, the book of Ezra never refers to any individual, even Jeshua, by this title.

With *verse 7* their plan begins to unfold; they call an assembly of all the exiles at Jerusalem.

Verse 8 specifies that they (the men) must appear within three days. This would not have been unreasonable since they still had not spread out very far from Jerusalem. The authority back of the order was that of the leaders and elders. Penalty for not appearing in person would be the loss of all their possessions, and their expulsion from the community. The land basically was the Lord's, and it was distributed among the people in His name for their use, though He continued to hold title to it: therefore their continued occupancy was conditioned on their obedience to Him.

3. The decision is accepted by all, in the assembly.

TEXT, 10:9-15

- 9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month, and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain.
- 10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel.
- 11 "Now, therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."
- 12 Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do."
- 13 "But there are many people, it is the rainy season, and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter.
- 14 "Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us."
- 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them.

COMMENT

Verse 9 indicates full compliance with this order, from the men throughout the territory of Judah and Benjamin where the exiles had settled. The latter half of the ninth month would be in our December, which was the rainy season in their land. No building

would be large enough for the entire male population, so they met in the Temple yard, shivering because of the seriousness of the occasion and the discomfort of the rain.

In *verse 10* Ezra charged them with their sin.

Verse 11 speaks of two groups from which they were to be separated: (1) the people of the land, possibly referring here to the foreign men whom some of the women of Israel had married; and (2) the foreign wives, whom men of Israel had taken. The offense could work both ways (see 9:12), and both must be corrected.

Verse 12 voices their acknowledgement of the rightness of what had been said, and their decisive acceptance of the need of separation.

In *verse 13* the men point to mechanical problems in carrying out this command: the rain; discomfort of standing in the open; legal complications in correcting such a serious offense.

Their request (*verse 14*) was that enough time be given so that orderly procedures may be followed: appointments were to be made for all offending couples to come before the elders and judges of their cities (the elders had always had such responsibilities), till the task was completed. They evidently reasoned that if marriage was a public ceremony, then the separation also was to be made publicly.

Verse 15 gives the names of two who opposed this procedure, though their reason is not stated. We do not know if they objected to the delay, the procedure, or to the action itself, though *verse 12* indicated unanimous agreement up to that point. Their objections were apparently answered satisfactorily by two other speakers, as named.

4. The decision is carried out.

TEXT, 10:16-19

16 But the exiles did so. And Ezra the priest selected men who were heads of fathers' households for each of their fathers'

- households, all of them by name. So they convened on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter.
- 17 And they finished investigating all the men who had married foreign wives by the first of the first month.
- 18 And among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers; Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah.
- 19 And they pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense.

COMMENT

Verse 16 shows Ezra once more appointing men from the various households (clans) to help with this responsibility. These assembled within ten or eleven days. This is the point where we may ask what they had to investigate; was it only to discover every person in their communities who had offended or were they setting policies to check for sincere conversions among the parties involved?

Verse 17 relates the completion of the investigation three months later, on the first day of the year, exactly a year after Ezra had assembled his group of exiles to go up to Jerusalem (7:9).

Verse 18 demonstrates the extent of the sin, even within the priesthood. (Notice that again, as at verse 5, the priests are listed first.) The book began with recognition for the fine work of the high priest Jeshua, son of Jozadak (2:2; 3:2). It ends with the acknowledgment of the sin of some of his descendants and relatives. So the best of institutions must always be subject to reexamination.

According to *verse 19*, the offending priests gave their hands (literal meaning of "pledged") to put away their foreign wives; we are reminded how far back the binding nature of a handshake goes, along with some of our other customs. This would save their land from the continued burden of their error; but what about the wrong already done? The heathen women were themselves victims of an injury which could never be righted in

this world. Therefore, to atone for their guilt, the priests offered a trespass offering. Details of this are given in Lev. 5:14-19; Num. 15:22-31. It was, you will notice, for unintentional sins (Lev. 5:17f); there is no sacrifice in the O.T. for deliberate sins (Num. 15:30f). This suggests that those who were involved may not have been aware of the law; perhaps this particular law had not been sufficiently publicized. Or they may not have been impressed with the seriousness of their act. Evidently they had not deliberately intended to disobey one of God's laws. Most of our sins, then and now, probably would come under this category, because few people intend to do wrong deliberately. In most cases we are deceived, or misled, or thoughtless; but the consequences are still the same, and the damage is just as real.

While only the priests are mentioned as making this offering, it is possible that the other offenders did likewise.

5. A list is made of those who complied.

TEXT, 10:20-44

- 20 And of the sons of Immer there were Hanani and Zebadiah;
- 21 and of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah;
- 22 and of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah.
- 23 And of the Levites there were Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer.
- 24 And of the singers there was Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.
- 25 And of Israel, of the sons of Parosh there were Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah, and Benaiah;
- 26 and of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah;
- 27 and of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza;

- 28 and of the sons of Bebai: Johohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai;
- 29 and of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth;
- 30 and of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh;
- 31 and of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon,
- 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah;
- 33 of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eli-phelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei;
- 34 of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel,
- 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi,
- 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,
- 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu,
- 38 Bani, Binnui, Shimei,
- 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah,
- 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai,
- 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah,
- 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph.
- 43 Of the sons of Nebo there were Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah.
- 44 All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

COMMENT

It is obvious that this is only a partial list, perhaps of the most influential of the people involved.

Verses 20-22 continue the list of names from the priesthood; *verses 23, 24* give names of Levites and their associates; *verses 25-43*, of Israel.

No mention is made in *verse 44* of what was done for the continued support of the women and children, whether they received some form of alimony or whether they married the men who had been divorced by their Israelite wives. Such problems could only be dealt with on an individual basis, and this would reach beyond the scope of Ezra's book.

WORD STUDIES

COVENANT (vs. 3, Berith): comes from the verb, "eat." To make (literally, cut) a covenant, persons butchered and cut up a domestic vegetarian (peaceful) animal (see Gen. 15) and arrived at their agreements around a table of good fellowship. Peace treaties, religious obligations, personal contracts were all sealed in this way. God's covenant with man always had this connotation of fellowship, or sharing, including His obligation to bless if the covenant was kept.

TAKE OATH (vs. 8, Shaba): swear, "to seven oneself." Seven, a sacred number, calls attention also to offerings that would be made to seal an oath (Gen. 21:28ff).

SUMMARY

As Ezra prayed a crowd gathered and entered into his feelings of guilt and sorrow and reverence. One of them, Shecaniah, spoke for all to encourage Ezra to lead in covenanting with God to correct the sin of marriage to heathen mates, believing that there was still hope. Leaders of the priests, Levites, and citizens took an oath to support Ezra in this reform. An assembly of all the males throughout the area of Judah and Benjamin was called, under penalty of forfeiting all their property. In a matter of days these assembled in spite of a heavy rain, and became convinced of the necessity of confessing their wrong and amending it. Ezra appointed leaders for each community to investigate each offending household. On the first day of the new year, about three and a half months after Ezra had prayed, the investigations were completed and the community of Israel had separated itself from entanglements with foreign spouses. The decision was completed with pledges and offerings to God; the list of those whose names were affixed to the agreement began with priests, contained Levites, and concluded with many of the prominent people throughout Israel.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the man who helped Ezra the most, to correct the evil?
2. What response did he get from the general population?
3. Whom did Ezra select to investigate and deal with offenders?
4. How long did the process take?

REFLECTIONS ON EZRA

The book of Ezra began with captives returning to Israel especially to rebuild their Altar and Temple. A second band returned and were especially involved in the purification of the religious life.

The book has presented us with a contrast between (1) growing awareness of and concern for the Gentiles, and (2) exclusiveness, forbidding marriages to Gentiles. On the one hand, help was obtained from a foreign king, his cabinet, and taxes on neighboring lands to help Israel build the Temple; even some of the labor came from other lands. Some foreigners may even have been included in the migration from Babylonia to Judah. Their continuation as a people depended on the day-to-day favor of foreigners.

On the other hand, help of the Samaritans had been flatly rejected, and marriages with foreigners had been annulled and forbidden for the future. Israel had to live between these two tensions.

But so must the church today. It must live in the world; it cannot withdraw from it, but must in fact mingle with the Pharisees and publicans, the pure and the impure, the household of Caesar and Simon the sorcerer and Saul the persecutor; it cannot obey its Lord, grow, or even survive without conversions from these sources.

But it must keep itself free from the entanglements and defilements of that world. It must maintain its principles and transform the lives that it touches into the likeness of its Master.

May the handling of the problems in the book of Ezra assist us in the handling of those which are distinctive to our day.

PROJECT

Can you recall, chapter by chapter, what is in the book of Ezra? The first and last chapters are easy: 1—Cyrus' proclamation permitting the return from captivity; 10—Mixed marriages abandoned. Next notice chapters 4 and 7: 4—Rebuilding of the Temple ceases; 7—Ezra arrives with more returnees. Now fill in the gaps: 2—List of returnees, first expedition; 3—Altar set up. After chapter 4 (Rebuilding of the Temple ceases) comes 5—Rebuilding is resumed; 6—Darius' decree, and completion of the Temple. After 7 (Ezra arrives with more returnees), 8—Names of returnees, and description of the trip; 9—Ezra hears of the problem of mixed marriages; then you remember 10.

Put these titles on separate cards without the chapter numbers, mix them up, and practice arranging them correctly.

DATES TO REMEMBER (All are Before Christ.)

- 538 Cyrus conquered Babylon
- 536 Cyrus freed captive Israelites to return home and rebuild Temple
- 536 Work on the Temple stopped
- 520 Temple work resumed
- 516 Temple work completed
- 475 Events of the Book of Esther
- 458 Ezra brought another band of returnees
- 457 Ezra's reforms were completed
- 445 Nehemiah's first mission to Jerusalem
- 433 Nehemiah's second mission to Jerusalem

Nehemiah

INTRODUCTION

THE MAN

The name, Nehemiah, means "Comfort of Jehovah" or "(Whom) Jehovah has comforted" (see Word Studies, end of the next chapter). The man himself was a government official, in contrast to Ezra, who was a priest. This results in a different methodology for accomplishing his goals, but there is no difference in compassion between the two men. The importance of the position which he held in Persia under Artaxerxes may be guessed from the fact that he could ask for the position of governor over Judah as a personal favor, and get it. The character of the man is revealed in that he even desired it, and that he served in that capacity, with all its complications and burdens in preference to the surroundings of the palace in the largest empire of his world. In this he reminds us of Moses.

The man's humility is evidenced by his hesitancy to tell us of his position as cupbearer till the end of the first chapter, and from his neglecting to tell us the position to which he was appointed until chapter 10, and then as a passing reference.

There are a number of similarities between Ezra and Nehemiah. Both utter intercessory prayers for the people. Both rest for three days on their arrival in Jerusalem. Both describe opposition by the Samaritans and an assortment of their neighbors. Both recognize the need of preserving the identity of Israel against intermarriage with foreigners. Both books consist of two halves, with a time lapse between, although Nehemiah is in both halves of his book, having returned after an interval in Persia. God had a use for both of these men, as He can use persons of all kinds of talents and backgrounds and methods of operation today.

THE BOOK

The title is taken from its opening sentence and from its chief character. In some versions, however, it is titled II Esdras, and

Ezra is called I Esdras. In the Hebrew text these were at one time one book. Don't confuse these with I, II Esdras in the O.T. Apocrypha.

The major subject is the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the exile. The events described took place beginning twelve years after the close of the book of Ezra. Within a century the great Greek philosophers and generals will arrive on the world's scene to remold the political situation completely.

It is interesting that, if our dating for these two books is correct, the Jewish people made their first priority the rebuilding of their Temple and the restoration of their religious forms. Even when they had been impelled by fear of their neighbors, they had built an altar instead of a wall; they had trusted in God instead of their own strength (Ezra 3:3). But trust in God does not mean blindness to physical realities, nor doing nothing in the face of dangers; so now they rebuild the wall.

The book also deals with an effort to revitalize the population of Jerusalem; to renew the nation's spiritual life through public reading of the Law, with Ezra's co-operation; to restore the details of the observance of feasts and ceremonials and contributions described in the Law, and to require an oath of loyalty of all the citizens of the land. It closes with a grand portrayal of the dedication of the wall with marching choirs and impressive offerings, followed by the dissonant but necessary condemning of those who had been tempted into disobedience to the Law by contracting marriages to unbelieving foreigners.

AUTHORSHIP

From the amount of autobiographical material in the book, it is reasoned that Nehemiah was either its author or its most extensive contributor. Some ascribe its authorship to Ezra because it was combined with Ezra in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, "The Twelve," all the Minor Prophets, were in one book, and no one would ascribe all of them to one author. Others would assign it to the author of Chronicles because of similarity of materials,

INTRODUCTION

thus combining Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah under one anonymous authorship. We see no reason to doubt its intimate connection with Nehemiah.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - Ch. 1 Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 - Ch. 2 Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.
 - Ch. 3 The rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described.
 - Ch. 4 The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
 - Ch. 5 Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
 - Ch. 6 The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.
 - Ch. 7 Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - Ch. 8 The Law is read, and the Feast of Booths is kept.
 - Ch. 9 The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.
 - Ch. 10 The people make vows of faithfulness.
- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13
 - Ch. 11 The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
 - Ch. 12 The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.
 - Ch. 13 Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Chapter One

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What were Nehemiah's feelings toward his brethren in Israel?
2. What was his view of the character of God?
3. What pattern do you see in his prayer that could be of help to you in your prayers to God?
4. What was the immediate objective of his prayer?

OUTLINE

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 1. Report on Jerusalem (vss. 1-4).
 2. Nehemiah's prayer (vss. 5-11a).
 3. Identity of Nehemiah (vs. 11b).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 1. Report on Jerusalem.

TEXT, 1:1-4

- 1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.
Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital,
- 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.
- 3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."
- 4 Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

COMMENT

Verse 1 begins with a statement that its source is Nehemiah: adequate evidence that he is the author of the entire book, or at least the major part of it. The month Chislev, their ninth month, would correspond roughly with our December. The reference to the twentieth year is explained more fully in 2:1. The custom of the time was to date all events from the beginning of the rule of the present king; each king's rule would begin with the year one. Comparing this with Ezra 7:1, 8, and assuming that the Artaxerxes is the same person in each case, we can determine that the events of the book of Nehemiah begin thirteen years after Ezra's start for Jerusalem, or twelve years after the conclusion of Ezra's book, i.e., 445 B.C.

Susa was the city in Elam, 200 miles east of Babylon, where the Persian kings maintained a residence, and from which they ruled their kingdom for a part of each year (cf. comments on Ezra 6:2).

The Hanani of *verse 2* was probably Nehemiah's own brother: cf. 7:2. From the emphasis which is made in the sentence, it would appear that the visitors from Judah had not searched Nehemiah out with a grievance, but that Nehemiah had initiated the inquiry concerning his fellow-Jews who had "escaped," i.e. returned to their homeland, and concerning affairs at Jerusalem.

Their report in *verse 3* indicates both physical and mental distress, arising out of the condition of the city's walls and gates. The breaking down of the wall (chiefly of stone) and the burning of the gate (chiefly of timbers) had been done by Nebuchadnezzar, 141 years earlier. Some suppose that this is a reference to more recent events of which Nehemiah would not have been aware before this, and that therefore, the walls and gates had been partially restored after the Captivity. The Bible makes no mention of previous reconstruction of the walls, except in the false report of Israel's enemies in Ezra 4:12. If there had been any repairs, they surely could not have been very extensive.

Nehemiah's grief as portrayed in *verse 4* (It was perfectly acceptable for a man to weep because of mental anguish in their culture.) would be easily understood. Without walls the city would

have no defense against vandalism or military action, except what they could supply with watchful human bodies. They would be especially vulnerable to the Samaritans, their nearest neighbors. There was something he could do, however: he could fast and pray.

2. Nehemiah's Prayer

TEXT, 1:5-11a

- 5 And I said, "I beseech Thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and loving-kindness of those who love Him and keep His commandments,
6 let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned.
7 "We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses.
8 "Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples;
9 but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.'
10 "And they are Thy servants and Thy people whom Thou didst redeem by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand.
11a "O LORD, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man."

COMMENT

This prayer by Nehemiah is as noble as that of Ezra (9:6-15), though Ezra was a religious official and Nehemiah was a secular ruler. This speaks well of Nehemiah's habits of spirituality and fellowship with God: his practice of the ceremonies of religion.

The prayer begins in *verse 5* with praise to God for His (1) greatness and (2) character of loving kindness. So Jesus began His model prayer with praise: a good model for us today. The loving kindness mentioned in this verse is not merely sentimental; it "always implies faithful compliance with . . . the covenant . . ."

Verse 6 speaks of Nehemiah's persistence, day and night, and moves to confession. As Ezra had done (9:6), so Nehemiah also identified himself with their sins. The mention of "thy servant" and "thy servants" was the formula of polite address.

Verse 7 enumerates some of their sins. There were sins of commission ("we have acted very corruptly") and sins of omission ("and have not kept thy commandments . . ."). See the Word Studies, end of this chapter, for the difference in emphasis between commandments, statutes, and ordinances. Note that Nehemiah identifies Moses with God's giving of His law.

In *verse 8, 9* Nehemiah relies on one of God's promises in His word, assuming they have repented. As Ezra had enabled us to see his familiarity with the Scriptures in 9:11f, so Nehemiah's prayer at this point is also a composite of several Scriptures:

- 1) If you are unfaithful I will scatter you: Lev. 26:33.
- 2) But if you return to me: Dt. 30:2f.
- 3) I will gather them from there and will bring them: Dt. 30:4; 9:29.
- 4) to the place where I have chosen to cause my name to dwell: Dt. 12:5.

Verse 10 recalls actions in the past in which God has assisted his people.

Verse 11 asserts that the people were truly God's servants, that they qualified for His promises by their regard for His name

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 670.

(personality), and asks that the prayer may succeed on the basis of compassion or mercy beyond deservings. "This man" of verse 11 is a reference to Artaxerxes (2:1 ff), whom God should move to favor the request which Nehemiah would bring before him.

3. Identity of Nehemiah

TEXT, 1:11b

11b Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

COMMENT

The appearance of this statement here instead of in verse one is probably explained by Nehemiah's humility; he has not overawed us at the outset with his rank.

The duty of a cupbearer went far beyond that of serving the king's drink or food. He would be the taster who would assure that the food was safe and that no poison had been added by his enemies; he risked his life on the king's popularity or unpopularity at every meal, to protect the royal household. At the same time, he must be the most trusted person in the whole empire. If he added poison when the food had been brought to him, it would be beyond the last defense short of the king's palate. In addition, he had access to the entire palace, including the king's harem; no one else in the kingdom, outside the royal family, would be trusted farther than this. His position was next to that of the crown prince himself.

It is a credit to Nehemiah that, having attained this highest position open to him in the most powerful kingdom of his day, he was willing, like Moses, out of compassion for his brethren to make himself one of them for a sufficient length of time to improve their condition as far as he was able.

WORD STUDIES

SUSA (vs. 1; Shushan): lily, something brightly colored. It was named possibly from the lilies growing in its pools, or from the beauty of the city as the king's residence. Its base is the origin of the names, Susan, or Susanna, and of the headings for Psalms 45 and 80.

COMMANDMENT (vs. 7; Mitzvah): what has been set up, or put, or placed; that is, a monument. Something established, confirmed, appointed, ordained; hence commanded. By keeping these, one is enabled to stand, or endure: Ex. 18:23. "Bar Mitzvah," "son of the commandment," uses this word.

STATUTE (vs. 7): to cut in, hew, hack; engrave, or carve. Then, something decreed, prescribed, appointed, because it is carved in stone.

ORDINANCE (vs. 7): the primary idea is to set upright, or erect, or render justice; to govern or rule; hence, judgments.

NEHEMIAH: The last three letters represent the name of God: Jehovah. The first five letters portray drawing the breath forcibly, panting, sighing, or groaning; they come to mean "console, comfort." Thus the name means "Comfort of Jehovah" or "Jehovah has comforted." The word "comfort," also occurs in the names Menahem and Nahum. It is the first word in Isa. 40.

SUMMARY

Nehemiah was a Jew who had advanced to a position of great responsibility and trust within the government of Persia. His brother came on a visit with other Jews, and in reply to Nehemiah's concern told him about the defenseless, impoverished conditions in Jerusalem. Nehemiah wept, then he prayed. He recalled God's greatness and His lovingkindness to Israel in the past; he confessed that he and all Israel had sinned and had violated God's commandments; he asked that God keep His promise and restore them, as they were his servants. He further asked

that God would cause the king to respond favorably to the request which he was about to make before him.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where was Nehemiah at the beginning of the book?
2. Who was Hanani, and how did he influence Nehemiah?
3. What were the conditions in Jerusalem at the time?
4. What was the position which Nehemiah occupied?

Chapter Two

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What was the occasion on which Nehemiah brought his request before the king?
2. How was the king informed that Nehemiah wanted to make a request?
3. What was included in the request that Nehemiah made?
4. Why do you suppose Nehemiah made his tour of inspection by night?

OUTLINE

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip (vss. 1-10).
2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls (vss. 11-20).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTS

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip.

TEXT, 2:1-10

- 1 And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.
- 2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.
- 3 And I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should

- my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"
- 4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.
- 5 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."
- 6 Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.
- 7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.
- 9 Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.
- 10 And when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

COMMENT

Verse 1: Nisan was the first month of the year, corresponding to our March-April, the beginning of Spring. It was the twentieth year, but Neh. 1:1 has spoken of the twentieth year, the ninth month! One explanation is that if Artaxerxes began to rule between the first and ninth months, for example in the fifth, then the twentieth year of his reign would begin in a fifth month and end a year later in a fourth month; thus the ninth month (Chislev) of the twentieth year would come before the first month (Nisan) of the twentieth year. Also, there were two calendars in use: the religious,

which began with Nisan, (springtime), and the agricultural, which began six months later, in the Fall, after harvest was completed. Nehemiah may have used this. The Jewish year still begins with Rosh Hashonah, the first day of the seventh month (about our September).

This would indicate a space of four months since Nehemiah had gotten the disturbing news described in the previous chapter. Evidently Nehemiah had been spending the time in prayer, awaiting the propitious moment to introduce his subject, or else the king had been occupied in another city for these months (See comments on Ezra 6:2.), and this was Nehemiah's first opportunity to come before him with his request. The delay would have heightened Nehemiah's tension and concern.

King Artaxerxes in this passage is traditionally identified with Artaxerxes Longimanus, who ruled from 465 to 424 B.C. The time had arrived for the serving of the wine to the king; Nehemiah had evidently tasted it and was in the act of serving it to the king.

Verse 2 reveals something of the intimacy that would have existed between a king and his cupbearer. The king observed Nehemiah's obvious sadness; he surmised it was caused by grief; his question was a mark of his concern. Nehemiah's fear arose most likely from his recognition of the responsibility to be cheerful, particularly at that point in the meal or banquet.

In *verse 3* we see Nehemiah's method of conveying his message to the king. First there is the polite form of address: "Let the king live forever," which even the top ranking servant must not forget. Then there was the reference to the desolation of the cemetery of his ancestors, which would strike a responsive cord in an oriental monarch's mind; one's ancestors must always be respected.

In *verse 4*, when the king asked what request this was leading up to, Nehemiah prayed. It is a small intimate detail from Nehemiah's diary, and it reminds us of the possibility of our being so conscious of God's constant presence that we may breathe a short prayer even between hearing a question and responding.

Verse 5 again shows Nehemiah's close conformity to court decorum. The pleasure of the king is foremost. The only compulsion laid upon him must arise out of his favorable regard for his

servant, based on his satisfactory past performance. The request is that Nehemiah be sent to Judah, where the aforementioned cemetery is located, to rebuild his home city, which he still has not identified. There is no mention of the walls either, which had been the subject of an earlier controversy (Ezra 4:13).

In *verse 6* details are spelled out. The mention of the queen's presence¹ speaks of two things: (1) it was a very intimate and private moment, rather than a public occasion. The queen ordinarily would not appear in public; she was not a public official, but rather the king's consort, meeting his personal needs, in the oriental manner. (2) The fact that she is mentioned suggests that she added her influence to make up the king's mind.

The two questions in the text are not answered, but the meaning back of them is explained. The question, "How long will your journey be?" is a way of saying "It pleased the king to send (him)"; and "when will you return?" indicated the king's desire to make it only a temporary mission; whereupon Nehemiah set a date for his return. Many of our questions also are disguised statements.

In *verse 7* Nehemiah asked for the necessary papers to get him to his destination; he would need documents showing his authority and the backing of the Persian court to pass through various provinces along the Euphrates and Jordan valleys.

In *verse 8* he asked for supplies to accomplish his objective on his arrival; timber from the king's forest, possibly in Lebanon or in Solomon's ancient gardens or elsewhere close by Jerusalem. This he would need to (1) rebuild the fortress by the Temple, probably in the N.T. the Tower of Antonia just to the north; (2) repair the walls, that is, towers and gates in particular; (3) build himself a house as his own headquarters as governor. He believed it was God's approval that caused the king to grant his wishes.

Verses 9, 10 trace his progress through the provinces, especially Samaria and Ammon, on his approach to Jerusalem. While

1. The position of the queen sitting by or before the king corresponds with representations in the monuments. Compare especially the representation of Ashurbanipal reclining at a banquet, his queen being seated on a chair at the foot of his couch." *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 162.

these two lands in particular were hostile to him, his possession of papers from their superiors and his in Persia, and especially the Persian military guard accompanying him, would convince them of the necessity of allowing his passage. This was in contrast to Ezra's trip without escort (Ezra 8:22).

Sanballat, in *verse 10* was the governor of Samaria; his name appears in contemporary literature, the Elephantine Papyri from Egypt; the Jewish colony there asked for his support in building a temple to Jehovah there, but received no assistance. His name means "Sin (an Assyrian moon god) gives life"; it is not clear whether he worshiped the god Horon, or whether "Horonite" indicates that he was from Horonaim, in Moab; at any rate, his very name would be an offense to a loyal Israelite.

Tobiah (The name means "Pleasing to Jehovah"; a similar name, Tabeel, "Pleasing to God," is in Ezra 4:7.) was possibly a half-descendant of the Jews, appointed to govern the Ammonites north and east of Judah. Ruins of a place with his name clearly carved into the stone by the doorway has been located a ways east of the Jordan; from here his descendants, many with the same name, continued to rule for several centuries.²

The word "official" here is literally "slave" (cf. Word Studies for Ezra 9); in this context it would represent high rank, as a head of a province, though he was still subservient to the Persian king.

2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls.

TEXT, 2:11-20

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

12 And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell any one what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

2. For a description see the article, "The 'Araq el-Emir and the Tobiads," *Biblical Archaeologist*, Sept., 1957, pp. 63-76.

- 13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire.
- 14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass.
- 15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.
- 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the rest who did the work.
- 17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach."
- 18 And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.
- 19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"
- 20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem."

COMMENT

In *verse 11*, the three days may be compared with Ezra's after a similar journey: Ezra 8:32. It may mean only that Nehemiah arrived one day, rested the next, and after sundown (beginning of the third day) he began his inspection rounds.

Verse 12 describes the complete secrecy of this part of the operation. He went under cover at night; he took only a few with him;

he told no one why he was going; he took only one animal to ride, to make as little sound as possible. The secrecy was justified, as we gather from *verse 19*, from the opposition that arose when his tour became known.

All of the locations in *vss. 13-15* apparently were at the south end of Jerusalem, where two valleys converge to draw the city down to a narrow point. The refuse gate was to the south, possibly directed toward the Valley at Hinnom, the city's garbage dump (*Gehenna*). The piles of debris effectively blocked his passage eventually, and he was forced to double back before continuing.

Verse 16 re-emphasizes his secrecy; he did not even dare to trust any of his countrymen, whether priests, rulers, or labor contractors ("the rest who did the work") with his purpose or plans.

In *verse 17* he finally shares his burden, probably with those mentioned in *verse 16*. Note the first person: "the bad situation we are in . . . Come, let *us* rebuild. . . ." Two reasons seem to be on his mind: (1) to improve their physical situation, and (2) to improve their morale, i.e., take away their reproach, their reason for lacking self-respect and being ashamed.

We watch, in *verse 18*, as an idea begins with God ("the hand of God"), moves to Nehemiah ("had been favorable to me"), reaches the king ("and also about the king's words . . ."), and arrives at the people ("Then they said, 'Let us arise and build.' "). Then things began to move.

In *verse 19* opposition arises. Sanballat and Tobiah we met at *verse 10*; Geshem was their counterpart, known from contemporary literature as the governor of Arabia, though again he would not necessarily have been an Arabian. The territory then included Edom, which had been a thorn in the side of Israel for centuries (cf. the book of Obadiah).

The method which the Jews' enemies used at this point was ridicule; they especially charged them with trying to rebuild the walls in order to mount a rebellion which, it was implied, would be futile.

Nehemiah's reply, in *verse 20*, was one of hope and assurance of God's blessing: they would succeed because they were

His servants, while their enemies had no portion (property rights), no right (jurisdiction), or memorial (reason why any of the residents should remember their past connection with the city, their contribution was so small during the century and a half they had been able to occupy it).

WORD STUDIES

FOREST (vs. 8, *Pardes*): "PARADISE": a park or pleasure-ground, a place planted with trees, pleasure-garden, enclosed hunting-ground, a park with wild animals, around the residence of the Persian monarchs; region of surpassing beauty; park around the house. The word is used only here and in Song of Solomon 4:13 and Ecc. 2:5.

REPROACH (vs. 17: noun, *Cherpah*; verb, *Charaph*): has the basic idea of pulling, plucking, picking or gathering (fruit). We pick at people, and pull them apart. Our descriptive words, "carp" and "harp" (criticize, reproach, upbraid), may be derived from it. Since the picking of fruit also implies the approach of winter, it speaks of a frigid treatment, a scornful attitude.

SUMMARY

After about four months, Nehemiah stood before Artaxerxes to serve the wine. The king observed his dejected expression and asked the reason for it. Nehemiah replied that the city, gates, and cemetery of his ancestors lay in ruins. He asked that the king allow him a leave of absence and an appointment to go and help rebuild: he would also need supplies from government preserves. The wishes were granted and Nehemiah made his way from Persia through Ammon and Samaria to Jerusalem, meanwhile becoming aware of the enmity of Tobiah and Sanballat, governors of the two lands. In complete secrecy he journeyed by night around a part of the city's ruined walls; then he returned to the city and announced to some of its leaders a plan to restore the walls, with God's direction. The plan was adopted, the enemies responded

with ridicule and accusation of plotting rebellion, and Nehemiah predicted that God would crown their project with success.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the king of Persia?
2. What was the first thing Nehemiah did when he was asked to make his request?
3. Who heard of Nehemiah's trip, and what was the reaction?
4. What proposal arose out of Nehemiah's tour of inspection?

Chapter Three

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the people repaired the part of the wall they chose, or that they were assigned the part they were to work on? Would they have cast lots, so that they could not blame anyone else if their part was more difficult than others?
2. How do you suppose the work was financed?
3. Where did the materials come from?
4. Do you suppose they all had the same motive for what they were doing, or the same enthusiasm?

OUTLINE

There is only one topic in this chapter: Description of the rebuilding of the wall, section by section.

We will depart from our usual method in this chapter, and arrange the material topically for our discussion, hoping that it will be of greater interest and usefulness if treated in this manner. Each section will include parallels, or applications, for today. Three headings will be used:

1. Who the builders were,
2. What part they built, and
3. How they built.

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

TEXT, 3:1-32

- 1 Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel.
- 2 And next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.

- 3 Now the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars.
- 4 And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz made repairs. And next to him Meshullam the son of Berechiah the son of Meshezabel made repairs. And next to him Zadok the son of Baana also made repairs.
- 5 Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters.
- 6 And Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors, with its bolts and its bars.
- 7 Next to them Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, also made repairs for the official seat of the governor of the province beyond the River.
- 8 Next to him Uzziel the son of Harhaiah of the goldsmiths made repairs. And next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs, and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.
- 9 And next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs.
- 10 Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashabneiah made repairs.
- 11 Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahathmoab repaired another section and the Tower of Furnaces.
- 12 And next to him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters.
- 13 Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate. They built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and a thousand cubits of the wall to the Refuse Gate.
- 14 And Malchijah the son of Rechab, the official of the district of Beth-haccherem repaired the Refuse Gate. He built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars.
- 15 Shallum the son of Col-hozeh, the official of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate. He built it, covered it,

- and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and the wall of the Pool of Shelah at the King's Garden as far as the steps that descend from the city of David.
- 16 After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, official of half the district of Beth-zur, made repairs as far as a point opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the Artificial Pool and the House of the Mighty Men.
- 17 After him the Levites carried out repairs under Rehum the son of Bani. Next to him Hashabiah, the official of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district.
- 18 After him their brothers carried out repairs under Bavvai the son of Henadad, official of the other half of the district of Keilah.
- 19 And next to him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the official of Mizpah, repaired another section, in front of the ascent of the armory at the Angle.
- 20 After him Baruch the son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the Angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.
- 21 After him Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz repaired another section, from the doorway of Eliashib's house even as far as the end of his house.
- 22 And after him the priests, the men of the valley, carried out repairs.
- 23 After them Benjamin and Hasshub carried out repairs in front of their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah carried out repairs beside his house.
- 24 After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah as far as the Angle and as far as the corner.
- 25 Palal the son of Uzai made repairs in front of the Angle and the tower projecting from the upper house of the king, which is by the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh made repairs.
- 26 And the temple servants living in Ophel made repairs as far as the front of the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower.

- 27 After him the Tekoites repaired another section in front of the great projecting tower and as far as the wall of Ophel.
- 28 Above the Horse Gate the priests carried out repairs, each in front of his house.
- 29 After them Zadok the son of Immer carried out repairs in front of his house. And after him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, carried out repairs.
- 30 After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah carried out repairs in front of his own quarters.
- 31 After him Malchijah one of the goldsmiths, carried out repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, in front of the Inspection Gate and as far as the upper room of the corner.
- 32 And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants carried out repairs.

COMMENT:

The construction of the entire wall is described here, as though it was all completed immediately. More details of the work, and the hazards they overcame, occupy the next three chapters; at Neh. 6:15 we are told of the completion of the work.

In this chapter the arrangement of materials is not necessarily chronological, but geographic, moving from the Sheep Gate on the north side of the city counterclockwise section by section in order till we are brought back again to the Sheep Gate. For this reason this chapter furnishes the most extensive description of the city of Jerusalem that appears anywhere in the Bible.

Much of the material needed would be lying all about them: the stones from the old wall. Nehemiah had gotten permission to bring other material from the king's forest (2:8). Labor would be the largest item: digging, discarding debris, shaping, moving, lifting, fitting. What money was needed may have been contributed by each group.

1. The builders were from many backgrounds.

(1) There were men whose profession was religion. The chapter begins (3:1) with a mention of the high priest Eliashib and his brothers the priests. Nehemiah, a government official, does them the honor of placing them first. It is probable also that they were the first to begin the project. Meremoth, in *verse 4*, was identified with the priesthood by Ezra (8:33); other priests appear in *verses 22, 28*, possibly indicating residence in other quarters of the city.

We may ask if it is necessary to understand that they actually handled rocks and timbers. Perhaps they only supervised, or financed certain parts of the construction. But this is not stated; they had as much at stake in the city's future as any others, and it need not be a surprise if they were toiling side by side with their fellow-citizens. This is especially suggested by the phrase, "arose and built."

Levites are also mentioned (*vs. 17*), and temple servants (*26*) who lived in Ophel, the part of the city where the Temple was located.

(2) There were government officials located not only at Jerusalem (*vss. 9, 12*), but in nearby cities as well (*vss. 14-19*). Besides their families, they would have at their disposal many persons under their pay or authority. One who is also mentioned, who was of a lower rank than these, was the keeper of the East Gate (*vs. 29*). The entire function of government could be improved by good walls, so these men helped.

(3) Then there were businessmen. The goldsmiths (*vss. 8, 13, 32*) would compare with our jewelers. The perfumers (*vs. 8*) would be similar to our druggists. The merchants (*vs. 32*) would be our grocers, tailors, hardware dealers, storekeepers in general. Walls of security would be vital to them, and they were willing to expend the necessary energy and effort to provide them.

(4) There were people who came from other districts and cities: Jericho (*vs. 2*), Tekoa (*vss. 5, 27*), Gibeon and Mizpah (*vs. 7*), and many others (*vss. 13-19*). Their survival would be more likely with a strongly fortified city close by.

(5) Even women were included (*vs. 12*). It is nothing new for

ladies to work in field or factory, office or classroom, militia or commerce, when they are needed.

2. They built in many different environs.

Because some of the locations are especially appropriate to the people who made the repairs (close to their own homes, Levites at Ophel, priests at the gate where sheep were brought in, close to the Temple), we would guess that they had some choice of where they would work. It is also true that persons work the best at things they are interested in; while the wall would be monotonously the same all around the city, the surroundings would be exceedingly varied and would furnish a point of interest. Perhaps, then, we can try to guess why they repaired at these particular sites; perhaps those who give of their effort to the church today have a similar range of interests.

(1) Most prominently mentioned are the gates. There are ten of them: Sheep (*vs. 1, 32*), Fish (*vs. 3*), Old (*vs. 6*), Valley (*vs. 13*), Refuse (*vs. 14*), Fountain (*vs. 15*), Water (*vs. 26*), Horse (*vs. 28*), Inspection (*vs. 31*), and the keeper of the East Gate appears, though the gate itself is not mentioned in the locations.

Two other gates are mentioned later on in the book: the Gate of Ephraim, and of the Guard (*12:39*). So the city had twelve gates in Nehemiah's time; this may show how fitting it was for John to speak of the twelve gates of the city in time to come (*Rev. 21:12ff*).

Gates were often more than entrance ways. They could be large rooms, with walls subdividing them and with benches where elders could sit to hear disputes between neighbors. Note in *vs. 15* that one gate was provided with a cover, or roof. Here the merchants came each evening to make their goods available to the inhabitants (*Neh. 13:19-21*). So the gate would be important for commerce or for justice. We do see a goldsmith (jeweler) by the Inspection Gate (*vs. 31*), which is also close to the house of the merchants; and other goldsmiths and merchants by the Sheep Gate (*vs. 32*). So today there are those who serve the church

because they see benefits in it for their business, or they see its value in upholding justice, social or otherwise.

(2) Others worked close to the official seat of the governor (of the entire province, when he visited the city on business, *vs. 7*); by the king's garden (*vs. 15*), or by the upper house of the king and the court of the guard, i.e., prison (*vs. 25*). The church commends itself today to some because it fosters general subservience to the government, and makes the government's job easier.

(3) But the king's garden (*vs. 15*) would also be a place of great beauty, and an excellent environment for the one interested in esthetics. So music and art and even a vase of flowers have their place in the church's service.

(4) Half a dozen of the builders looked after the wall close to their own houses (*vss. 10, 23, 28, 29, 30*). The home is an important institution today, and many are appreciative of the role of the church in laying down patterns for enduring homes.

(5) Business interests, or industry, were represented; some labored by the Tower of Furnaces (*vs. 11*). The word is descriptive of baking ovens rather than smelting furnaces; it appears also in *Hos. 7:4ff*. Some industrialists have expressed a preference for hiring church members. Thus the church today attracts support from this kind of people who built Jerusalem's walls.

(6) The tombs of David, the cemetery section, came in for attention. It was this particularly that Nehemiah had used to catch the interest of the king of Persia (2:3). All of the traditions of the past, respect for one's elders, respect for the bravery of the forefathers (the House of the Mighty Men, *vs. 16*, was close by), all of these are involved here; and the church reaches many because of its identification with the traditions of the past.

(7) The ascent of the armory (*vs. 19*), the military training and supply center, drew notice also. While some see our military forces as our first line of defense, they may also see the church and our trust in God as our last line of defense.

(8) Religion was also at stake. Some repaired to the high priest's doorway (*vs. 20*), and to the residence of the temple servants (*vs. 31*). It is certain that some would have seen the need of strong walls then to protect their religious institutions; there are people today

who need no other reason than the need of religion, for their support of the church.

Even this does not exhaust the list. There is still the Artificial Pool (vs. 16) and the steps that descend from the City of David (vs. 15), the southern section of Jerusalem.

What shall we do about the persons who are drawn to the church by such a variety of motives? Criticize them for their inadequate motives? Or welcome them for the variety of contributions they make to the church all of which are necessary that the total wall, so to speak, can be built? And meanwhile, we seek to educate and improve and clarify their motives.

3. There were differences in how they built.

(1) When the priests launched the project by building a section of the wall, they held a service of consecration. They also included a stretch adjacent to where they had built. This would be characteristic of them; apparently no other part of the wall received that kind of treatment at that time. Perhaps it was because they were priests (although such actions don't follow in vs. 22 and 28); or perhaps it was to mark the beginning with dedication ceremonies to ask God's favor on the remainder of the project.

(2) One man, and only one, is remembered for building zealously (vs. 20).

(3) The Tekoites built in spite of lack of co-operation from their nobles (vs. 8; see Word Studies). They were not dissuaded by the apathy of their leaders, but recognized their obligation to their higher officials of state.

(4) Two of them repaired "another section" after finishing a first (vs. 21, cf. 4; 27, cf. 5). It seems that some must always carry double the ordinary load, if the Lord's work is done; it is especially noteworthy that the Tekoites, faced with the unconcern of their most capable, still went ahead with a second portion.

(5) Differences in the condition of the walls can be distinguished. In some places they must be totally rebuilt (vs. 2); in others they could simply be repaired (vs. 4); in others, they needed only to be

restored: the KJV has "fortified." The sense of this word is vague; literally it means "freed, cut loose, or left" (vs. 8).

The one thing apparent, from first to last, is the careful organization, the willingness of each group to do its small part, to contribute to the whole. A city wall with one gap is useless. An undertaking this large was impossible, except by an extra large amount of co-operation. For a hundred years and more the wall had been in ruins; now, because one man was sufficiently interested, the community was organized to pull together and do the work.

The next three chapters take us back a step and trace the achievement through some of its more difficult hours.

WORD STUDIES

SUPPORT (vs. 5): "put necks to." On the neck or shoulders are placed burdens (yoke: Gen. 27:40). When an ox braces itself to pull, it thrusts its neck or shoulders forward against the yoke. The Tekoite nobles were not doing this; they hadn't "knuckled down" to shoulder their part of the burden.

WALL (vs. 8: Chomah): the word emphasizes what is brought together, rather than what is kept out. The verb form means "to join together, join in affinity; surround with a wall; keep or hold together things conjoined."

A kindred word from the same base means "to bring together, congregate, conjoin." Another from the same base means, "become thick, curdle, coagulate (like milk)." Also from the same base are the words meaning "people," "kinsman," "collect," and the preposition "with."

This is an entirely different word from that which appears in the Word Studies for Ezra nine.

SUMMARY

It is difficult or useless to try to summarize a chapter with so many small details. It has been shown that those who worked on

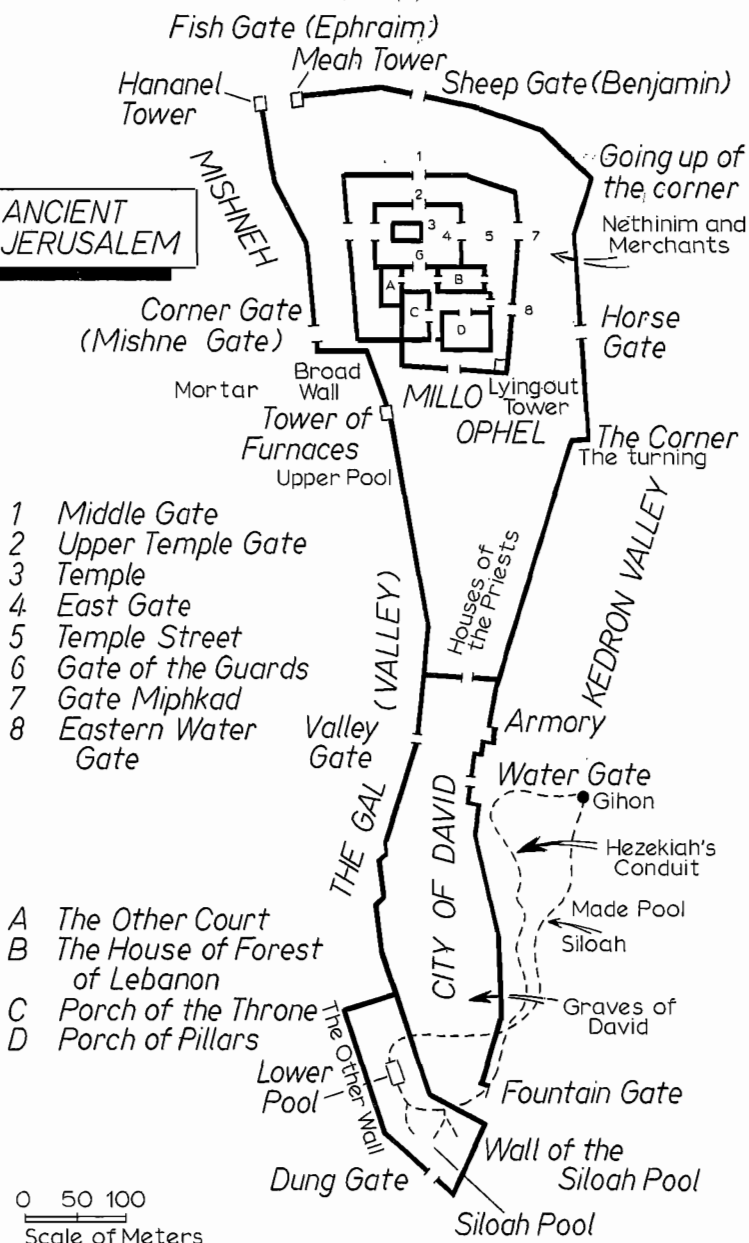
the wall were from very divergent professions and social levels: priests, jewelers, druggists, government officials, women, Levites, temple servants, merchants, and citizens of neighboring towns. They worked in a variety of environments: the gates, government headquarters, their own houses, down by the bakery, over at the cemetery, alongside the armory, close to the priest's house and the dormitories for the temple servants. They showed a variety of temperaments: reverence, zeal, stubbornness in the face of apathy, doggedly helping with a second section after finishing their first assignment; building anew, repairing, or just cleaning up and passing along.

The church can use all these types, for all these situations, and can watch as its members serve with their humanity showing through the chinks in their armor.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

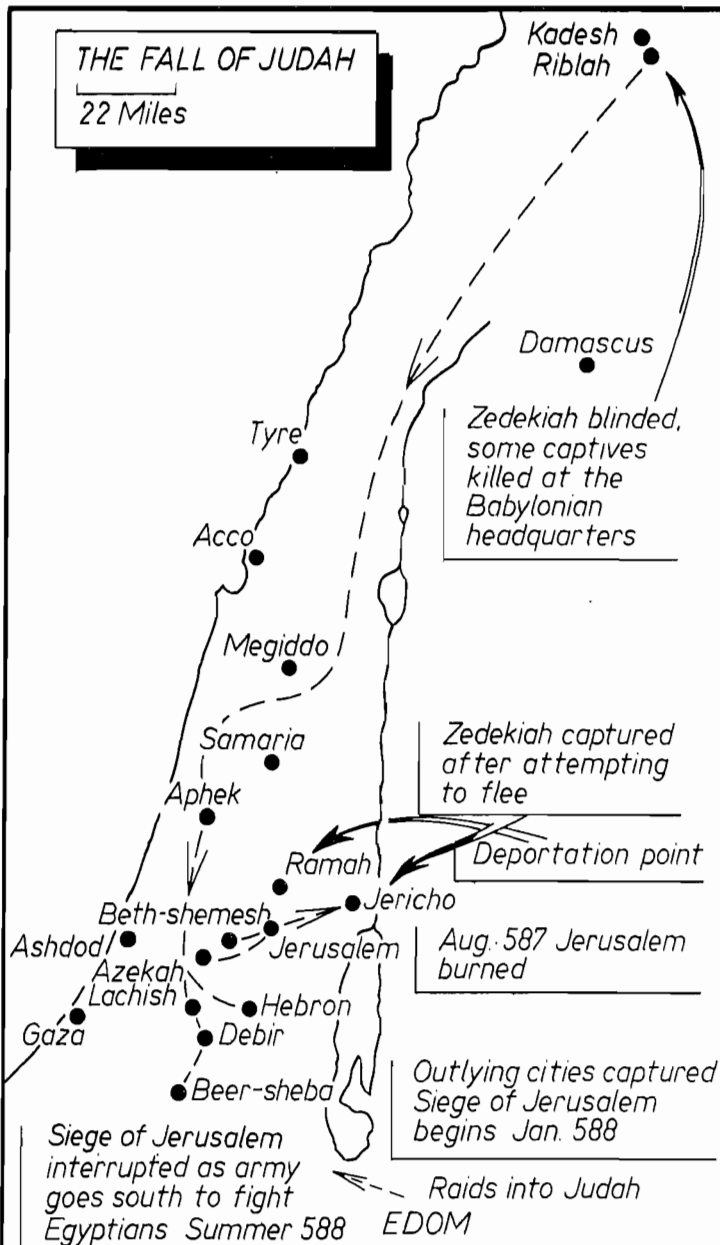
1. What part did priests take in the work?
2. Why do you suppose they consecrated what they built? Why didn't they consecrate all of it?
3. Were there some who did more than others?
4. Were there people from outside the city who helped?

ANCIENT JERUSALEM



THE FALL OF JUDAH

22 Miles



Chapter Four

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Sanballat didn't want a wall around Jerusalem?
2. How many times did Jerusalem's enemies attack the city?
3. What do you think was Israel's most important tool for overcoming obstacles?
4. What percentage of the men worked, and what percentage were on military duty?

OUTLINE

Chapters 4 - 6 describe the building of the walls with varying obstacles and opposition.

- D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule (vss. 1-6).
 2. They spread rumors of impending attack (vss. 7-14).
 3. Work progresses in spite of these (vss. 15-23).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule.

TEXT, 4:1-6

- 1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.
- 2 And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?"
- 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

- 4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity.
- 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.
- 6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

COMMENT

In *verse 1* we read of Sanballat's anger on hearing of progress on construction of the wall. Many times the enemy of the Lord's work exposes himself by this means today. Perhaps he did not want the wall built because it would make it difficult for him to attack and rob the city; his opposition is hard to explain otherwise. Strong defenses at Jerusalem could pose no threat to the safety of Samaria. His first stage of opposition consequently was ridicule; so must the Lord's people be prepared to deal with this tool which the Devil still uses.

Verse 2 gives the details of his mockery. See if any of it sounds familiar today. (1) The reference to the Jews as feeble (drooping, languishing) may be a subtle suggestion that if they had been tending their crops instead of working on the walls, they wouldn't be as weak from hunger now. What food for his stomach does one get from building walls, or going to church to listen to sermons? (2) The meaning of the next phrase, "restore it for themselves," is vague, and translations vary: it contains the ambiguous word from 3:8, which literally means, "to cut loose or free, leave." One thing is clear: the emphasis on "for themselves." What did they think they could do by themselves, without Sanballat's help? (3) The next two phrases may go together, and imply that the Jews would be foolish to think that by making sacrifices to God they could gain His favor and be able to finish their work quickly, "in

a day"; i.e., worship is futile, and such ideas are nonsense. Or we may see in the phrase, "can they offer sacrifices?" the implication that since the wall is not needed to enable them to make sacrifices, they must be building it to lead to a rebellion. Then the next phrase, "Can they finish it in a day?" has the contemptuous idea that the Jews would lose heart and would not stay with the work to its completion. (4) The last remark was an invitation to look at the rocks and rubbish before them; that would be enough to discourage anybody!

Verse 3 indicates the close tie between Sanballat of Samaria and Tobiah of Ammon, on opposite sides of the Jordan. The evaluation of the wall, that it would be no match for even a fox, i.e., jackal, was pure caricature and not argument.

The tone of *verses 4, 5* indicates that all of vss. 2, 3 were spoken audibly before Jerusalem. Nehemiah's instantaneous reaction was a brief prayer. This characteristic of the man appeared before, at 2:4; it will crop up several more times.

Nehemiah's requests were that God would be conscious of the way they were being ridiculed, and that their enemies be repaid for their evil blocking of God's approved plan. The imprecatory nature of the prayer is similar to that in a few of the Psalms (69:27f, for example). Let us not judge him by a morality which God would reveal through His Son several centuries later; we are bound, as he was not, to pray for our enemies; but it is true that the consequences which he asked are the natural outcome in this world of the kinds of evil being committed by their enemies. It is well for us to be warned, lest we suffer a similar fate.

Verse 5 happily records that because the people put their heart into their work ("mind" is literally "heart"), the work progressed to the halfway stage. The word "height" is a conjecture; it is missing in the Hebrew text: we could substitute "width" or simply say it was half-finished just as accurately. Work was progressing throughout its whole length, according to chapter three. Note also Nehemiah's taking no credit to himself; it was the people who were responsible.

2. The Jews faced the menace of an attack.

TEXT, 4:7-14

- 7 Now it came about when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry.
- 8 And all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.
- 9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.
- 10 Thus in Judah it was said,
 "The strength of the burden bearers is failing,
 Yet there is much rubbish;
 And we ourselves are unable
 To rebuild the wall."
- 11 And our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work."
- 12 And it came about when the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,"
- 13 then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows.
- 14 When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: "Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

COMMENT

Now begins the second stage of opposition, the threat of actual hostility.

Verse 7 spells out the sources of their opposition, from all four

directions. To the north was Sanballat, representing the Samaritans. To the northeast was Tobiah and the Ammonites. The Arabs would include Edom, to the south and east; and Ashdod lay to the southwest of Jerusalem, along the coast, among the descendants of the Philistines. This opposition arose before the gaps in the wall had been entirely closed.

In *verse 8*, their conspiracy was not directed to the military destruction of Jerusalem: they had insufficient armies for that, thanks to Persia's control over all of them; but they could create confusion and stop the work in that manner.

Nehemiah's response in *verse 9* was prayer, first of all. But it was combined with works; he posted an around-the-clock guard.

The poetic form of *verse 10* shows that it was an oft-repeated saying. If we see discouragement in it, the frustration of long hours already invested and still as many hours of toil lying ahead, there is also hope and confidence in it; it is the kind of song that would encourage them to grit their teeth and continue on. The reference to failing strength may be another clue to the fasting and privation necessitated by their work.

In *verse 11*, we hear their enemies threaten, perhaps pretending secrecy but intending for the threats to be reported to the Jews, to appear from nowhere and destroy the builders.

Verse 12 shows that their message was reported to the Jews. The persons doing the reporting were the workmen who came from outlying towns; people from Tekoa eleven miles south, from Gibeon and Mizpah a comparable distance to the north, and from half a dozen other localities mentioned in chapter three were all helping. The "ten times" is just a way of saying "repeatedly": cf. Gen. 31:7.

Verse 13 gives more information on Nehemiah's defense. Since the city lacked a professional army, he stationed people from the various families (clans) at the more vulnerable locations.

We see the reality of the situation in *verse 14*: the visible fear, and Nehemiah's effort to reassure them and spur them on. His arguments were good ones: (1) remember the power and greatness of God (from which their strength came), and (2) think of the

brothers, children, wives, and homes they were fighting to protect (which would give them an immediate, visible incentive).

3. Work progresses in the midst of precautions.

TEXT, 4:15-23

- 15 And it happened when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.
- 16 And it came about from that day on, that half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows, and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah.
- 17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon.
- 18 As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me.
- 19 And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.
- 20 "At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."
- 21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared.
- 22 At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day."
- 23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.

COMMENT

Verse 15: If it had been the plan of Judah's enemies to create confusion to hinder the work, the plan failed: they heard that the

Jews responded to the threats by organizing adequate defenses. Nehemiah gives credit to God for the outcome; the emphasis is not on their avoiding attack, but on their being able to continue their work. All we have seen so far are threats; their enemies may not have had the heart, or intention, to risk health or life for their evil ends.

Nehemiah's servants, *verse 16*, may have been his bodyguard of Persian soldiers. The presence of the captains behind the house of Judah could be physical; but it could speak more pointedly of their moral support.

The workmen in *verse 17* could continue hauling materials with one hand, and could use the other hand for weapons.

The workmen in *verse 18*, stone masons most likely, would need both hands for their work, so they kept their weapons close by.

At the end of *verse 18* and in *verses 19, 20*, communication was provided for. It was well over half a mile from the northern to the southern extremities of the wall, so a loud signal was needed if they were to be summoned to one another's defense. The shofar (trumpet), made of the curved horn of a cow or ram, was the answer. With this reassurance against surprise attack, and with the added assurance of God's assistance, they could work more efficiently.

In *verse 21*, though their work force was cut in half by their need of defense, they could make up a part of this by working from dawn to dusk.

According to *verse 22*, additional efficiency would be obtained by keeping all the workers within the city each night. The teaming of a skilled and unskilled laborer may be suggested by the mention of a man and his servant. The availability of the workmen as guards during the night is cited; there would be other advantages to the stratagem. It had been the workers who came from outside the city who brought the rumors in *verse 12*; this would cut off that avenue of subversion. It would also prevent defections from their work force, and at the same time speed construction by eliminating travel time. There may be a hint in this passage on how to get along with people; the only reasons which Nehemiah expressed for keeping men in the city were those which showed no

lack of confidence in, or disrespect for, his workmen. The practice of hospitality by the residents of the city would be needed to make this method succeed.

Verse 23 emphasizes once more the urgency of their work, that they kept their clothes on continuously. The last phrase of the verse is obscure. Literally it reads, "each one his weapon to the water." The KJV interprets it to mean that they did remove their clothes to wash them; sanitation must not be neglected. The *Anchor Bible* assumes that it is necessary to make some small corrections in the text; it reads, "each one had his spear in his right hand," to indicate constant readiness. The *Cambridge Bible* adds still more and suggests, "each one with his weapon in his hand for a full month of days." The NASB stresses that they took their weapons everywhere, even to get a drink or to bathe. The *Living Bible* simply tries to capture the sense: "And we carried our weapons with us at all times."

WORD STUDIES

WEALTHY (vs. 2: Chayil): in various contexts, it can mean (1) strength, might, valor; (2) forces, army; (3) ability, wealth; (4) integrity, virtue. It is usually translated "army," but "wealth" in Ruth 2:1, where it describes Boaz.

The two most important letters in the word are the "h" and "l"; these appear in our words "heil," "hale," "heal," "health," "whole," and even "holy": words having the same sense as the Hebrew, in certain contexts. They also occur in a word of very different derivation, but with the same connotations, in our slang "(big) wheel"; we wonder if this is only a coincidence. Try that expression in verse 2!

TRUMPET (vs. 20: Shofar): scratch, scrape, rub, polish. This leads to the idea of brightness, brilliance, and a brilliant tone. The word for "scribe" (Sepher) is akin to it (cf. Word Studies on Ezra 7: note the resemblance in primary meaning). There seems to be a connection between what a person communicates by writing or speech, and what he conveys by musical tones.

SUMMARY

This chapter tells of the effort of Israel's enemies to block progress on the wall by ridicule and rumor. First, Sanballat of Samaria made fun of these feeble people trying by themselves to push stones around; stones which already had been pushed over and burned, showing their ineffectiveness. Tobiah joined in by saying it wouldn't support a fox. Nehemiah prayed, and the people kept on working till the wall was half built.

Then their enemies came from four directions and threatened to do battle. Again Nehemiah prayed, and this time he set a guard. The workers were becoming tired and discouraged. A rumor of ambush spread, and as the people became frightened, Nehemiah calmed them and encouraged them to be willing to fight for God and home. Half of the workers were put on guard while the other half worked; even these had their weapons in their hand or within reach. At the sound of a trumpet, all were to rush to that point to defend their fellows. They worked from dawn to dusk, they remained close to their work instead of going home, some slept in their clothes, and they stayed alert.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did these events happen, compared to the previous chapter?
2. What methods were used by Israel's enemies to prevent building?
3. What tribes of people opposed them?
4. What is the first thing Nehemiah did to overcome them? The second thing?

Chapter Five

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What were the reasons for the people's distress?
2. What had they done to relieve their hardships?
3. What would have been the result if no further solution were found?
4. How much expense was Nehemiah willing to go to?
5. How do interest rates compare, then and now?

OUTLINE

E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.

1. The problem stated (vss. 1-5).
2. The solution (vss. 6-13).
3. Nehemiah's own example (vss. 14-19).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.

1. Selfishness and greed create a problem.

TEXT, 5:1-5

- 1 Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.
- 2 For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters, are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live."
- 3 And there were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields our vineyards, and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."
- 4 Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."
- 5 "And now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters

are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

COMMENT

Chapter five presents a new kind of problem: the work is threatened by internal dissension. Somewhere along the line this almost always has to be faced. It may be pointed out that the problem is not identified exclusively with the rebuilding of the wall. The only mention of the wall in this chapter is in verse 16, and may be merely a statement that Nehemiah had helped on the construction at some time past. The problem of usury was probably larger and more extensive than the brief period of their work on the wall. It would give even more point to their complaint, however, if this was going on while the walls were being built. The presence of the chapter at this point does have its weight and does suggest a connection. It does follow logically from the things that have gone before.

With great numbers of workmen busy from dawn to dusk repairing the wall in the shortest time, and with their being forbidden even to go out of the city to take care of crops, some would begin to suffer hardship. The workers received no income apparently, and this kind of toil produced no consumer goods; hunger was the inevitable result. Opportunists arose and took advantage of the situation to make themselves wealthy at the expense of the hard pressed.

Verse 1 identifies the opportunists as some of the more wealthy Jewish brethren. Some of these may have been of the number who had married the "peoples of the lands" (cf. comments on Ezra 9:1), and had become prosperous as a result. It made the load no lighter that those who were oppressing them were of their own race and religion.

Verse 2 states the people's appeal to the government for relief, and identifies the first of three of their burdens: some had large families, "Let us get grain" may be their threat to steal to keep from starving, or it may be only a request for food to help them survive this time of desperation.

Verse 3 gives the second source of their grief: many had gone in debt and mortgaged their property, and were in danger of default and the loss of everything. The famine alluded to may not have been a general condition; the word is used in other places occasionally of private hunger, so it may be only a suggestion of the conditions imposed on some persons by the circumstances mentioned above. These in themselves would be enough to produce the situation of hunger.

Their third burden, in *verse 4*, was taxes. Some had borrowed money, jeopardizing their lands and pledging their future crops to pay the Persian tribute; their subjection to Persia was an ever-present reality.

Verse 5 is their plea, on the basis of compassion. If their creditors loved their children, they could be sure that the poor loved their children in the same manner. Some families had already been driven to sell their sons and daughters into slavery, and to part from them. In addition, some of their daughters had been forced into bondage. This may have been an euphemism for rape¹; at the least it would imply marriages which were not of their choosing, since women were often sold into slavery for this purpose (Ex. 21:7-11).

Of course all of this was legal: the Law of Moses made provision for a person to sell his children into slavery to pay his debts (Lev. 25:39-43). He could even sell himself; he could not sell his wife separately, for "the twain shall be one flesh."

And slavery was not as onerous as it became in more recent centuries. A Hebrew slave, male or female, was to be released after a maximum of six years (Dt. 15:12-18), though slaves were not always freed as they should have been (Jer. 34:14-17). If he suffered any injury or abuse, he was to be released (Ex. 21:27). He had the further option of running away, in which case he was to be protected and not returned to his former owner (Dt. 23:15f). In effect, he was a slave only as long as he wanted to be a slave. Neither is today's employee in industry compelled to report to his job any longer than he wishes; but he won't get help in paying his

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 708.

expenses and his debts unless he does. Why, then, would they bemoan the enslavement of their children? Even at best there was the reality of separation from them.

2. Nehemiah protests, and offers a solution.

TEXT, 5:6-13

- 6 Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.
- 7 And I consulted with myself, and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.
- 8 And I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.
- 9 Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"
- 10 "And likewise I, my brothers and my servants, are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury.
- 11 "Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them."
- 12 Then they said, "We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.
- 13 I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said,

“Amen!” And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

COMMENT

Note the personal tone of *verse 6*.

In *verse 7*, he makes two appeals. The first is addressed to the nobles and rulers, i.e., the persons making the loans at excessive interest, and buying the slaves (perhaps collecting exorbitant taxes, too). The second is to the people themselves (this is labeled a characteristic of Nehemiah²), whose support and good will is always ultimately essential to any rulers. The complaint is against usury (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35ff; Dt. 23:19). The purpose for making a loan should be to help the needy, not to enrich the lender.

Verse 8, before the assembled people, informs us that Nehemiah and others had bought Jews back from slavery to foreigners, to the limit of their means, either in the lands of their captivity or more recently in Judah. Now their fellow-Jews were selling them back into slavery. There was nothing illegal about this, but it just didn't make sense.

Verse 9, still before the assembly, appeals to their creditors on the basis that their action was bringing aid and comfort to their enemies, who would hear reports of every oppression. There is the implication also that what they were doing was not consistent with reverence to God.

In *verse 10*, Nehemiah appeals to them on the basis of his own example. His brothers would be his relatives or associates whom he had brought with him from Persia; the servants would be the soldiers sent as his bodyguard. Each of these were making loans of food and money to the poor. There is a kindly compulsion in his words as he includes himself in the exhortation, “Please, let us leave off this usury.”

Verse 11 suggests that the property which had been mortgaged

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 709.

and subjected to foreclosure, plus the crops and personal belongings, be returned to their original owners. The hundredth part of the money presents a problem. He may have asked them to drop all interest requirements, in which case the 1% would be the monthly rate. Even so, this would be low interest in a world where 20% was the standard figure (Lev. 5:16; 6:5). One suggestion is that one letter had slipped out of a word, and the text should be emended to read, "also the *claim* on the money and the grain . . ." ³ However, the interest rate is not that unbelievable; Latin sources speak of the same monthly rate of 1%, or annual rate of 12%. ⁴

Verse 12 indicates their consent to this proposal. To avoid a change of heart later on, they were required to go through the formalities of taking an oath (see "Take Oath," Word Studies for Ezra 10).

In *verse 13* we see Nehemiah employ a "visual aid." The folds of his garment served as pockets for the personal belongings he would carry; with a dramatic gesture he shook these out before his audience as a symbol of the loss of possessions which God would cause the person to suffer who violated his oath. The assembly cheered; they all praised God; and their creditors kept their promise.

3. Nehemiah vindicates his own conduct.

TEXT, 5:14-19

- 14 Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah; from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.
- 15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty

3. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 129.

4. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 212.

shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

- 16 And I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.
- 17 Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.
- 18 Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people.
- 19 Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

COMMENT

From *verse 14*, it is obvious that this note was written after Nehemiah's second journey to his brethren in Israel, described in 13:6ff. It would also appear from this verse (and through the end of the chapter) that Nehemiah was a man of considerable means who could afford to live on his income as a Persian official without ever drawing his salary as governor of Judah, for himself or for his assistants. This is also the first disclosure that Nehemiah has made of the rank which had been assigned to him by Artaxerxes; again we see something of his reserve. We can also guess what kept his enemies in the surrounding regions from attacking.

Verse 15 contrasts this with other administrations in which large (daily) demands had been made on the people, both by the rulers and by their appointees. The forty shekels of silver was probably the value of the bread and wine, rather than in addition to it; assuming that a shekel was an average day's wage for a working man, the ruler would be well paid. Add the burden of the appointees' domineering attitude (underlings in government have historically been among the most overbearing), and we can guess

the benefits which Nehemiah's administration had in contrast. The reason he gives for his unassuming character was his fear of the Lord.

Verse 16 lists three more things to his credit. (1) He himself helped with construction on the wall; even if this meant only superintendence of the work, it was beyond the call of duty for a governor. (2) Neither he nor his associates bought up any of the land at cheap prices from the desperate workers. (3) His own soldiers busied themselves with the building.

Meanwhile, in *verse 17*, there were the considerable expenses of official hospitality. It is suggested that the 150 Jews were the officials spoken of; read, "Jews, that is, officials." There were still others from surrounding lands who came and went.

The daily menu, in *verse 18*, has been estimated as sufficient to feed 400 to 500 people⁵; that would be no small food bill. Here also is his concern not to be a burden on the people. It is always a blessing when those who give themselves to the service of others do not need to be compensated by oppressive salaries from those whom they volunteer to serve.

In *verse 19* Nehemiah's only request for recompense for his work was from God. His nobility speaks for itself.

WORD STUDIES

REDEEM. Of the three main words translated "redeem" in the O.T., two appear in Nehemiah. Qanah, 5:8: "set upright, erect." This is a means of "founding, creating," by which then we "get, acquire" something, as Eve "got" Cain; hence to get by purchase, buy, buy off, or redeem.

Padah, 1:10: the basic idea is to cut off, or cut loose; thus, to let go free, or set free. This happens when one is ransomed, or redeemed.

The third word, Gaal (noun, Goel, Redeemer) is implied in the whole process of being sold into slavery as described in 5:5, or in

5. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 714.

mortgaging property (5:3). A near relative always has the right; if he were sufficiently wealthy and equally concerned (see Ruth 4:1-6 for one who wasn't), to buy a person back from slavery (Lev. 25:48f; Ex. 6:6); he could always redeem land which had been sold or foreclosed (Lev. 25:25). All firstborn males were to be given in sacrifice to God in memory of the sparing of the firstborn in Egypt; but a person could not be sacrificed, so a redemption price was paid and his life was spared (Ex. 13:2, 13). If a person had suffered a crime or had been murdered, his next kinsman was to track down the guilty and avenge his brother; this threat would preserve justice in the land (Num. 35:19). Or if a married man died without children, his next younger brother or kinsman was to marry her and continue his brother's name and inheritance (Ruth 3:13).

So our redeemer restores our inheritance, recovers us from sin's bondage, rescues us from death, protects us from injustice, and gives us an everlasting name.

SUMMARY

The next obstacle which Nehemiah and the builders had to surmount was caused by the Jews themselves: their selfishness and greed and oppression of one another. Some had been forced by the economic situation to borrow money, mortgaging and losing their property. Others had sold their children into slavery. Still others had encumbered their property to borrow the money to pay their taxes.

When Nehemiah heard how they were abusing one another when they all equally needed the protection of the wall and its completion was in jeopardy, he went to their creditors and politely insisted that they return the slaves and things taken in security, that they eliminate the usurious interest rate, and thus honor God and quit giving comfort to their enemies. Walls or no walls, the presence of a class of impoverished people never makes a contribution to the wealth of the well-to-do; ultimately the well-being of all is related. Observing Nehemiah's own example they

agreed, and took an oath to continue this policy into the future.

Nehemiah himself assessed no tax on the land to pay his salary or his lavish hospitality bills. He required similar generosity of his associates and soldiers, and he and they actually assisted in the construction of the wall.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who had caused the people's distress?
2. How did Nehemiah propose that this be relieved?
3. What example did Nehemiah himself set?
4. Was the solution successful?

Chapter Six

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Can you find two occasions when Nehemiah prayed?
2. What was the basis of the information which his enemies had?
3. What saved Nehemiah from their plots?
4. How long did it take to repair the wall about Jerusalem?
5. What were the results to their enemies?

OUTLINE

- F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.
1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference (vss. 1-4).
 2. They try again through spreading rumors of rebellion (vss. 5-9).
 3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah (vss. 10-14).
 4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah (vss. 15-19).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion,
but the wall is completed.

1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference.

TEXT, 6:1-4

- 1 Now it came about when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates,
- 2 that Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me.
- 3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great

work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

- 4 And they sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

COMMENT

In *verse 1* the full threesome from Neh. 2:19 are present once more, plus other enemies. Geshem, ruler over Arabia though not necessarily an Arabian, may have been the most powerful figure of them all, as his territory was larger than the others. The statement that the doors had not been hung in the gates is another indication that chapter 3 had carried the story clear through, and chapters 4-6 go back and fill in the details.

In *verse 2* the name of Tobiah is missing, which has provoked speculation that he refused to be implicated in a plot which involved him in violence against a Jewish ruler. Or it may be that he was just waiting his turn with his own scheme. The plot apparently was to single Nehemiah out from his defenders, entice him away from the city to a secluded spot, and assassinate him, or at least give him a sound beating.

Verse 3 gives Nehemiah's reply: he would not be diverted from his work. It was not an out-and-out refusal, but at least he would not consider it until his present work was done; one must not lose sight of his priorities.

Verse 4 indicates that a similar ploy was used, with similar results, three more times.

2. They try again by spreading rumors of rebellion.

TEXT, 6:5-9

- 5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand.
6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and

Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports.

- 7 "And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."
- 8 Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind."
- 9 For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

COMMENT

In *verses 5-7*, the fifth try introduces two variations: the letter is unsealed, and it contains definite charges.

The use of an open letter, in *verse 5*, may have had several motives. (1) It may have been designed to frighten Nehemiah because he would observe that its contents were known to others; thus he could not ignore it or dismiss it as easily as he had the others. (2) The people of the city who were aware of its contents might be terrified and might abandon active co-operation in the work to avoid suspicion of rebellion. (3) Some of them might actually try to dispose of Nehemiah seeking to do the king a favor and receive a reward for destroying a traitor; if Sanballat could get someone else to adopt this risky mission, he would be spared its dangers. (4) Meanwhile he would contribute to the spread of rumors and might force Nehemiah to come to him in hopes of resolving the charges.

Verse 6 credits two sources: "they say," and "Gashmu says." In other words, these were rumors. Gashmu is a dialectical difference in spelling for the name Geshem. There is a similar variation in spelling the name Tobiah as "Tobiyahu" (II Chr. 17:8), which the English text does not reveal. Many other names (Jeremiah and

Hezekiah among them) also have similar variant forms.

The rumor (apparently being initiated by Geshem on the spot) was that "you are building the wall" ("you" is singular) as a prelude to leading the Jewish people in a rebellion. Another part of it was that Nehemiah planned to make himself king, which would be treason. If the rumor spread far enough, it might even bring the armies and the king of Persia against Nehemiah!

Verse 7 adds other details to the rumor, that Nehemiah had hired prophets to proclaim him king and to rally the people behind him. It was always possible that one somewhere might actually be doing this. During Zerubbabel's rule some believed that he could be the Messiah promised of God (Hag. 2:23), and later during Jesus' ministry some sought to make him king.

The inference which they were making was that the rumors would get to the Persian court unless Nehemiah came to them, whereupon they would be reassured and could clear his name of suspicion and defend him from these charges. If Nehemiah had not been absolutely sure of his standing with the king of Persia, and of Artaxerxes' complete confidence in him, he could have been misled.

Verse 8 indicates that he saw through the scheme and dismissed it as coming out of Sanballat's imagination. A ruler out of touch with his subjects never could have acted with such confidence.

Verse 9 shows that Nehemiah was aware also of the purpose to discourage and alienate the workers. It concludes with another prayer just a breath long. It is all the more remarkable as an almost unconscious prayer because of the absence of "O God," which is inserted by the translators.

3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah.

TEXT, 6:10-14

- 10 And when I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and

let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.”

- 11 But I said, “Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.”
- 12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.
- 13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.
- 14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me.

COMMENT

In *verses 10-14* Tobiah's plan is unveiled. Perhaps his absence in the previous paragraphs is to be explained by the necessity for him to be setting up his stand-by plan.

Shemaiah, in *verse 10*, is not identified further than by naming his father and grandfather. Some suppose that he was a priest¹ because he proposed that he and Nehemiah hide in the Temple, which was forbidden territory for anyone but priests; Shemaiah would have been spared, but Nehemiah could have been executed for such an infraction of the law. Laymen had the right of sanctuary at the altar, but not inside the building. Others see him as a prophet, specifically a false prophet, because his proposition is in the form of poetry (it is so arranged in the *Anchor Bible*²), as most prophecies were (especially false prophecies); and because it is called a prophecy in *verse 12*. If he were not a priest, he would have needed some other ruse to get Nehemiah into the building while he stayed outside, for example. It is useless to speculate beyond what the Bible has recorded, and it does not tell which he was.

1. *Ellicott's Commentary on The Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p. 492.

2. *Anchor Bible*, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” p. 122.

Shemaiah's being shut up has also been variously interpreted. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that he was seeking to overcome Nehemiah's suspicion of him by pretending to be in as much danger as he; they would both need to go into the Temple to save their lives.

In *verse 11*, Nehemiah was not taken in by this trick. First, he trusted his position as a Persian official to give him more protection than could be provided by stealth: "Should a man like me flee?" Secondly, he saw the proposition as involving the violation of a sacred law (Num. 18:7); the preferred reading then is, "Could one such as I go into the Temple and live?"

Verse 12 may subtly suggest a third reason: he discerned (by a flash of insight perhaps) "that surely God had not sent him." All true prophecies must come from God; a prophet was not allowed to originate his own message, to speak from himself (Dt. 18:20); Shemaiah had not used the formula, "Thus saith the Lord!" Sometimes a knowledge of the Scriptures can save a man's life. This proved to be a good hunch; Sanballat and Tobiah had hired the man to speak this deception.

In *verse 13*, Nehemiah speaks of the plot only as an effort to discredit him and cause him to sin. This would have been enough to end the effectiveness of his particular ministry; his death would have been incidental.

Verse 14 provides a pause in the action, and another of Nehemiah's quickie prayers. He asks that God keep in mind what his enemies have done. Noadiah is not known from any other reference. The mention of women prophets is rare, but there were some whom God used (Jgs. 4:4; Lk. 2:36).

4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah.

TEXT, 6:15-19

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.

- 16 And it came about when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.
- 17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.
- 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.
- 19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

COMMENT

Verse 15 reports the completion of the wall; the date, in the month of Elul, would correspond with the middle of September. Total time required for the work was fifty-two days. This seems incredible to many; Josephus supposes it to have taken two years and four months.³ This seems unnecessary.

There is a childhood riddle that goes, "If it takes a hen and a half a day and a half to lay an egg and a half, how long would it take for fifty hens to lay fifty eggs?" It was always a delight to hear someone respond "Fifty." But the correct answer is a day and a half; it takes no longer for fifty hens to lay fifty eggs than it takes for one hen to lay one egg (or 1 to lay 1). To come back to the wall, the work required no longer than it took for one crew to complete one unit, as long as each crew did its part, and there are at least 42 crews named in Neh. 3! That is the marvel of organization, and that may just be what Nehemiah is telling us.

Verse 16 records the result. (1) Their enemies in the surrounding nations were humbled. (2) God was glorified.

Verses 17-19 are parenthetical, giving more information on some of the intrigues, especially involving Tobiah, which went on

3. *Antiquities of The Jews*, Book XI, chap. 5, p. 274.

and in spite of which the wall was completed promptly.

Verse 17 reveals that Tobiah had much influence and much correspondence with government leaders in Judah.

Verse 18 gives a reason for this, in the intermarriage of his family with Israel's leading priests. Shecaniah is mentioned in Ezra 2:5, and Meshullam in Neh. 3:4, 30.

Verse 19 reflects Nehemiah's difficulties within his own ranks as a result of divided loyalties. "Words" ("they . . . reported my words to him") may be translated "goings forth"; hence, his activities.

This ends the story of rebuilding the wall.

WORD STUDIES

REMEMBER (vs. 14: Zakar): from the idea of "pricking or piercing" comes the idea of "penetrating or infixing"; thus "remembering, recalling, considering."

GESHEM (vs. 1): violent storm, severe shower.

STRENGTHEN (vs. 9: Chazaq): the primary idea is to bind fast, to gird tight; then to cleave, or adhere firmly.

Things are strengthened by being bound together; a spear may be made stronger by winding it round with a cord. One's strength seems greater when he has fastened a girdle about his loins.

A very free translation might be, "Give my hands stick-to-it-iveness!" Or, "Link our hands together (with others, or Yours)!" Or, "Hitch up my belt!" Or just "Give me strength."

SUMMARY

As the wall neared completion, Sanballat and Geshem tried to lure Nehemiah into a trap, but he would not leave his work. They used rumors to try to frighten him, or bring him to them, or discourage the workers, but he was not fooled by their lies. Then Sanballat and Tobiah hired Shemaiah to trick him into violating a law of God, thus putting his life in jeopardy or destroying the

faith which the people had in him. Again Nehemiah saw through their scheme. As a result the wall was finished fifty-two days after work began, to the glory of God and the embarrassment of their enemies. Meanwhile Tobiah, who had relatives among the leaders and priests, was in frequent communication with Jewish leaders, learning Nehemiah's moves; he even sent letters to Nehemiah himself to frighten him.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the three neighboring rulers who plotted against Nehemiah in this chapter?
2. How many times did they communicate with Nehemiah?
3. What was different about the last letter?
4. Who was the man hired to destroy Nehemiah by trickery, and who hired him?

Chapter Seven

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Nehemiah appointed his brother to an important government post?
2. Who else besides his brother was appointed?
3. How thickly was Jerusalem populated at this time?
4. Why did Nehemiah stress that God put it into his heart to take a census?

OUTLINE

- G. Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
1. Nehemiah makes arrangements for the continued defense and administration of the city (vss. 1-4).
 2. He retraces the genealogies of the first returning exiles (vss. 5-73).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- G. Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
1. Nehemiah makes arrangements for the continued defense and administration of the city.

TEXT, 7:1-4

- 1 Now it came about when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed,
- 2 that I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.
- 3 Then I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing guard, let them shut and bolt the doors. Also appoint guards from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house."

- 4 Now the city was large and spacious but the people in it were few and the houses were not built.

COMMENT

The occasion for Nehemiah's activity was probably his anticipated return to his duties in Persia. Since the purpose for which he had come was now completed, he could return things to the hands of the permanent residents.

Verse 1 speaks of the appointing of gatekeepers; we seldom read of these in the Bible, but we know they were there. These were times when their work was especially important.

Levites and singers are also mentioned, probably to help man the watchtowers, since the population of the city now consisted of such a disproportionate number of temple personnel.

Verse 2 records two personal appointments. Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, who had alerted him to the problem at the book's beginning (1:2), was one, and Hananiah, a military leader known for his religious profession and consistency, was the other.

Verse 3 bespeaks the continued tension in the city; the gates were not to be opened until the citizens were well awake and active, rather than at the first rays of dawn. The doors were not to be shut only, but bolted for security, as in times of active threat. Sentries were to consist of security police and a citizen patrol.

Verse 4 is another reminder that the city's greatness in the past far outstripped the present. There was still a need for restoring more of the houses for the residents and for prospective growth.

2. Nehemiah retraces the genealogies of first returning exiles.

TEXT, 7:5-73

- 5 Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record:

- 6 These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city,
- 7 who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah.
- The number of men of the people of Israel:
- 8 the sons of Parosh, 2,172;
- 9 the sons of Shephatiah, 372;
- 10 the sons of Arah, 652;
- 11 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818;
- 12 the sons of Elam, 1,254;
- 13 the sons of Zattu, 845;
- 14 the sons of Zaccai, 760;
- 15 the sons of Binnui, 648;
- 16 the sons of Bebai, 628;
- 17 the sons of Azgad, 2,322;
- 18 the sons of Adonikam, 667;
- 19 the sons of Bigvai, 2,067;
- 20 the sons of Adin, 655;
- 21 the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, 98;
- 22 the sons of Hashum, 328;
- 23 the sons of Bezai, 324;
- 24 the sons of Hariph, 112;
- 25 the sons of Gibeon, 95;
- 26 the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188;
- 27 the men of Anathoth, 128;
- 28 the men of Beth-azmaveth, 42;
- 29 the men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743;
- 30 the men of Ramah and Geba, 621;
- 31 the men of Michmas, 122;
- 32 the men of Bethel and Ai, 123;
- 33 the men of the other Nebo, 52;
- 34 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254;
- 35 the sons of Harim, 320;
- 36 the men of Jericho, 345;
- 37 the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 721;

- 38 the sons of Senaah, 3,930;
- 39 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973;
- 40 the sons of Immer, 1,052;
- 41 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247;
- 42 the sons of Harim, 1,017.
- 43 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, 74.
- 44 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 148.
- 45 The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, 138.
- 46 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth,
- 47 the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon,
- 48 the sons of Lebana, the sons of Hagaba, the sons of Shalmal,
- 49 the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar,
- 50 the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda,
- 51 the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah,
- 52 the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephushešim,
- 53 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur,
- 54 the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha,
- 55 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah,
- 56 the sons of Nezhiah, the sons of Hatipha.
- 57 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida,
- 58 the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel,
- 59 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon.
- 60 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants, were 392.
- 61 And these were they who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses or their descendants, whether they were of Israel:
- 62 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 642.

- 63 And of the priests: the sons of Hobaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, and was named after them.
- 64 These searched among their ancestral registration, but it could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood.
- 65 And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest arose with Urim and Thummim.
- 66 The whole assembly together was 42,360,
- 67 besides their male and their female servants, of whom there were 7,337; and they had 245 male and female singers.
- 68 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245;
- 69 their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720.
- 70 And some from among the heads of fathers' households gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold drachmas, 50 basins, 530 priests' garments.
- 71 And some of the heads of fathers' households gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 gold drachmas, and 2,200 silver minas.
- 72 And that which the rest of the people gave was 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,000 silver minas, and 67 priests' garments.
- 73 Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their cities.

And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.

COMMENT

Most of the remainder of this chapter is a repetition of material in Ezra 2, and therefore will need no further comment. Some additional differences beyond those noted there will be observed.

Verse 5 explains the situation which brought the genealogical records to light. Probably with a view to increasing the population of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was led of God to initiate a census

of the land. His emphasis on the Lord's leading may be explained if he was familiar with David's experience, arising out of pride, in II Sam. 24. In the course of these preparations he ran across the public register of those who had come with Zerubbabel, almost a hundred years before. These would be useful as a beginning point, as a means of comparison, and as a tool for exerting pressure to maintain or increase the population of the city and province.

Verse 6 begins the repetition of Ezra 2. Slight differences in spelling and the addition of the name of Nahamani have already been noted in Ezra 2. This additional name was on the genealogical list which Nehemiah consulted, and brings the number of men who had led the returning expedition to twelve. This parallels the first chapter of Numbers, where twelve men had been chosen to share leadership with Moses in bringing Israel to the Promised Land. They must have thought of themselves as their spiritual descendants, making a new beginning for Israel as much like the old as possible. However, Nehemiah's list does not identify each name with a specific tribe. This is another step toward the principle frequently observed in the O.T., and expressed by Paul in Rom. 9:6-8, that descent from the right forefathers is not only insufficient but also unnecessary. Some further comment on the change from Rehum (Ezra 2:2) to Nehum (Neh. 7:7) may be excusable. The letters N, L, and R are somewhat interchangeable in Hebrew; a familiar example is the spelling of Nebuchadnezzar and its variant, Nebuchadrezzar.

There are two words using these letters, which portray one's heart going out to another. One, Naham, means "comfort"; the other, Raham, means "compassion"; the distinction in meaning is rather small. Do you suppose that Nehemiah, in running across the name, Rehum (note the consonants only), may have recognized a variant spelling of the first component of his own name, and consciously or unconsciously spelled it like his own? We emphasize, many of these names were spelled correctly in more than one way.

In addition, there are several discrepancies in the number of people in various groups (example: sons of Arah, 775 in Ezra 2:5, in Neh. 7:10, 652. One suggestion is that Ezra quoted Babylonian

sources relative to those who planned to come; Nehemiah, with the Jerusalem records before him, those who actually arrived.¹ However, Nehemiah mentions one person, Nahamani (Neh. 7:7) whom Ezra doesn't list. Perhaps he made up his mind to go at the last minute! Also, the total would be expected to be less in Nehemiah if this were the case; but the total is identical (47,360 in Ezra 2:64 and Neh. 7:66). We suggest the possibility that some individuals may have been related to two clans and could be counted under either. The absence of one man's name, further, could be accounted for in that neither list claims to be complete.

The largest difference is in the list of materials: Neh. 7:70ff cf. Ezra 2:68f. But perhaps both lists are partial, and each author decided to include what impressed him.

The last part of *verse 73* has no parallel in Ezra. It really belongs topically with chapter 8 since it anticipates these events, and gives the date (seventh month, our September or thereabouts) when they began.

SUMMARY

Now Nehemiah appointed leaders to carry on the city's affairs, apparently in preparation for his return to Persia. The gates were not to be opened in the morning till it was safe; and were to be bolted when shut. Guards were posted on the wall and throughout the city.

Nehemiah sought to increase the number of the city's residents; he found the genealogical list of the first returnees from 91 years before, originally recorded in Ezra 2. This would be helpful in tracing down the present population. The remainder of the chapter duplicates this list, with some variations.

WORD STUDIES

HANANI and HANANIAH (vs. 2): these names are, as you can see, identical except for the ending which means "Jehovah" on the end of one of them. The base, represented by the first two consonants, means "grace, favor, kindness." Add another letter

1. Luck, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

and it becomes “bend, bow down, incline”; bowing is an act of graciousness. Add a different letter and it becomes, “incline, be favorably disposed, be gracious, merciful, compassionate.” Nehemiah’s brother Hanani’s name then comes out, “Gracious”; the commander’s name, “(Whom) Jehovah has graciously given.”

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What precautions were taken regarding the gates?
2. How did Nehemiah run across the genealogical list included here?
3. Where else in the Bible is the list substantially recorded?

Chapter Eight

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Whose idea was it to read the Law?
2. How long did the reading continue, on the first day? Any other days?
3. What happened when the Law was read? What did it cause the people to do?
4. What do you suppose a visitor to the city would have noticed during this time?

OUTLINE

- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - A. The Law is Read and the Feast of Booths is Kept.
 1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law (vss. 1-8).
 2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting (vss. 9-12).
 3. The Feast of Booths is rediscovered (vss. 13-18).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - A. The Law is Read and the Feast of Booths is Kept.
 1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law.

TEXT, 8:1-8

- 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.
- 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.
- 3 And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand;

and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

- 4 And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.
- 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood up.
- 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.
- 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiiah, and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place.
- 8 And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

COMMENT

The highlight of this chapter is the reading of God's word. Dr. Ironside,¹ in writing on this chapter, notes that "In every genuine revival . . . the revealed Word of God has had a large place." He points to several examples, including the Reformation and its emphasis on translating and publishing the Bible to make it a book of the people.

Verse 1 speaks of the people's assembly "as one man," referring to their unanimity of purpose rather than their 100% attendance. The assembly was at a city square, not the Temple, suggesting that it arose out of popular demand instead of religious command. Observe also that the people made the request that the Law of Moses be brought and read to them. Nehemiah is in the background now, and Ezra is on the stage. Interestingly, The *Cambridge*

1. Ironside, *op. cit.*, p. 87. His seven-point outline of this chapter is delightful, though a bit fanciful.

Bible sees the people striking a blow against the monopoly of religion by the priests.² The *Expositor's Bible* sees just the opposite. "As the civil ruler thus takes a lower ground in the presence of the religious leader, we seem to be anticipating those days of the triumph of the Church when a king would stand like a groom, to hold the horse of a pope."³ Why see conflict in it? Perhaps Ezra and Nehemiah were working together in harmony. Evidently Ezra was known to them, and he was the logical one to go to with their request. This is the first mention of him in Nehemiah.

There had evidently been an ebb in the spiritual conditions during the twelve years since the close of Ezra's book. Some suppose that this could only be accounted for if Ezra had returned to Babylon during this time, returning only for this occasion. Others believe that his work had been effective only briefly.

The people's reverence for the Word is seen in their conviction that their Lord had given it to His people Israel; they were the People of the Book.

Verse 2 indicates the extensive interest in the reading: men, women, and all who could understand. This is presumed to include children, but it also may be translated, "from man to woman, that is, all who (are able) to hear with discernment." Similar phraseology in *verse 3* also does not necessitate the presence of children, though it is possible to translate the passages to include them. Even the involvement of women in a religious service or festival in the O.T. was rare; this was indeed an exceptional occasion.

The date, the first day of the seventh month, may have been significant for two reasons. It was the date for the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23ff, Ezra 3:1), though its name is never mentioned and one wonders if any but the religious leaders were conscious of this (cf. vss. 9, 10). Also, the first day of every month was holy and was marked by the joyous sound of trumpets (Num. 10:10).

Verse 3 implies that the book of the law from which Ezra read

2. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, op. cit., p. 241.

3. Walter F. Adenay, *Expositor's Bible*, "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," p. 274.

was of extensive length; it required five or six hours, from dawn to noon. The verses that follow indicate, however, that much of the time may have been taken up by explanation and even discussion. The attention of the people was noteworthy enough to deserve special comment.

Verses 4-8 expand the information given in *verse 3*.

Verse 4 is the first mention in the Bible of a raised platform constructed for speaking. It was built large enough to accommodate fourteen men; these others probably assisted Ezra in the reading, since *verse 7* gives an entirely different list of those who did the teaching and explaining. Or they may have been there to add their testimony and influence to the occasion. That these men were laymen is suggested by several factors. (1) They are not identified as priests or Levites as the men in *verse 7* are. (2) Their names do not appear in any of the lists of priests or Levites elsewhere in the book. (3) This was, as noted in *verse 1*, a popular meeting rather than a religious one, and the leaders therefore were probably from among the people.

Verse 5 gives a reason for the raised platform, that the people might see. It also indicates that the people stood in reverence when the Law was opened up. It is not clear from this passage whether they continued to stand as the scroll was being read.

In *verse 6* the expression, "the great God," is taken to reflect Babylonian influence;⁴ the two words appear elsewhere in the Bible, but always with another adjective between. Whatever its source, it is a reverent and true designation. The lifting of hands could indicate petition (Lam. 2:19; Psa. 141:2); blessing (Psa. 134:2); affirmation or oath (Gen. 14:22 footnote); note particularly its association here with "Amen." Bowing with faces lowered indicated adoration.

Verse 7 gives the names of teachers on this occasion. The "and" should probably be omitted (this is permissible on the basis of the Hebrew), particularly since several of these names can be identified as Levites from other sources, in 12:8 for example. The Levites were given the responsibility in the Law to teach their brethren.

4. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 736.

The last phrase, “remained in their place,” could be translated “stood.”

In *verse 8* it appears that the thirteen mentioned in the previous verse participated in the reading of the Scripture, and made explanations or translations as they went along. It is possible that they took turns reading and speaking. It is also possible that the assembly divided into smaller classes or discussion groups, with one in charge of each, thus giving each person an opportunity to pry until he completely understood a passage. Some see this verse as evidence that the exiles returned speaking Aramaic instead of Hebrew, and therefore the older text had to be translated for their understanding. Others note that Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written to the Jewish people after the Captivity, and they are in Hebrew; therefore exposition of the Scriptures is involved here. It is known that they had adopted Aramaic, the more general dialect of the area, by the time the N.T. was written,⁵ but not before Jerusalem had resisted the onslaught of Assyrian armies after the fall of Samaria (II Ki. 18:26).

2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting.

TEXT, 8:9-12

- 9 Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.
- 10 Then he said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

5. This is a point that Joseph Smith overlooked when he had Jesus speaking an Aramaic word (Raca, 3 Nephi 12:22) to the supposed descendants of immigrants to America who had left Jerusalem before the Captivity, when they were still speaking Hebrew. See comments following Ezra 4:7, page 52.

- 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy, do not be grieved."
12 And all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

COMMENT

In *verse 9* the people wept, apparently at their shortcomings now revealed by the reading of the Law. But Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites all acted together in asking the people to cease, because the occasion was to be one of joy. (Note the comments on *verse 1* dealing with Ezra's and Nehemiah's working together in harmony.) Every Jewish feast was unsuited for sorrow (Dt. 12:7, 12); it is noteworthy that all but one of Israel's holy days were feasts instead of fasts; theirs was to be a religion of joy. But this was especially true of the Feast of Trumpets or of the first of the month; note again Num. 10:10.

One reason which has been suggested for this joy prescribed in the Law was to counteract the Canaanite weeping for Tammuz.⁶ The women planted anemones ("pleasant plants") as reminders of the god Tammuz, whose death brought on the winter. Then every Spring, when the new green shoots came from the anemone bulb, supposedly marking the god's return to life, they rejoiced and staged an orgiastic celebration to assure the fertility of the soil. But there are also enough positive reasons in Judaism for their rejoicing frequently before God.

In *verse 10* the method of celebration, by feasting and sharing, is part of the pattern for their festivals, specifically the Feast of Weeks and Booths (Dt. 16:11, 14). The fat part of the meat would be regarded as the daintiest morsels, the most tender; it would be rich food compared to their ordinary fare. It is estimated that in their culture meat was a luxury enjoyed only once every few weeks. The sweet would refer to any sweet drink, of the vine, or

6. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 738.

other fruit or honeyed juices, especially unfermented. (The word is related to "unleavened": see Word Studies, Ezra 6.) The food was shared not only with the poor but with any of the people who had not prepared any. Their delight in the Lord would give them strength. There is a power that comes through joy.

In *verse 11* the Levites are portrayed as marshals, keeping order at the feast.

Verse 12 indicates that the people caught the significance of the command to rejoice.

3. The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, is rediscovered.

TEXT, 8:13-18

- 13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests, and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.
- 14 And they found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.
- 15 So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches, and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."
- 16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate, and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.
- 17 And the entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.
- 18 And he read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

COMMENT

Verse 13 describes a more restricted session the following day, not for the total assembly but for the heads of households or clans, the priests, and the Levites: those leaders, both religious and secular, who would need to know the laws so that they could enforce or apply them. Ezra was their special instructor.

According to *verse 14*, it was at this point that they discovered a detail which had been overlooked for many centuries (cf. vs. 17) concerning the Feast of Booths, which began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The feast itself had been kept; it is noted in particular in Ezra 3:4; but the people had not been building their temporary living quarters out of branches, in imitation of the living accommodations during the Wilderness Wanderings, as specified in the Law (Lev. 23:40-43).

The story goes immediately in *verse 15* to the gathering of foliage to begin this celebration. Some writers⁷ have expressed concern that no mention is made of the Day of Atonement, the one fast day in Israel's calendar (Lev. 23:27-32), which would come on the tenth day. This does not necessarily mean that it wasn't held; there may only have been a lack of any significant departure from regular practice, thus no comment was needed.

It is also noted that the kind of branches which they were told to gather corresponds only in a general way with the instructions in Lev. 23:40; but perhaps that list was not understood to be exclusive, but only suggestive. The Law was never interpreted in an exclusivistic, legalistic manner until the Pharisees so employed it, under Roman influence.

The reader of *verse 16* will be able to imagine a most unusual transformation in the appearance of Jerusalem as these leafy shelters sprang up everywhere: people constructed them on their flat roofs or in their yards; priests and Levites were probably the ones who raised theirs in the Temple courtyard; the homeless, or visitors from surrounding cities, probably filled the public square; in and around the gate on the road to Ephraim would be

7. Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

a natural place for the travelers to erect their booths.

Verse 17 speaks of the total participation of all who had returned from the Captivity, whether they lived in Jerusalem or not. This particular feature of building brush shelters was what had not been done since Joshua's day; note the use of tents in II Chr. 7:10. The building of a booth is a feature of Jewish celebration in America today.⁸ The result of keeping God's Law was joy.

The daily reading of the Law throughout the feast is taken to indicate that this was a Sabbatical Year (Dt. 31:10f). But, judging from the previous tone, it might have been a spontaneous thing which required no command for it to be carried out. They may have wanted to celebrate the feast in the fullest way possible. The assembly on the additional eighth day was also according to Divine pattern (Lev. 23:36).

WORD STUDIES

AMEN (vs. 6: pronounced in Hebrew the same as in English): the basic idea is of something firm, like a foundation or support or pillar of a building. A thing which is built on a firm foundation is "durable" and "lasting." A person of this kind would be "faithful"; his conduct and his words would be "true."

In Neh. 10:1 this same word forms the base of the word translated DOCUMENT: something confirmed and sure.

UNDERSTAND (vss. 2, 8: Bin): separate, distinguish. It indicates "discerning" or "understanding" as they are dependent on the power of separating or distinguishing or discriminating. Intelligence and wisdom are dependent on this.

The preposition translated "between" is derived from this word.

SUMMARY

After the completion of the wall, the people (both men and women) gathered at a public square within the city and asked Ezra

8. Philip S. Bernstein, *What The Jews Believe*, p. 35ff.

to read God's Law to them. This was done in the Fall of the year, on the first day of their seventh month, the month which contained more religious holy days than any other. Ezra and others read and explained the Law beginning at dawn and continuing till noon. The rest of the day was occupied with feasting, sharing, and fellowship, in a spirit of joy.

The next day some of the leaders assembled with Ezra for more specific instruction, and in the process of their studies discovered a command concerning the Feast of Booths, scheduled for the middle of the month, which they had been neglecting. They gathered branches and built temporary brush shelters.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who read the Law to the people?
2. What special preparations were made for the occasion?
3. What feast in particular was mentioned?
4. What was unusual about the manner in which they kept the feast?