

Ezra the Scribe

INTRODUCTION:

Although these are estimates, they give a general time frame for us to fit the events that occurred after Israel returned after the 70 year captivity in Babylon. Although the book of Ezra begins with the return from Babylon in 636, Ezra does not actually return to Babylon until about 457 bc which is almost 80 years later and about 60 years after the temple was finished.

536	49,897 return from Babylon
536	7 th Month built altar– offered sacrifice
535	Work on Temple begun
520	Work renewed by Haggai, Zechariah
516	Temple Completed
478	Esther Becomes Queend
457	Ezra goes to Jerusalem
444	Nehemiah rebuilds the Wall
432	Nehemiah returns a second time (Halley's Bible Handbook 229-230)

Cyrus II "the Great"	550-529 BC
Cambyses II	529-522 BC
Darius I	522-486 BC
Xerxes I	486-465 BC
Artaxerxes I	465-425 BC
Xerxes II	425-424 BC
Darius II	423-404 BC
Artaxerxes II	404-359 BC
Artaxerxes III	359-338 BC
Arses	338-336 BC
Darius III	336-330 BC

The Times of Ezra

Ezra is introduced with his genealogy that revealed he had the right to be high priest. He was descended from Aaron through his son Eleazar and grandson Phinehas. We don't know his relationship to Joshua and the current high priest because the genealogies take us only as far as Azariah who was Jehozadak's grandfather and also in "Jeshua's – Joshua's genealogy. So there was a close connection.

*Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, **Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, 2 the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, 3 the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, 4 the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, 5 the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest– Ezra 7:1-5***

*Shallum begot Hilkiah, and **Hilkiah begot Azariah; 14 Azariah begot Seraiah, and Seraiah begot Jehozadak. 15 Jehozadak went into captivity** when the Lord carried Judah and Jerusalem into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. 1 Chr. 6:13-15*

*In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to **Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, Hag 1:1***

Ezra is called a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses. Which at that time would have referred to both his ability to make copies of the Scriptures as part of the job of scribe, but more importantly his ability to preach and teach the Law and the Prophets. It is stated that the king granted him all his request which could only mean that he sent word to the king, but also could indicate that like Nehemiah, Ezra also has some type of relationship with the king. As we later read the letter, we will have to judge the type of relationship they had. God's providence is also clearly indicated, and it too will be elaborated upon later.

*this Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was **a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him. Ezra 7:6***

Ezra, along with other children of Israel made the journey back to Jerusalem in the seventh year of this king. They started this journey on the first day of the first month and ended it on the first day of the fifth month. So it took them four months to travel from the city in Medo Persia back to

Jerusalem.

*Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 **On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, 7:7-8***

Providence and Preparation.

The connection between Ezra and God's providence is clearly indicated. God's "good hand was upon him," because (for) of three things: (1.) He had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord. (2.) To do it. (3.) To teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

according to the good hand of his God upon him. 10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. Ezra 7:9-10

As Daniel before him, Ezra had made it his goal to seek the Law of the Lord and do it. This always brings us to God's attention. Every time his eyelids see someone who is truly seeking and striving to understand and do His will, God will begin the steps to bring him to that goal. He had also made it his goal to become a scribe and teacher. If we look at Joshua's command by God for success we see these three things there as well.

Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Josh 1:7-8

A Copy of the Letter

God recorded the letter that the King sent to Ezra and from that letter we can seek to understand the circumstances and events of that time. As noted above, this is a personal letter which seems to indicate a personal relationship between the two men. The king calls Ezra "*the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel.*"

This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel: 12 Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace, and so forth. 7:11-12

The contents of the letter record the decree and permission that the king has given to Ezra regarding the people who will return with him and those who would remain behind but might want to make a contribution. He is being "*being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem.*" This gives Ezra the civil authority to make decrees and decisions that will be backed by the authority of the Medo Persian empire. More importantly, Ezra is commanded to do this "*with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand.*" This clearly indicates that the king is commanding him to be careful to follow the Law of Moses exactly as it has been written and which he can understand because he is an expert.

He also authorizes Ezra to take "*the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered*" and use it to "*be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem.*"

I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand; 15 and whereas you are to carry to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem; 16 and whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem — 17 now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer

them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem. Ezra 7:11-17

Added to this is the authority to draw from the king's treasury to do whatever is needed for the temple.

*And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God. 19 Also the articles that are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And **whatever more may be needed for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide, pay for it from the king's treasury. Ezra 7:18-20***

The king then issues a decree to all the treasurers on the other side of the river (Euphrates) are commanded to diligently take care of any needs Ezra might have. He then expresses his own faith in God that these things will be of benefit to the Medo-Persian empire. He does not want the wrath of God to be poured out upon his realm or his sons.

*And I, even I, Artaxerxes the king, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the region beyond the River, that **whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, may require of you, let it be done diligently, 22 up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred kors of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribed limit. 23 Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it diligently be done for the house of the God of heaven. For why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons? Ezra 7:21-23***

The letter concludes with the prohibition of any taxation on the priests, Levites, singers, etc. This is the basis of our own law regarding the taxation of churches. Our early leaders saw the wisdom of glorifying God in this way.

Ezra is then given a great compliment and vote of confidence: "you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River. The king recognizes the "God given wisdom" that Ezra has exhibited and he wants used. He also gives the criteria upon which these men are to be appointed: "all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them." There are two important points here. First, the king wants men who know the laws of God and second he wants those who are moved to teach them to others. Not enough just to know and live, but also to seek for others to do the same. Ezra is then given the authority to use the Medo-Persian laws to execute, banish, confiscation of good or imprisonment.

*Also we inform you that **it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God. 25 And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them. 26 Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment. Ezra 7:24-26***

Ezra's Praise to God for such a Letter

Ezra is deeply moved by this act of providence. He praises God for His providence. First for putting it into the heart of the king to do this. Since this is providence, it may very well be from the praise and confidence placed in Ezra that he played some role in bringing this about. Yet he sees this as God's hand using him and gives no credit at all to himself. Yet the king knows too much about him and has too many compliments and places too much confidence for this not to be the case. Ezra also praises God for the mercy that gave him such a wonderful role and position of confidence in the eyes of all these men. This gave him great comfort and confidence.

27 Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, 28 and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me. Ezra 7:27-28

Details of the Departure to Jerusalem

After receiving the letter the people gather together and a list of their names and genealogy are given (Ezra 8:1-14). They gather beside the River Ahava and after an assessment, Ezra realizes he is missing some important people. It is clear that he wants everything necessary to fulfill the king's command so that if they are lacking when he arrives he will still be able to do what the king has commanded. As a priest who knows the law, he needs the genealogies to properly prepare the temple for worship. Without them he will not be able to serve the Lord, so he takes the time to gather them.

*Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there. 16 Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leaders; also for Joiarib and Elnathan, men of understanding. 17 And I gave them a command for Iddo the chief man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say to Iddo and his brethren the Nethinim at the place Casiphia — **that they should bring us servants for the house of our God.** 8:15-17*

Ezra's Confidence in God's Providence

Ezra's plans are all based on His desire to serve God and He looks to God to make it all possible. When good things happen, he gives God the glory by ascribing to Him the good things that happen.

*Then, **by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding,** 8:18*

His trust in God's providence then takes a leap of faith. He needs God to bless them with a safe and prosperous journey, but he doesn't want to ask the king for help because of the unshaken confidence he has always shown in the presence of the king and his counselors.

He proclaims a three day fast for all who are returning to Jerusalem. He does this "*we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.*"

***Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.** 8:21*

The term humble here is the same term used in the command regarding the day of atonement.

"This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. 30 For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord. Lev. 16:29-30

This fast was designed to humble/afflict their souls to "seek from Him the right way for us." Ezra saw fasting that would humble and afflict their souls as the best means to receive God's providential care in this journey.

Ezra then explains why he didn't ask the king for the human means to bring this about. His trust and confidence in God has been the basis of all Ezra's dealings with the king. He was too ashamed to lower the view of the king about his faith to ask for an escort. They had affirmed to the king that "*The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him.*" Since he could not ask the king for an escort, this "expert in the law of God" knew that fasting was the best option to gain the favor of God needed.

***For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."** Ezra 8:22*

Since he felt he could not lower the nature of the faith they had proclaimed to the king about God, and since he did not want to tempt the Lord by assuming that God would take care of them. He chose the best possible method. They fasted three days and entreated God about this matter and

God answered their prayers.

So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer. Ezra 8:21-23

Ezra then found 12 trusted men and entrusted all the gifts that were being taken.

And I separated twelve of the leaders of the priests — Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them — 25 and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel who were present, had offered. ... 28 And I said to them, "You are holy to the Lord; the articles are holy also; 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 leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' houses of Israel in Jerusalem, Ezra 8:24-25, 28-29

They left the safety of Medo-Persia and embarked on the dangerous journey to Jerusalem. God delivered them from the thieves and the danger of ambush that was ever present and they arrived safely.

Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road. 32 So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days. Ezra 8:31-32

They then delivered all that they had brought into the temple and recorded the entire amount.

Now on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui, 34 with the number and weight of everything. All the weight was written down at that time. Ezra 8:33-36

They then offered burnt offerings to God in the temple.

The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. Ezra 8:33-36

After they accomplished their obligations to the God of heaven, they turned their attention to the leaders of the Medo Persian empire. They delivered the letter containing the orders of the king to the satraps and governors as the king had commanded. All these leaders gave their full support to the work and mission of Ezra. Thus the providence of God is seen from beginning to end.

And they delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps and the governors in the region beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God. Ezra 8:33-36

Ezra in Jerusalem

REVIEW:

Ezra has received a letter from king Artaxerxes, authorizing to return to Jerusalem to beautify the temple and offer sacrifices to the LORD. The key passages that give us the context for the class this evening center on Ezra and this letter from the king. Ezra is a great example for all men who want to preach or be a faithful servant of God.

according to the good hand of his God upon him. 10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. Ezra 7:9-10

The letter reveals that someone has worked very hard with this king and opened his mind and heart to the LORD. His faith and zeal are amazing in a heathen king.

I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand; 15 and whereas you are to carry to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem; 16 and whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem — 17 now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem. Ezra 7:11-17

One of the important things that will have great bearing on how we interpret the events that occur when he arrives in Jerusalem is the civil authority given to Ezra when he arrives there. He is not arriving as a Jew who returned to Israel, but as a governor with the power of life and death over everyone in Israel.

Also we inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God. 25 And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them. 26 Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment. Ezra 7:24-26

As Ezra prepares to leave with all the gold, silver and goods to return to Jerusalem, a difficulty arises. This is a dangerous journey and the amount of money they are carrying will make them of great interest to the thieves and wicked men along the way. Ezra has told the king of the great power of God and is now ashamed to ask the king for a guard. So he decides to fast, humble themselves and , seek from Him the right path.

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. 8:21

For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him." Ezra 8:22

Final Preparations for the Journey and Arrival in Jerusalem

Ezra then found 12 trusted men and entrusted all the gifts that were being taken.

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are holy also; 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 leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' houses of Israel in Jerusalem, Ezra 8:24-25, 28-29**

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Ezra is now either the governor or satrap over Israel with the full support of all the satraps and governors in the region.

A Crime in Israel

As noted in last week's class, it has now been about 80 years since they returned from Babylon. That works out to about four generations. The temple had been finished for about 60 years and the original rulers (Zerubbabel, Joshua) and the prophets (Zechariah and Haggai) had passed from the earth and either no one had warned or rebuked them, or they had stiffened their necks again and refused to listen. They violated one of the fundamental rules of the Old Covenant. The very thing that had brought Solomon down was now the plight of the entire nation.

*When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "**The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations 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 their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.**" 9:1-2*

Israel had been strictly warned about this and had already fallen into it once bringing disaster of the nation.

"When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, 2 and when the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. 3 Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other

gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. 5 But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire. 6 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. Deut 7:1-7

That the leaders were chief in this matter was especially troubling since Solomon and Ahab had been influenced to great evil by such wives.

But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites — 2 from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. 3 And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. 4 For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. 5 For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6 Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not fully follow the Lord, as did his father David. 1 Kings 11:1-6

Now Ahab the son of did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. 31 And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. 1 Kings 16:30-32

But there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up. 26 And he behaved very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. 1 Kings 21:25-26

Ezra is "astonished," which means he is "desolate, astonished, appalled, devastated, ravaged."

shamem A verb meaning to be desolated, to be destroyed. A second meaning of this verb, which is extremely common, is to be appalled or astonished ..." (Complete Word Study Dictionary: OT:8074)

shamam "to be desolate, astonished, appalled, devastated, ravaged." ... occurs approximately 90 times ... Just how the meanings "be desolate," "be astonished," and "be appalled" are to be connected with each other is not clear. In some instances, the translator must make a subjective choice. For example, after being raped by her half-brother, Tamar is said to have remained in her brother Absalom's house, "desolate" 2 Sam 13:20. However, she surely was "appalled" at what Amnon had done. ... " (Vines)

This was such an unforeseen problem that it was like a lightning strike.

So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. 9:4

Ezra spends the day fasting and sitting still. In the evening sacrifice he arises from the fasting, falls on his knees and offers a prayer to God.

5 At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God. 9:5

In this prayer all his "astonishment (desolate, astonished, appalled, devastated, ravaged) is on display.

6 And I said: "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day. 8 And now for a little while grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival

in our bondage. 9 For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. 10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, 11 which You commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity. 12 Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever.' 13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, 14 should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant or survivor? 15 O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You, in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this!"
9:6-15

Ezra Confront their Sin

Review

Ezra has returned to Jerusalem to beautify the temple with the authority of the king. (Ezra 7:27-28). He is also given authority over the people. It is not stated that he is a government official as a governor, but he is given the authority to set up civil authorities and to give them life and death power over the people.

*And you, **Ezra**, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them. 26 **Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.** Ezra 7:25-26*

After he arrives, he receives a report from the leaders that a grave sin has occurred. The people have joined themselves to the pagans who remained in the land. Ezra is crushed by this news. First he tore his garment, and plucked out some hair from his beard and head and began fasting. As word spread those who trembled at God's word gathered around him. At the evening sacrifice, he fell on his knees and began to pray and confess to God. As he prayed, even more assembled and along with Ezra everyone was weeping.

The Solution is Suggested

The full emotions of the prayer are so powerful that word quickly spreads and a large assembly gathers together. His emotions quickly spread to these people. Again, how much of this is sincere repentance and how much great fear over the authority given to this man as governor can't really be assessed, but judging from previous prophets who had spoken to the people, it certainly had some bearing as he had the authority to imprison or even put to death.

***Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.** 10:1*

One of those witnessing his distress offers a suggestion to him that will give hope in Israel. We don't know anything more about his man. He suggests that these people Make a covenant with God to:

- (1) Put away these unlawful wives that they had no right to be married to.
- (2) Put away the children who had been born to them.

*And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "**We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this. 3 Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master 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. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it.**" 10:2-4*

This is to be done by the counsel and advice and authority of:

- (1) **Ezra**; who had the civil authority from Medo Persia and was a scribe who knew the Law
*For Ezra had **prepared his heart to seek the law** of the LORD, and **to do it**, and **to teach in Israel** statutes and judgments. Ezra 7:10*
- (2) Those who **tremble at God's commands**; Those who tremble at God's word will always support and help those who are seeking to have that Law fulfilled. So Paul believed about Corinth (1Cor. 5).
- (3) **According to the law**. This too is an important concept. The law involved was clear.

*"When the Lord your God brings you into the land... cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, ... **You shall make no covenant with them** nor show mercy to them. 3 **Nor shall you make marriages with them.** You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so **the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.** Deut 7:1-4*

This was the law and its punishment. This is why Ezra was so upset with the people. They were even then provoking the anger of the Lord and destruction was imminent. Yet the Law gives no remedy. It only forbids it. What then does "**done according to the law**" mean? Clearly from what followed it meant both repentance and the fruits of repentance. Every law has this woven into it. When a law of God is violated, two options are built into it. The first is the full weight of the Law and the punishment prescribed. The second is the sincere repentance along with the fruits of repentance.

For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter 2 Cor 7:10-11.

There is a critically important example for us to understand. The only way to fix this violation of the law was to remove its cause. They had married those whom they had no right to marry and the only solution that was "**according to the law**" was to void the marriage and send them away. Though man made wisdom might look to God's grace to provide the solution of repentance and keeping the unlawful thing, but that can never be done regardless of the human wisdom and sophistry that have been devised to avoid it. Just as the one who stole must return the goods if the repentance is genuine as the clear and obvious fruit of their repentance, so also here.

The responsibility lies with Ezra, but those who love the Law are supporting him. He concludes with the encouragement to take courage and do it.

Ezra uses this opportunity to get a commitment from the people. He makes them swear an oath to God that they would put away their wives and those who were born to them.

An Oath is Sworn

Although Ezra has the civil authority to punish, he wants to handle this with grace and mercy, so he demands an other that they would "*do according to this word:*" which is again a powerful proof that what they did (put away wives and children) was absolutely necessary. Since they were swearing to do it.

***Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath. 6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity.** 10:5-6*

The "they" would be those among this group who had the civil authority to decree this. It is then and sent throughout the region commanding the people to gather and warning of the grave civil consequences if they failed to do so.

***And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem, 8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of those from the captivity.** 10:7-8*

It is obvious from this passage that very few if any of the ten tribes have returned since they are

still called "Judah and Benjamin." They are trembling because of the severity of the punishment and the gravity of the situation. Also it is the ninth month which corresponds to our December. Today the average temperature in December is a high of 57 and a low of 47.

So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth of the month; and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of heavy rain. 10:9

Ezra then sets forth the matter at hand. It appears the majority of this sin has been committed not by the women, but the men. It is the pagan wives that are under consideration. These wives have made Israel guilty of sin and so confession needed to be made. In order to "do His will," they must "separate from both the people (contracts and covenants) and the pagan wives.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. 11 Now therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives." 10:10-11

Whether they did this out of loyalty to God is difficult to determine. The people had no choice in the matter because of Ezra's civil authority and the direct command from the king of Medo Persia that he must make the people do all that is in the Law. It is also evident that this was a civil matter and not simply a decision of the people to leave their wives. It could not be "***the work of one or two days,***" because of the number of offenders. They must each come at appointed times so that the problem can be properly resolved legally. There were some who opposed this idea, but they had no authority or means to stop it.

12 Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do. 13 But there are many people; it is the season for heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside. Nor is this the work of one or two days, for there are many of us who have transgressed in this matter. 14 Please, let the leaders of our entire assembly stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter." 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support. 10:12-15

Compliance

It was done by appointing Ezra the priest, and certain heads of households (magistrates). They sat down and slowly examined the matter. It took three months to take care of this by questioning the men. Each case had to be carefully examined. The husband must give evidence that his wife was of the proper genealogy. If she was not then she had to be put away along with the children.

Then the descendants of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain heads of the fathers' households, were set apart by the fathers' households, each of them by name; and they sat down on the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. 17 By the first day of the first month they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives. 10:16-17

The list that follows gives the examples of those who had to put away their wives and with this admission of guilt, the sacrifice to be offered to resolve the issue.

And among the sons of the priests who had taken pagan wives the following were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. 19 And they gave their promise that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they presented a ram of the flock as their trespass offering. Ezra 10:18-19

Then followed an abbreviated list of the common people who had taken foreign wives and had children by them who had to put them all away.

All these had taken pagan wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children. Ezra 10:44