**EZRA**

Chapters 1 & 2:

The book begins in the 1st year of the reign of Cyrus the Great of Persia (539 BC). God initiated the new era for His people by moving Persian King Cyrus’ heart to issue a written proclamation freeing the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

Some suggest Cyrus the Great, king of the Medes and Persians, was a champion of human rights. Others say he was “hedging his bets” to assure no god would be angry with him. Cyrus may have been an enlightened ruler, but Cyrus was not a Jewish convert. He was a pagan (although Daniel may have influenced him). He allowed many people to return to their homelands and build temples for their gods, perhaps to foster good will among his captive nations. But *Ezra and Nehemiah* clearly credit the Jews’ repopulation of Judea to God, not Cyrus.

The Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylinder with cuneiform markings from the time of Cyrus, was discovered and now is on display in London’s British Museum. It credited the god, Marduk, with Cyrus’ victory over Babylon and described Cyrus’ treatment of those he conquered, saying, “May all the gods whom I have settled in their sacred cities daily ask Bell and Nebo for a long life for me.” So, whatever Cyrus’ primary motivation was, YHWH used him to restore His people to the Promised Land and to continue history’s path toward Messiah.

The prophet Jeremiah had predicted the Jews would be in exile for 70 years. (Jer.25:11-12). The first Babylonian deportation of Jews from Jerusalem was in 605 BC. Cyrus’ decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem was in 538 BC (67 years later), but Jerusalem Temple altar was rebuilt in 536 BC (70 years after the exile). [Some calculate the 70 years by dating it from destruction of the Temple in 586 BC until completion of its rebuilding in 516 BC, 70 years later.]

Cyrus’ proclamation declared, “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.” He continued, saying that God had appointed him to build a temple at Jerusalem in Judah. Cyrus did not declare YHWH was the only true God; rather, Cyrus spoke of the “God of heaven,” and “the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.” [The phrase “God of heaven” is used more often in *Ezra* than in any other book in the Bible- 9 times. It used a total of 10 times in the other exilic and post-exilic books; but elsewhere in the OT, it only is used 4 times.]

Cyrus announced that any Jew who wished to do so could return (“go up”) to Jerusalem to build the Temple. He also directed anyone living near survivors of the Jewish exiles to give them gold, silver, goods, and livestock, as freewill offerings to help build the Temple for the “God of Jerusalem.” Cyrus also returned to the Jews some of the items the Babylonians had taken from the Temple. Jews who chose not to return to Judah also were required to send gifts to Jerusalem for the Temple. [The custom of requiring contributions for the Temple from Jews around the world continued through Roman times until the Temple was destroyed. Then, the Romans diverted the funds to its Temple of Jupiter which was erected on the site of the Jewish Temple.]

The contributions (gold and silver, etc.) were given to Sheshbazzar, a Persian name, who may have been the same person as Zerubbabel, a descendant of David and leader of the returnees (some people had 2 names), or Cyrus may have appointed Sheshbazzar as treasurer until Zerubbabel took over.

When God moved Cyrus to free the exiles. He also had to move Jews to make the long, dangerous, difficult 900-mile journey back to Jerusalem, where nothing but ruins was left, and returnees had to start from scratch. Most did not remember Jerusalem. All they had known was Babylon, where many Jewish people had prospered and become comfortable. So, most did not want to return. But those who chose to go to Jerusalem/Judah were going to the place that had symbolized God’s presence with their forebearers.

The leaders of the returnees included Zerubbabel (a descendant of the royal Davidic line, King Jehoiachin’s grandson, and an ancestor of Christ), Jeshua, a high priest of the Aaronic line (grandson of Seraiah, the priest Nebuchadnezzar killed at Riblah, 2 Kings 25:18-24). Chapter 2 contains a list, by family, of the men who returned- 42,360 male Judahites, 7,337 servants, 200 singers, plus livestock. The list is almost the same as the one in Nehemiah. It may be a summary of all the returnees. [Note: *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* are male-focused. The only women referred to in *Ezra* are the foreign ones who were sent away.]

The returnees were a remnant of less than 50,000, a fraction of the Jews in the world, but they were from all strata of society. Among those listed, were people from towns in Judah who could not prove their genealogy or demonstrate a claim to real estate in the Holy Land. [The 2 ways to prove one was a Jew - a genealogy or a deed to land in Judah.] The list also included priests who were “unclean” because they had married a woman from a non-priestly family or could not prove their priestly lineage. They were not permitted to serve in the Temple.

About 10% of the list was names of priests. 3 of the 4 groups in the list were in 1 Chron.24: 7-18 also. The missing one was Peshhur, which lost its priestly status. Note: Only 74 Levites made the trip. They had low social status and only would have menial work to do in Jerusalem, so they did not leave Persia.

After 4 months, the people arrived at Jerusalem. The first thing they did was give freewill offerings, according to their ability, to rebuild the Temple. Then, they went to their towns/villages to build their homes.

Chapter 3:

The Jews re-assembled in Jerusalem, in the 7th month, *Tishri* (mid-Sept.- mid-Oct.), the time of the Jews’ 3 major fall feasts:

* Trumpets- *Rosh Hashana* (civil new year),
* Atonement- *Yom Kippur*,
* Tabernacles- *Succoth*.

Their first official act toward rebuilding the Temple was to build the altar

for sacrifices in its original location. High priest, Jeshua, and the other priests, with Zerubbabel and the leaders, began to work “as 1 man.” [Jeshua was of Zadokite lineage and had high status.] This was a beginning of the reconciliation between God and His people.

The locals who lived in the land were hostile to the returnees. They had taken over the land the exiles had left, and they did not want to lose it. In the So., Edomites (Idumeans/descendants of Esau) had moved into the hills of Hebron in Judah. (Herod was Idumean). In the No. were Samaritans (non-deported Jews who had intermarried with the people Assyria transplanted there; they engaged in a syncretic form of worship of YHWH and other gods.) Ammonites were in the E, and in the W, were “Ashdodites”/Philistines (Ashdod was one of the 5 cities of the Philistine coalition). [At that point, Judah was much smaller in size. It went from Mizpah to En Gedi and Gezer to Jericho.]

Building the altar took about a day. They gathered the stones in the fields and stacked the natural stones into an altar without using chisels (unhewn stones). Immediately, the Jews began to sacrifice burnt offerings as required by the Law. They knew the price of sin, and they knew they needed atonement.

*Ezra* orderedthe people precisely to follow the requirements for the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*), which lasted 7 days. They lived in “booths” to remind them of God’s protection of Israel in the Wilderness. (Many Jews still observe *Sukkot* like that. At first, the people camped around the altar. As the nation grew, they camped on the Temple precincts. Later, in Jesus’ time, the Jews all tried to camp in or around Jerusalem. Today, observant Jews camp in their yards, on their balconies, and other such places during *Sukkot*.) The booths/shelters have slits in the wooden branches or palm frond of their roofs so the sky can be seen. They give thanks for God’s protection in the Exodus and for His recent protection. (In Ezra’s time thanks were for their safe return from Babylon).

The Jews offered their sacrifices on the new altar even though the Temple foundation had not yet been laid. These were the first sacrifices in 50 years (since the Temple had been destroyed.) From Sept/Oct to March, they prepared to build the Temple. As Solomon had done, they sold food, wine, and olive oil to Tyre and Sidon in exchange for cedar wood from Lebanon. [Israel had no wood.] Logs were floated from Lebanese ports to Joppa, then dragged 35 miles inland to Jerusalem.

They began to build in the 2nd month, May/June, just as Solomon had. (1 Kings 6:1). Levites supervised the construction. The new (2nd) Temple was the same size as Solomon’s, but his was far grander and had much more gold. Solomon’s Temple took more than 7 years to build; Zerubbabel’s took 4 years. Solomon’s Temple was surrounded by a thriving city; Jerusalem was in ruins.

The order of worship at the Temple was just as David had prescribed when he brought the Ark to Jerusalem. Asaph’s descendants played cymbals; priests blew the long, thin silver trumpets; the song was:

He is good,

His love to Israel endures forever.

The people were followed God’s Law, seeking to renew their relationship with Him. The isolation caused by their sin had ended and they were His people again.

As they gathered to worship and the people celebrated with music and emotion. Young Israelites cheered the new beginning, but the older Israelites wept, mourning for the grandeur of Solomon’s Temple. Together, the noise they made was so great it could be heard from far away.

Chapter 4: [Ezra 4:8-6:18 were in Aramaic; then the text returns to Hebrew.]

Chp.3 ended with a note of euphoria over laying the Temple foundation, but the enemies of Judah and Benjamin immediately began to interfere. First, they offered to help, claiming they too worshipped the same God of the Jews. [They were the “people of the land” (2 Kings 17:27-34), whom Assyrian King Sargon had replaced in 721 BC, 2 years after Esarhaddon, Assyria’s last great king, sent the No. kingdom Jews into exile in 723. The new people intermarried with the few Jewish peasants who remained. The result was a mixed population with a syncretic religion having elements of their homelands’ worship/gods and YHWH.]

The Judahites rejected the offered help, knowing they had to guard against erosion of their faith in and reliance on God. [They remembered Balaam who had suggested to Balak the Ammonite, that the Israelites could be defeated by intermarriage with the Midianite women, which would result in their worship of Baal. Initially, that strategy had been successful. (Num.25:7-11).]

The opposition then hired people to frustrate the Jews’ plans and to discourage, harass and threaten them. At the beginning of the reign of King Artaxerxes, the opponents sent the king a letter, written in Aramaic. To gain the king’s favor, the letter ingratiatingly declared they were “under obligation to the palace,” literally, they “ate the salt of the palace.” (In some ancient cultures, salt was a royal monopoly (hence, the English word “salary;” salt also was used to ratify royal treaties, so the saying arose, “not worth his salt.”)

The letter accused the Jews of working to rebuild a totally rebellious city, Jerusalem. The king researched the claim and found a long military history among the Jews, especially under the strong kingdoms of Solomon and David. And the Jews had made several attempts to revolt against King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, which was what led him to destroy Jerusalem. So, Artaxerxes ordered the Jews to stop work, but he left the door open to change his mind.

For almost 16 years, no more work was done on the Temple. Instead, the people went to their own land and built homes and farms. In 534 BC, the 2nd year of King Darius’ reign, things changed. [Cyrus had died in 520 BC, and Cambyses, his son, became king. Cambyses’ brother, Smerdis, rebelled, and Cambyses killed Smerdis. But an Egyptian noble, Gaumada, masqueraded as Smerdis, and with some success, continued the revolt. In 522 BC, Cambyses killed himself. The next year, 521 BC, the Persian Army chose Darius, a distant cousin of Cyrus. King Darius ruled until 486 BC. Darius and his army overthrew the imposter Smerdis, and 2 years later, the rebellion finally was ended.]

[Darius’ reign is well documented in non-Biblical contemporary literature. On a high cliff in Western Iran (Persia), the “Behistum inscription” was found. It tells of Darius’ rise to power in 3 languages. Darius’ palace at Persepolis in So. Iran has been excavated. His tomb was carved into a rock face 3 miles No. of the city.]

Chapters 5 & 6:

Haggai and Zechariah arose and prophesied in the name of the God of Israel. Their prophesy motivated Zerubbabel and Jeshua to renew the work rebuilding God’s house. At that time, Tattenai was governor of Trans-Euphrates, “the land across the river,” the 5th satrapy. (Shethar-Boxenai probably was his assistant.) [Archaeologists have found among Babylon’s records, a 502 BC reference to Tattenai as governor of Trans-Euphrates, part of the 5th satrapy of Syria- Palestine, which included Israel.]

The opponents immediately went to Tattenai and asked him who had authorized the Jews to rebuild the Temple. Xerxes had forbidden work there. But God was watching over the Jews. Tattenai would do nothing until he reported the matter to King Darius and received his response. This gave the Jews months to continue building while Tattenai’s letter made the long journey to Persia. [Texts from Persepolis confirm reports like Tattenai’s were sent to the king.]

Before writing his letter to the king, Tattenai went to Jerusalem to see what was occurring and to question the elders who were working on the Temple. They told him about Cyrus’ decree and suggested the records of the kingdom should be searched to confirm they were correct. When Darius saw the mention of a decree of King Cyrus, he hesitated. If the Jews were correct, he might violate an immutable decree of King Cyrus. [According to *Esther*, after a Persian king issued such a decree, it could not be changed.]

So, Darius ordered a records search. He did not find Cyrus’ scroll in the capital archives in Persepolis, but the search continued. A scroll was found in Ecbatana, capital of Media. [Cyrus spent the summer of 538 BC there and that is where he issued his decree.] The scroll contained a memorandum of Cyrus’ decree authorizing the Temple to be rebuilt and the Temple treasure to be returned to Jerusalem.

So, King Darius gave Tattenai 3 orders:

* Leave the Jews alone and do not interfere with the Temple construction,
* Use tax money to finance the building project and daily animal sacrifices, and
* Anyone who disobeys this order is to be impaled (a common form of execution in Persia. Greek historian Herodotus, reported that Darius impaled 3000 Babylonians after quelling a revolt.)

[In 1973, archaeologist discovered in Xanthos (W. Turkey) a cult charter for

a foundation from the late Persian period. It was like Cyrus’ decree to the Jews. It discussed amounts of sacrifices, names of priests and their responsibilities. Other accounts of Cyrus and Darius ordering money for peoples to rebuild their temples have been found (Cyrus cylinder)- “…that they may offer sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons…” Cambyses’ and Darius’ interest in regulating priests and temples is evident from their orders. Darius II (423-404 BC) sent a letter to the Jews at Elephantine Island (Egypt) about keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A similar memorandum permitting the Jews to build a temple at Elephantine Island was found among 5thC Aramaic papyri.]

Tattenai’s inquiry backfired. He now had to give the Jews tax money to help them instead of stopping their construction. Temple construction continued, with Haggai and Zechariah encouraging the work by their preaching. The Temple was finished in 515 BC on the 23rd day of *Adar*, the last month of the Jewish calendar. This was 4½ years after Haggai began to preach and 70½ years after the Temple was destroyed. [The reference to Artaxerxes is out of chronological sequence though he later supplied monthly funds to continue the Temple restoration.]

Dedication of the new Temple was dramatically different from Solomon’s. He sacrificed 200 times more animals (22,000 cattle and 12,000 sheep & goats- 1 Kings 8:63). The exiles made a 12-goat sin offering (symbolizing the hope for the 12 tribes’ renewal as a united Israel). For this dedication, the priests were grouped into 24 division, each of which served at the Temple for 1 week at a time. [In 1962, archaeologists found a fragment of a synagogue inscription at Caesarea listing 24 priestly divisions.] On April 21, 516 BC, the Jews celebrated the first Passover in 79 years. They included Jews from the No. tribes who had turned from paganism and separated themselves to the Lord.

Chapter 7:

Note: This section was written in Aramaic, the trade language of the day. Also note: The word “Israelite” was used 24 times in *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* because the goal was to reunify the kingdom. “God of Israel” also was used several times. *Ezra* only referred to Judah 4 times and those were in a geographical context.

The book jumps from the completion of the Temple (515 BC) to the 7th year of the reign of Artaxerxes (464-424 BC). Nothing is said about the intervening 60 years, which included the reign of Darius I.

Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was assassinated in his bedchamber between Aug.-Dec. 465 BC by Artabanus, a powerful courtier. According to legend, Artaxerxes, who was only 18 years old, killed Artabanus in hand-to-hand combat. Then, he killed his older brother, Darius, and finally in 464 BC, he killed his other brother, Hystaspes, satrap of Bactria. When Artaxerxes came to the throne, Persia was faced with a revolt from Egypt assisted by Greece. In 459 BC, the Greco -Egyptian alliance captured Memphis, capital of lower Egypt. Artaxerxes may have wanted Ezra to establish a friendly buffer in Israel between Egypt and Persia.

From 461 BC, Artaxerxes lived in Susa in the palace built by Darius I (where the story of Esther, who lived in the time of Xerxes, is set). In 424 BC, Artaxerxes died of natural causes after an unusually long 40-year reign. He was known for his noble, gentle spirit. His nickname was Longimanus (longhand) because his right hand was longer than his left.

60 years later, the 20th day of the 9th month (*Kislev*- Dec.19, 458 BC- the cold, rainy season), Ezra, the priest/scribe/Torah scholar was directed to lead a 2nd group of returnees to Jerusalem. [Ezra’s name was the short form of Azariah, it also was the name of one of Daniel’s friends. The Greek form of the name was Esdras. 2 Apocryphal books also ascribed to Ezra are called Esdras.]

Scribes, like Ezra, were important professionals in the ancient world. They could read, write, and interpret documents, a comparatively rare skill in the ancient Near East. Scribes played important roles in political, military, and religious affairs. Scribe/trained scholar was a profession that often was a family trade. They took dictation using a stylus/reed pen, often sharpened with a scribe’s knife. Scribes served as royal recorders who preserved acts and decrees of kings, some were local letter writers, others held important military posts, and some, such as Ezra, were highly trained, skilled intellectuals and theologians.

Many scribes, like Ezra, also were priests who were trusted to preserve Scripture. Some believe Ezra compiled the Pentateuch as a distinct unit to be used as legal instruction in Israel’s new, quasi-autonomous enclave in the Persian Empire. Evidence has been found that, as with Ezra, Darius I commissioned a priest/scholar, Udjahorresent, to return to Egypt to codify Egyptian law (518-503).

Ezra as leader of a new group of Jewish exiles who “went up” to Jerusalem, was to teach the Law, beautify the Temple, and restore Temple services. The 1st return of Jewish exiles had been led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua. They were to rebuild the Temple. Ezra was to revitalize the spiritual life of the people.

Ezra planned for the journey to coincide with Passover. This was a new Exodus. The journey took 4 months (119 days) probably in spring, the best time to travel. In a straight line, it would have been 500 miles, but the actual trip was 900 miles. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC to call the people back to God. The Temple had been completed in 515 BC.

The tale of the journey began with Ezra’s capsulized genealogy from Aaron through Jehozadak, who was deported to Babylon. [1 Chron.6:3.] Ezra was the son of Seraiah, the high priest under Judah’s King Zedekiah, who was killed by Nebuchadnezzar in 588 BC. Ezra’s genealogy only lists 16 of his ancestors, but some of them were famous in the OT. According to Jewish tradition, Hilkiah was high priest under Josiah. He probably found the copy of the Law (Deuteronomy) 160 years earlier, which led King Josiah’s reforms. (2 Kings 22:4; 2 Chron.34:14).

Zadok was David’s priest who Solomon appointed chief priest in place of Abiathar, who had supported Adonijah’s rebellion. The Zadokites retained the high priesthood until 171 BC; indeed, the “Sadducees,” were named after Zadok. Eleazer (Lazarus in Greek) was Aaron’s son and Phineas was Aaron’s grandson. He killed an Israelite and his Midianite wife, who had led him into worshipping Baal. (Num.25:7-11). Phineas’ zealous act ended a plague that had struck Israel, and God promised Phineas his line would retain the priesthood forever. Abishua was Phineas’ son/Aaron’s great-grandson.

Artaxerxes ordered the treasurers of the Trans-Euphrates, the province in which Israel was located, to provide Ezra all the gold, silver, and provisions he requested. The provisions totaled 3¾ tons of silver, 600 bushels of wheat, and 600 gallons of oil. The king also forbade the treasurers from levying or collecting any taxes from the Temple, the priests, or any of the religious personnel. They also were exempt from forced labor/conscription.

Ezra was authorized to appoint magistrates who knew the Law. Their tenure was for life (a Persian custom); however, officials were subject to capital punishment for official misconduct.

Finally, in 1st person commentary, Ezra gave all praise and thanks to God. He asked nothing for himself. He had prepared and trained for this call; that was his sole focus. God had given him conviction, strength, and courage for the job.

Chapter 8:

The chapter begins with a list of those in the 2nd return to Judah, 125 years after Judah fell. Most Jews in Babylon never had seen Jerusalem or the Temple. The Persians were tolerant, so it was easy for Jews to succeed there. By 458 BC, Babylon was full of Jews, many of whom had prospered and wanted to stay.

Most people on the list were related to families that had returned with Zerubbabel 79 years earlier. Descendants included royalty from the house of David and 2 branches of the Aaronite priesthood- from the line of Phineas and from Gershon’s line. 18 heads of families were named, plus 1496 other men (common people), for a total of 1514 returnees on this trip. As with the original group, all 12 clans were represented. This was a new Exodus. Ezra intentionally had recruited those who had relatives already in Jerusalem.

Later, 258 Levites also were assembled. Priests and Levites were needed to perform Temple duties. Few Levites were willing to return because of the difficulty of their disciplined duties in the Temple. Even on Zerubbabel’s (1st) return only 1.5% of the 50,000 who returned were Levites.

Ezra gave a specific message to 9 leaders and 2 men of learning to try to persuade Levites to return to Jerusalem and he sent them to a center of Jewish worship to recruit. [In some places in the Diaspora, Jews had built temples, as opposed to synagogues, which became worship centers. In Egypt, the Jews who fled there from the Babylonian invasion built a temple and began a modified form of worship.] Ezra’s group recruited 38 Levites from 2 families and 220 Temple servants (a class lower than Levites). All the Levites were Merarites, responsible for carrying the Temple furnishings in the Wilderness. (Num.3:33).

The returnees assembled as the Ahava Canal (location unknown) where they fasted and humbled themselves before God for the journey. Again, Ezra thanked God for His “gracious hand.” He appointed 12 Levites and 12 leading priests (1 for each tribe) and weighed out the gold and silver he had received. The 24 men to whom Ezra had weighed out the treasure were consecrated and given a sense of mission. They received a total of:

* 650 talent of silver= 25 tons= about 49,000 lbs,
* 100 talents of gold= 3 ¾ tons= 7500 lbs,
* 100 talents of silver articles= 7500 lbs, and
* 20 gold bowls valued @ 1000 darics= 19 lbs.

The exiles travelled 900 miles in 4 months= 7½ miles/day with women, children and tons of gold and silver.

They arrived in Jerusalem exhausted. Then they rested for 3 days- like the 3-day rest Joshua gave Israel before leading them across the Jordan. On the 4th day, they weighed the gold and silver at the Temple. Everything was accounted for. [Ezra probably had to send Artaxerxes a written account for all the valuables. In the Persian world written reports were kept on everything.] Ezra gave the treasure to 2 priests and 2 Levites. Then they sacrificed 12 bulls for the 12 tribes.

By the time of Ezra’s return, however, excitement in Jerusalem over construction of the Temple had faded and people had returned to their old lives. They were not building Jerusalem’s walls, and they had begun to intermarry with the people of the land. They were comfortable and had lost their separateness.

Chapter 9: [Note: The language shifts to 1st person.]

On the 17th day of the 9th month, about 4½ months after Ezra arrived (the 1st day of the 5th month- 75 years after the Temple was rebuilt), Ezra learned of the peoples’ intermarriages and assimilation into the local population. Indeed, Israelite officials and priests had led the way in that unfaithfulness. Intermarriages included with people from the 8 local nations: Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites. [The Pentateuch allowed intermarriage with Egyptians, which were Semites, but not Canaanites.]

When he heard this, Ezra pulled out his hair and beard in repentance. He sat staring for hours, as if mourning the dead because he believed this could be the end of Israel. The people heard of Ezra’ reaction and “trembled at the words of the God of Israel.” The faithful gathered at the Temple at 3:00 PM for the evening sacrifice, the time for prayer and confession [and the time Jesus died].

Ezra fell on his knees with his hands spread out to the Lord and began to pray. [Note: He used 1st person plural- “our sin/our guilt.”] He recalled the sins of Israel’s past and declared they were recurring. He was humiliated by the peoples’ sins. The nation’s sins had caused its downfall and it could occur again. [The Jewish colony at Elephantine Island, Egypt, begun by Jews fleeing the Babylonian invasion, ultimately dissolved into Egyptian/Greek culture due to intermarriage.]

Ezra’s prayer was one of confession and thanks. He asked personally for nothing, but he thanked God for preserving a remnant and confessed they were falling back into practices that originally had destroyed them. God’s new life and protection had lasted only a brief time before they had strayed again. [Note: Some Jews in the past had intermarried without being corrupted: Joseph married an Egyptian, Moses married an Ethiopian (Num.12:1), and Boaz married Moabite, Ruth. The issue was who the non-Jewish spouse worshiped, i.e., whether she had corrupted the Israelite or converted and worshipped YHWH.]

Chapter 10: [Note: The narrative returned to 3rd person.]

Ezra’s prayer and penitence moved the people. A large crowd gathered. They too were crying. The people acknowledged their guilt; Ezra led the reform. Shekinah, from the family of Elam, spoke. [Note: According to vs.26, some members of his family had intermarried.] He admitted the peoples’ guilt in marrying foreign women but declared there still was hope. He announced the people should make a covenant with God to send away their pagan (a more accurate word than foreign) wives and children. [In most ancient civilizations, children remained with the mother, except they went with the father in Greece.]

So, Ezra put the people, the priests, and Levites under oath, literally= “to cut a cow.” [Originally, when a covenant was made, an animal was cut in half, and the parties to the covenant walked between the pieces implying the same would happen to them if they broke the covenant.] The oath/covenant was a solemn declaration made under divine sanction, calling God to witness the truth of the statement. It often implied a curse if the oath were not fulfilled/was broken.

Then Ezra withdrew from the courtyard in front of the Temple into the priests’

quarters and stayed in the room of Jehohanan, son of Eliashib, the high priest. (Neh.13:28). There, he fasted- no food, no water.

A proclamation was issued requiring all Jews in Judah and Jerusalem to gather at the Temple. Anyone who did not arrive within 3 days would lose all his property and be expelled from the exile community. Judah was small, with Bethel on the No; Beersheba on the E; Jericho on the W; and Ono in the So. Everyone could get to Jerusalem within 3 days.

On the 20th day of the 9th month (*Kislev*- Dec.19, 458 BC), at the height of the cold, rainy season, all the men gathered in Jerusalem in the rain in the square in front of the Temple. Ezra did not mince words about their unfaithfulness and what they must do. The men agreed to divorce their idolatrous wives, but they wanted time. The reason for this request was unclear, perhaps they wanted to:

* Determine whether the wife was truly pagan or might be converted,
* Deal with the issue of return of a dowery,
* Deal with child support concerns.

So, they decided to resolve the issue locally where people knew one another

and could make more informed decisions. Community elders (grey beards) were appointed to oversee the process. 4 men dissented, perhaps for stricter measures or immediate action. One, Meshullam, had the same name as a person on the list of those who had intermarried (vs.29), but his was not an unusual name.

10 days later (1st day of the month of *Tivet*), the examining committees began work. It was completed on the 1st day of the 1st month, *Nisan* (March 27, 457). Out of 29,000 families, 113 were found to have intermarried- 17 priests, 10 Levites, 1 singer, 84 others, but none of Solomon’ servants. Among those named were descendants of Jeshua, the high priest of the 1st return.