

EZRA

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The Name:

The name EZRA is given to the book written by a priest by that name who returned with Zerubbabel from Babylonian captivity. It is a shortened form of Azariah, which means: "Yahweh has helped."

The Author:

We find the genealogy of Ezra in which he traces his descent back to the high priest Aaron, ch. 7:1-6 of his book. Ezra is said to be "the son of Seraiah." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes that: "Since Seraiah, according to the Book of Kings, was killed by Nebuchadrezzar at Riblah (2 Kings 25:18-21), and since he was the father of Jehozadak, the high priest who was carried into captivity by Nebuchadrezzar (1 Chron 6:14-15 (5:40 in Heb), etc.) in 588 BC, and since the return under Ezra took place in 458 BC, the word 'son' must be used in Ezra 7:2 in the sense of descendant. Since, moreover, Joshua, or Jeshua, the high priest, who returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel, was the son of Jehozadak and the grandson of Seraiah, Ezra was probably the great-grandson or great-great-grandson of Seraiah." In the Book of Nehemiah, Ezra is called "Ezra the scribe."¹ Originally the title meant an officer at the king's court, or the king's secretary. But later it was applied to students of the Law of Moses.

Introduction:

The Pulpit Commentary gives the following introduction to the Book Ezra: "The Book of Ezra is a work of so simple a character as scarcely to require an 'Introduction.' It is a plain and straightforward account of one of the most important events in Jewish history — the return of the people of God from the Babylonian captivity. This return had two stages. It commenced under Zerubbabel, the lineal descendant of the kings of Judah, in the first year of Cyrus the Great in Babylon, which was B.C. 538; and it was continued, and in a certain sense completed, under Ezra, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, which was B.C. 458. The Book contains an account of both these periods, and is thus, primarily, divisible into two portions — the history of the first, and the history of the second return. The former occupies the first six, the latter the last four chapters. A close harmony may be observed between the two narratives. The origin of the movement in either case is traced up to a sentiment of goodwill in the mind of the reigning Persian monarch; the sentiment gives birth to a decree, which is recited at length; then a commission to conduct the captives back to their own land issues; the number of those who returned, and the names of the leading men, are given; the exact weight of the sacred vessels which the exiles brought back on each occasion is put on record, and the exact number and character of the offerings which they severally made to

¹ Neh. 8:1

the God of Israel The history is also carried on in either case to the main result which followed the return. And here again there is a parallelism. On the first occasion the zeal of the exiles raised up with difficulty, and after much opposition, the material church of God — the temple — which the Chaldaeans had destroyed; on the second, they raised up and restored to its pristine glory the spiritual Church, or congregation of the people of Israel, which had sunk into a low and miserable condition through the influence of the neighboring heathen. As history does not ever exactly repeat itself, there is of course much diversity combined with this resemblance. The rebuilding of the temple occupied a long term of years; the religious reformation was accomplished in a few months. The one was the work of the established civil ruler; the other of a mere scribe and priest, holding a temporary commission. To effect the one it was necessary to struggle with adversaries, and make appeals to the Persian king; prayer was the means by which the other was brought about, and a single appeal to the King of heaven sufficed.”

Outline of the Book:

- I. The Return of the Captives ch.1,2 (538 BC)
 - 1. Cyrus’ Proclamation ch. 1
 - 2. List of Repatriates ch. 2
- II. The Rebuilding of the Temple ch. 3-6
 - 1. The Laying of the Foundation ch. 3 (538 BC)
 - 2. The Interruption of the Work ch. 4 (537-518 BC)
 - 3. The Resumption and Completion of the Work ch. 5,6 (518-514 BC)
- III. Ezra’s journey to Jerusalem ch. 7,8 (458 BC)
- IV. Ezra’s Measures against Mixed Marriages ch. 9,10

Analyses of the Book:

The book of Ezra covers a period of approximately 80 years. There is a hiatus of almost 59 years between the chapters 6 and 7.

When we study Ezra, as well as the books of Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi it strikes us how great is the contrast between what God does in heaven and what we see happen on earth.

Isaiah had predicted Cyrus’ proclamation more than 150 years earlier. Isaiah lived from approximately 745-695 BC and Cyrus made his proclamation in 538 BC. Yet in Isaiah chapters 44 and 45, Cyrus’ name is mentioned. Isaiah’s prophecy is proof of the fact that God is infinitely superior to the idols.

Another marvelous coincidence is the relationship between Jeremiah’s letter to the captives in Babylon² and Daniel’s prayer, which it inspired.³ The role Daniel’s prayer played in this part of history is of the greatest importance. Daniel prayed in the same year that King Cyrus issued his proclamation. It may be difficult for us to understand why God needed Daniel’s prayer, but we must accept the fact that it was of vital importance in the occurrence of the events.

We could expect, therefore, that the putting into effect the plan of God would be accompanied by spectacular events on earth. What actually happened failed to have any effect upon the world of that time. A small group of 42,360 people answered the call to

² See Jer. Ch. 29

³ See Dan. Ch. 9

return. The work of restoration they began was stopped by force within one year after their arrival in Jerusalem. And the mentality of those pioneers left much to be desired also. They were more motivated by self-interest than by the things of God. A glance at the prophecy of Haggai clarifies this.⁴ They stole and cheated,⁵ and they intermarried with the heathen nations that surrounded them. Yet, God used this hotchpotch of paupers to restore the place of His revelation on earth. This sounds ludicrous, but we see here demonstrated what the apostle Paul would later call “the foolishness of the cross,” by which God uses “the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.”⁶ In contrast to this group, we find a few men, like Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra and Nehemiah whom God used to become the pillars of His temple. Humanly speaking, building rested upon their shoulders.

I. The Return of the Captives ch.1,2

1. Cyrus’ Proclamation 1:1-11

1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

2 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.

3 Anyone of his people among you-may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.

4 And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem."

5 Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites-everyone whose heart God had moved-prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem.

6 All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.

7 Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god.

8 Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

9 This was the inventory:

<i>gold dishes</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>silver dishes</i>	<i>1,000</i>
<i>silver pans</i>	<i>2,910</i>
<i>gold bowls</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>matching silver bowls</i>	<i>410</i>
<i>other articles</i>	<i>1,000</i>

⁴ See Hag. 1:3,4,9

⁵ See Hag. 2:17; Zech. 5:1-4

⁶ I Cor. 1:18,27

11 In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

According to *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* Cyrus reigned from 559-530 B.C. *Hally's Handbook of the Bible* gives the years 538-529, probably on the basis of the opening verses of Ezra, that suggest that Cyrus issued his proclamation in the first year of his ascension to the throne. It is more likely, however, that Ezra's "first year" is the year in which the king began to reign over Babylonia. It would be hard to believe that Cyrus conquered the whole Babylonian Empire in the first year of his becoming king of Persia.

Cyrus' policy and that of his successors was completely opposite to the way the Assyrians and Babylonians had treated the people of the lands they conquered. The Persians treated the nations they subdued with respect and they revered their gods. They even tried to repair the damages of the previous policies of forced mass migration by permitting the displaced persons to return to their original homelands. After a 70-year sojourn in Babylon, however, and a more than 200-year captivity in Assyria, a large-scale return to the motherland proved no longer feasible.

We must not see Cyrus' veneration of YHWH as an indication of his personal conversion but rather as part of the generally religious policy he enacted in his empire. An inscription found from this period reads: "When I entered peacefully into Babel, Marduk, their great lord made the generous heart of the Babylonians inclined toward me, whilst I was daily attentive to his veneration."⁷ Yet, Ezra states clearly: "the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia," and also that the repatriates consisted of "everyone whose heart God had moved-prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem." What happened was the direct result of the working of the Holy Spirit. Satan was of course immediately busy to sow tares among the wheat, so that it would be difficult to discern truth amidst the lies. But this does not diminish the reality of what happened. The fact that the Holy Spirit worked here in the heart of human beings is not synonymous to regeneration or baptism with the Spirit in the New Testament sense of the word. But it may be seen as a pointer to the working of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, particularly in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

There is a parallel between the return from captivity and the exodus of Israel from Egypt in that the inhabitants of the lands supported the Jews with money and goods. We read in Ezra: "And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem. All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings."⁸ And the Exodus' record tells us: "Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbors for articles of silver and gold. (The LORD made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and Moses himself was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh's officials and by the people.) The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians."⁹

⁷ Quoted in the Dutch Biblical Encyclopedia.

⁸ Ch. 1:4,6

⁹ Ex. 11:2-3; 12:35,36

The repatriates carried a part of the temple treasures, which Nebuchadnezzar had stolen, back with them to Jerusalem. Less than one year before, King Belshazzar had used the same cups and bowls for his drunken frolic on the last evening of his life. These utensils were the only remaining items of the glory of the old temple, the place where God had revealed Himself on earth. The actual symbol of glory, the ark with its cover, is no longer mentioned. We are probably safe to suppose that the ark was destroyed when Jerusalem was reduced to rubble. If pious Jews had hidden the ark, as some suppose, the returnees must have known about this. These cups and bowls were stolen when Nebuchadnezzar took King Jehoiakim as a captive to Babylon during the first deportation of captives.¹⁰ At the destruction of the temple, which occurred eleven years later, the remainder of the treasures was taken.¹¹ If the ark had been among those items, it would surely have been mentioned in Scripture. We can hardly overstate what the loss of the ark must have meant to the Jews. Yet, this loss also meant a step forward in the history of salvation.

On the name *Sheshbazzar*, the prince of Judah, *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "This was probably the Chaldean name of him who was originally called Zerubbabel: the former signifies joy in affliction; the latter, a stranger in Babylon. The latter may be designed to refer to his captive state; the former to the prospect of release. Some think this was quite a different person; a Persian or Chaldean, sent by Cyrus to superintend whatever officers or men Cyrus might have sent to assist the Jews on their return; and to procure them help in the Chaldean provinces through which they might be obliged to travel."

According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, "Josephus accounts for his [Cyrus'] partiality to the Jews from this circumstance; that he was shown the places in Isaiah the prophet where he is mentioned by name, and his exploits and conquests foretold: see Isa 44:28, and Isa 14:1, etc. Finding himself thus distinguished by the God of the Jews he was anxious to give him proofs of his gratitude in return; and so made the decree in favor of the Jews, restored their sacred vessels, gave them liberty to return to their own land, and encouraged them to rebuild the temple of Yahweh, etc." There is no historical proof for the truth of this statement.

2. List of Repatriates ch. 2:1-70

1 Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town,

2 in company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah): The list of the men of the people of Israel:

<i>3 the descendants of Parosh</i>	<i>2,172 4</i>
<i>of Shephatiah</i>	<i>372 5</i>
<i>of Arah</i>	<i>775 6</i>
<i>of Pahath-Moab</i>	<i>2,812</i>
<i>(through the line of Jeshua and Joab)</i>	

¹⁰ See II Chr. 36:5-7

¹¹ II Chr. 36:18,19

<i>7 of Elam</i>	1,254	
<i>8 of Zattu</i>	945	9
<i>of Zacca</i>		760 10
<i>of Bani</i>		642 11
<i>of Bebai</i>		623 12
<i>of Azgad</i>	1,222	13
<i>of Adonikam</i>	666	14
<i>of Bigvai</i>	2,056	15
<i>of Adin</i>		454 16
<i>of Ater (through Hezekiah)</i>	98	17
<i>of Bezai</i>		323
<i>18 of Jorah</i>	112	19
<i>of Hashum</i>	223	
<i>20 of Gibbar</i>	95	
<i>21 the men of Bethlehem</i>		123 22
<i>of Netophah</i>	56	23
<i>of Anathoth</i>	128	24
<i>of Azmaveth</i>	42	25
<i>26 of Kiriath Jearim, Kephirah and Beeroth</i>	743	
<i>of Ramah and Geba</i>	621	
<i>27 of Micmash</i>		122
<i>28 of Bethel and Ai</i>	223	
<i>29 of Nebo</i>	52	
<i>30 of Magbish</i>		156
<i>31 of the other Elam</i>	1,254	
<i>32 of Harim</i>	320	
<i>33 of Lod, Hadid and Ono</i>	725	
<i>34 of Jericho</i>	345	
<i>35 of Senaah</i>	3,630	
<i>36 The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah (through the family of Jeshua)</i>	973	
<i>37 of Immer</i>	1,052	
<i>38 of Pashhur</i>	1,247	
<i>39 of Harim</i>	1,017	
<i>40 The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel (through the line of Hodaviah)</i>		74
<i>41 The singers: the descendants of Asaph</i>	128	
<i>42 The gatekeepers of the temple: the descendants of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita and Shobai</i>		139
<i>43 The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth,</i>		
<i>44 Keros, Siaha, Padon,</i>		
<i>45 Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub,</i>		
<i>46 Hagab, Shalmai, Hanan,</i>		

- 47 *Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah,*
 48 *Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam,*
 49 *Uzza, Paseah, Besai,*
 50 *Asnah, Meunim, Nephussim,*
 51 *Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur,*
 52 *Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha,*
 53 *Barkos, Sisera, Temah,*
 54 *Neziah and Hatipha*
 55 *The descendants of the servants of Solomon:*
the descendants of Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda,
 56 *Jaala, Darkon, Giddel,*
 57 *Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-Hazzebaim and Ami*
 58 *The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon 392*
 59 *The following came up from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon*
and Immer, but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel:
 60 *The descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah and Nekoda 652*
 61 *And from among the priests:*
The descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a
daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name).
 62 *These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were*
excluded from the priesthood as unclean.
 63 *The governor ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there was a*
priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.
 64 *The whole company numbered 42,360,*
 65 *besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 200 men and*
women singers. 66 They had 736 horses, 245 mules, 67 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.
 68 *When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the*
families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site.
 69 *According to their ability they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 drachmas of*
gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments.
 70 *The priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants settled*
in their own towns, along with some of the other people, and the rest of the Israelites
settled in their towns.

The first eleven names in this register are names of the leaders among who were Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua or Joshua, the high priest. According to vs. 64, the total of repatriates was 42,360. If, however, we add all the figures in this chapter, we only come to a total of 29,818, which is 12,542 less than Ezra's figure. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Ezra's numbers, as given in detail (vers. 3-60), produce when added together a total of only 29,818; Nehemiah's items (... Nehemiah 7:8-62) give a total of 31,089; those of the apocryphal Esdras a total of 33,950. The three authorities agree, however, in their summation, all alike declaring that the actual number of those who returned with Zerubbabel was 42,360. Esdras adds that children under twelve years of age are not included. If this were so, the entire number must have exceeded 50,000." *Halley's Handbook of the Bible* supposes that 12,500 were descendants of the ten northern tribes who were included in the total but not specified in Ezra's list. If that is the

solution to the riddle, it still does not solve the problem of the huge difference. We may suppose, though, that the author of the Book of Ezra knew how to count.

An interesting statement in the list is found in verses 59-63. The descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah and Nekoda, and from among the priests: the descendants of Hobaiiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai had no papers to prove that they were Israelites. This proves, in the first place how seriously the matter of descent was taken. The priests in this group were automatically excluded from the exercise of their profession until a divine verdict could be obtained via the Urim and Thummim. We do not know how this was obtained or what was involved in this. The spiritual lesson taught by this incident is that God will only use those who are His children. Barzillai is mentioned elsewhere in the Scriptures in connection with David's return to Jerusalem after the revolt of Absalom.¹²

Lastly, we read in this chapter about the freewill offerings made by some of the heads of families. These gifts consisted of gold coins (the Persians were the first ones to coin money) 61,000 drachmas of gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments. The garments were probably made of linen. The Berkeley translation renders the money as \$305,000 in gold and \$170,000 in silver. TLB rounds this off to: "The total value of their gifts amounted to \$300,000 of gold, \$170,000 of silver." If the total group consisted of 42,360 persons, the average per person comes to more than \$100, which is a very impressive contribution. The repatriates settled in the cities where their families had lived before the captivity.

II. The Rebuilding of the Temple ch. 3-6

1. The Laying of the Foundation ch. 3:1-13

1 When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem.

2 Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

3 Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

4 Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day.

5 After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred feasts of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD. 6 On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.

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

8 In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to

¹² See II Sam. 19:31-39

Jerusalem) began the work, appointing Levites twenty years of age and older to supervise the building of the house of the LORD.

9 Jeshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah) and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers—all Levites-joined together in supervising those working on the house of God.

10 When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel.

11 With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

12 But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.

13 No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

The seventh month may mean the seventh month after the departure from Babylon or after their arrival in Jerusalem. For Ezra, the journey took five months.¹³ It is possible that the travel time of the first group of repatriates was longer. If this is the case, their gathering in Jerusalem would have taken place almost immediately after their arrival in the country.

The first thing they did on the first day was to build an altar and begin the ritual of bringing sacrifices. The reason for this hurry was fear. The NIV's rendering "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation" seems an unfortunate interpretation of the mentality of the people. The Hebrew text reads literally: "And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries." The NASU is closer to the original with: "So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands." The fear of the people kindled in them the fear of the Lord. It is amazing to see how sharp was the spiritual insight of these people. They knew that there was no hope for help and no protection without God. They also understood that God could only come to their help on the basis of the atonement of their sin. And they realized that there would be no solution to their problems without fellowship with God.

The Jews had learned this lesson from Samuel. When Israel tried to shake the yoke of the Philistines, Samuel urged them to rid themselves of their idols and commit their lives to the Lord. When, during a gathering of the people at Mizpah, the Philistines came to attack, we read: "Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it up as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him." This event was commemorated in a monument erected at that place. It was called: "Ebenezer," meaning, "Thus far has the LORD helped us."¹⁴

Without atonement for our sin and without fellowship with God, everything in life will be against us. We live in a hostile world. On the other hand we can say with Paul: "If

¹³ See ch. 7:9

¹⁴ See I Samuel 7:3-12

God is for us, who can be against us?”¹⁵ The man who is reconciled with God eats at God’s table while the enemy is kept at a distance.¹⁶

The erection of the altar was accompanied by the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. According to the law, this feast must be celebrated on the 15th through the 22nd of the seventh month.¹⁷ The feast fell in harvest time and commemorated the desert crossing when Israel pilgrimaged from Egypt to the Promised Land. The feast emphasized particularly the temporal character of man’s wandering on earth.¹⁸ It is important to note that this feast was celebrated at the time when the rebuilding of the temple began. It is as if the Lord wanted to impress upon the heart of the people that this temple would also vanish and that what they were building was a shadow of a higher reality. In more than one sense, the Feast of Tabernacles pointed to the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh and pitched His tent among us.¹⁹

Approximately seven months after the erection of the altar, the people began with the preparations for the rebuilding of the temple itself. The sacrifices on the altar were brought before there was a temple. This is proof of the fact that the Jews realized that the presence of the Lord far surpassed the actual building. They must have understood something of the fact that the building was not reality itself, but merely a representation of a spiritual reality.

It, evidently, took time before the people set themselves to work. This does not necessarily point to laxity, at least not at this stage. The total ruin in which the repatriates found their country must have been overwhelming. These thousands of people had to find a place to live and they had to find food somewhere. The fact that they only needed nine months to get ready proves rather that they adapted themselves fast. Yet, it is disappointing to see that only professionals did the work. We would expect to see that everyone would put their shoulders to the wheel, as they did later under the direction of Nehemiah. The only volunteers we read about are the Levites and the priests, who were personally interested in the project. Maybe we judge the events too severely. It is possible that the people aimed for perfection and that, consequently, they only permitted experts to do the work. As it was at the building of the first temple in Solomon’s day, the people of Tyre and Sidon were involved in procuring the necessary cedar wood.²⁰

We don’t know how much was left of the foundation of the old temple. It is unlikely that, when the Babylonians burned the temple, they went to the trouble to remove all the foundation stones. And even if they had done so, the stones would still be around somewhere and it was only a matter of rearranging them. According to the record in the Book of First Kings, the old temple was sixty cubits long, twenty wide and thirty high. TLB renders the measurements as: “ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high.” Ezra states that King Cyrus decreed that the new temple must be ninety feet high and ninety feet wide; no length is mentioned. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “This breadth is thrice that of the main building, according to both Chronicles and Kings. It is even double that of the old temple, *with the side chambers*, which occupied a space of five cubits, or seven and a half feet, on either wing. That such an enlargement actually

¹⁵ Rom. 8:31

¹⁶ See Ps. 23:5^a

¹⁷ See Lev. 23:33-36

¹⁸ See Lev. 39-43

¹⁹ John 1:14

²⁰ See I Kings 5:1-11

took effect would seem to be most improbable; and we may perhaps conclude that Cyrus designed a building on a grander scale than Zerubbabel, with the resources at his disposal, was able to erect. It is curious that Cyrus did not in his decree specify the length of the temple.”

We note, however, that the laying of the foundation evoked mixed emotions. There were exuberant demonstrations of joy and also loud laments. The old temple had been destroyed 58 years before. Those in the crowd who remembered seeing the old temple must have been in their seventies. According to Haggai, similar demonstrations occurred when the temple was finished and dedicated. Haggai said: “Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?”²¹

At the laying of the foundation it became obvious that fellowship with God would never be again what it was before. The people must have realized that something had happened during the captivity that could never be healed completely. They did not understand, however, that God never takes a step back. The captivity left scars but in the atonement, these scars become the symbols of grace. The scars in Jesus’ body will remain visible throughout eternity. This mixture of emotions, of exuberant joy and deep sorrow is typical for the Christian life. This is the way we must build.

2. The Interruption of the Work ch. 4:1-24

1 When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel,

2 they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."

3 But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."

4 Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.

5 They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

6 At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

7 And in the days of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. The letter was written in Aramaic script and in the Aramaic language.

8 Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:

9 Rehum the commanding officer and Shimshai the secretary, together with the rest of their associates—the judges and officials over the men from Tripolis, Persia, Erech and Babylon, the Elamites of Susa,

10 and the other people whom the great and honorable Ashurbanipal deported and settled in the city of Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates.

²¹ Hag. 2:3

11 (This is a copy of the letter they sent him.)

To King Artaxerxes,

From your servants, the men of Trans-Euphrates:

12 The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations.

13 Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and the royal revenues will suffer.

14 Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king,

15 so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place of rebellion from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed.

16 We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates.

17 The king sent this reply: To Rehum the commanding officer, Shimshai the secretary and the rest of their associates living in Samaria and elsewhere in Trans-Euphrates: Greetings.

18 The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence.

19 I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition.

20 Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans-Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them.

21 Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.

22 Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests?

23 As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop.

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

The efforts to discourage the people begin, in chapter four, with a snare. The inhabitants of the land, who had been relocated by the Assyrians, came to offer their help in the rebuilding of the temple. These must have been the people who had replaced the population of Samaria. We read in the Book of Second Kings: “The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites.”²² We read about them that they began to worship YHWH as a local deity. Their attitude which, throughout the ages, became their trademark was: “They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought.”²³ Ezra calls them “the enemies of Judah and Benjamin.” Their offer of “détente” is recognized as a disguise of their hostile intentions. The Jews understood that rebuilding the place of

²² II Kings 17:24

²³ II Kings 17:33

God's revelation on earth would only make sense if people who served God with an undivided heart did it. Accepting their offer would bring about a repetition of the associations that had lured Israel into idolatry before.

Those people came saying: "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." By saying: "We seek your God" they exposed their lie. It is a widespread misunderstanding among non-Christians that religion consists in seeking God. The essence of the Gospel is that God seeks us and that salvation is ours if we allow ourselves to be found. The Jews never sought God. They had not taken the initiative in returning to the Promised Land. Only the Holy Spirit was responsible for the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and for the prayer of Daniel, as well as for moving of the heart of King Cyrus and the returning captives. To compare their worship of God, in addition to their serving their own idols, with the dedication of the Jews to YHWH was a gross insult. These people could have become temple builders through repentance and obedience, but as long as they clung to their old life, the Jews had no choice but to refuse their offer.

How little they had prioritized God is obvious from their reaction when their offer was rejected. They began by intimidating the people and, when that did not have any effect, they went higher up and wrote a letter to the king.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "In this world, whenever a good work is begun, some kind of opposition is sure to show itself, since Satan will never suffer any attack upon his kingdom without resenting it. The opposition may, however, be of two kinds. It may be open and proclaimed, or it may take the subtler and more dangerous shape of seeming approval and patronage. In the case before us, the opposition to Zerubbabel's mission was, at the first, of this latter kind. ... The movement was one for the re-establishment of God's peculiar people in their own land, under their own system, as a witness to the nations against polytheism, against idolatry, against materialism and sensualism in religion. As the Samaritans had adopted a mixed or mongrel worship, uniting idolatrous rites with the acknowledgment of Jehovah ...2 Kings 17:29-41), their admission by Zerubbabel to a partnership in his work would have been equivalent to the abandonment of pure religion, and the acceptance of a syncretism inherently vicious, and sure to develop into pronounced forms of impurity and corruption. Zerubbabel therefore declined the offer made him — most properly, since there is no "communion between light and darkness" (...2 Corinthians 6:14), no 'agreement between the temple of God and idols' (*ibid.* ver. 16). His determination was bitterly resented. Unable to seduce him into alliance with them, the Samaritans became his open and avowed enemies; during three reigns — the remainder of the reign of Cyrus, the reign of Cambyses (Ahasuerus), and that of the Pseudo-Smerdis (Artaxerxes) — they so worked upon the Persian court that the rebuilding of the temple was almost wholly stopped; no progress was made until the second year of Darius, when a new opposition showed itself, as appears by the next section."

There is some difference of opinion among scholars about the letter that was written to King Artaxerxes. One interesting feature of this section is that the whole text is in Aramaic and is incorporated as such in the Hebrew canon. The problem is that the letter is addressed to King Artaxerxes, who supposedly is the same Artaxerxes that came to power 66 years later. This brings some Bible scholars to believe that the letter was

actually of a later date and that a later editor inserted it into Ezra's text. It is hard, however, to reconcile such a distortion of facts with the cessation of the rebuilding of the temple for a period of 15 years. A more logical explanation is that this Artaxerxes is the same as Cambyses, who came to power after Cyrus. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* confirms: "It is generally believed, that from the time of Cyrus the great, Xerxes and Artaxerxes were names assumed by the Persian sovereigns, whatever their names had been before." "Artaxerxes" may have become a general title of the Persian rulers in the same way as "Pharaoh" in Egypt.

The accusations in the letter are completely spurious. At this time the city of Jerusalem was not being rebuilt. Also, Jerusalem had been the only place on earth of which it could be said that God dwelt there; it had been a symbol of the glory of the church and a shadow of the heavenly reality. This city is called here: "that rebellious and wicked city." The city had only been rebellious and wicked in as much as it had deviated from the blueprint of God's holiness. Sincere children of God are put here in the same category as the sinful men who had caused the captivity and destruction of the city by their idolatry.

As soon as the king's answer is received, the hostile civil servants of the king race to Jerusalem to compel the cessation of the work by force.

3. The Resumption and Completion of the Work ch. 5,6

Chapter 5:1 – 6:22

1 Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.

2 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.

3 At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates went to them and asked, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore this structure?"

4 They also asked, "What are the names of the men constructing this building?"

5 But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.

6 This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates, the officials of Trans-Euphrates, sent to King Darius.

7 The report they sent him read as follows:

To King Darius:

Cordial greetings.

8 The king should know that we went to the district of Judah, to the temple of the great God. The people are building it with large stones and placing the timbers in the walls. The work is being carried on with diligence and is making rapid progress under their direction.

9 We questioned the elders and asked them, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore this structure?" 10 We also asked them their names, so that we could write down the names of their leaders for your information.

11 This is the answer they gave us:

"We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished.

12 But because our fathers angered the God of heaven, he handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, 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 He even removed from the temple of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to the temple in Babylon.

"Then King Cyrus gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor,

15 and he told him, 'Take these articles and go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem. And rebuild the house of God on its site.'

16 So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished."

17 Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter.

6:1 King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon.

2 A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it:

Memorandum:

3 In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem:

Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be ninety feet high and ninety feet wide,

4 with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury.

5 Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.

6 Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you, their fellow officials of that province, stay away from there.

7 Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.

8 Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:

The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop.

9 Whatever is needed-young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem-must be given them daily without fail, 10 so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.

11 Furthermore, I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. And for this crime his house is to be made a pile of rubble.

12 May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

13 Then, because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates carried it out with diligence.

14 So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia.

15 The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

16 Then the people of Israel-the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles-celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

17 For the dedication of this house of God they offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel.

18 And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses.

19 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the exiles celebrated the Passover.

20 The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their brothers the priests and for themselves.

21 So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the LORD, the God of Israel.

22 For seven days they celebrated with joy the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

After a period of 15 years, the Holy Spirit begins to work again in the hearts of men. This time it is not to create in them an irresistible desire to return to their homeland, but by giving to Haggai and Zechariah the gift of prophecy.

Haggai's prophecy is short, consisting of five different messages, given at four different occasions, over a period of three months. Zechariah begins to prophesy while Haggai is still speaking. His first prophecy comes between Haggai's third and fourth message. It is generally supposed that Zechariah was much younger than Haggai.

From Haggai's reproach, we understand that, although the people were made to stop the labor at the temple by outward force, there were also inward factors that facilitated the interruption. According to Haggai, the temple builders made good use of their period of rest to build themselves small palaces. They demonstrated that where their treasure was, their heart was also.²⁴

²⁴ See Hag. 1:3,9

Zerubbabel and Joshua paid attention to the prophets and resume the work. The devil always tries to hinder the work in the Kingdom in different ways. The disquieting factor is not so much the outward resistance, but the fact the enemy finds such an easy inward hold in us. It is never too difficult for him to discourage us. We often cooperate too easily with the outward factors of resistance.

As soon as Zerubbabel and Joshua resume the labor, the Lord begins to bless. God assures them of His presence and He shows them the future glory of the building. In building God's building, the life of the builders is being changed. They become honest people and this allows God to also bless them outwardly. God honors those who honor Him. Zerubbabel becomes a signet ring on God's finger,²⁵ the symbol of God's authority, and an image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Zechariah's prophecy is more detailed than Haggai's. In a series of eight visions, he shows the importance of the rebuilding of the temple against the background of the heavenly reality. He brings out that the actual work of Joshua and Zerubbabel far surpasses the building of a structure of stone. Furthermore, He depicts, in prophetic language, how the Messiah will come and what Israel's role will be in the end times.

It is interesting to observe that, as soon as the Israelites begin to obey God, the outward resistance is broken; no earthly power is able to stop the work any longer. The governor Tattenai writes a letter to King Darius, but while he awaits the answer, the work continues without interruption. Ezra states: "The eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received." After Darius' favorable answer is received, the work is completed without further interruptions. The project is finished in the sixth year of Darius' reign, which is four years after its resumption.

The Passover is celebrated at the time stipulated by the Law of Moses. Ezra mentions specifically that the priests and Levites had undergone the rites of purification before the celebration of the feast. They may have remembered the record of Hezekiah's celebration of the Passover that had to be postponed because the priests had not purified themselves in time.²⁶ The feast was celebrated with "all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the LORD, the God of Israel." The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed the Passover.

The fact that Darius is called "the king of Assyria" strongly suggests that there were, among the repatriates from Babylon, also Israelites from the former northern kingdom who had returned from the Assyrian captivity.

The month of Adar was the twelfth month of the year. The temple was finished on the third of that month. TLB places this on February 18. The celebration of the Passover Feast was held on the fourteenth of the following month, which is approximately six weeks later. The work began with the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, a commemoration of Israel's pilgrimage; it ended with the Passover, the feast of redemption and deliverance. That is the correct order. The exodus from Egypt is a picture of the great redemption when the Lord comes in His glory to save us from the judgment, and the eternal Feast of Unleavened Bread will begin. In the words of the apostle Paul:

²⁵ See Hag. 2:23

²⁶ See II Chr. 30:2,3

“Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.”²⁷

III. Ezra’s journey to Jerusalem ch. 7,8

Chapter 7:1 – 8:36

1 After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra 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-

6 this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

7 Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

8 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king.

9 He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him.

10 For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

11 This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest and teacher, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel:

12 Artaxerxes, king of kings,

*To Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven:
Greetings.*

13 Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go.

14 You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand.

15 Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem,

16 together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem.

17 With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem.

18 You and your brother Jews may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God.

²⁷ I Cor. 5:8

19 Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God.

20 And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you may have occasion to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury.

21 Now I, King Artaxerxes, order all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates to provide with diligence whatever Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of you-

22 up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cors of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of olive oil, and salt without limit.

23 Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and of his sons?

24 You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.

25 And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates-all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.

26 Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

27 Praise be to the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way

28 and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

8:1 These are the family heads and those registered with them who came up with me from Babylon during the reign of King Artaxerxes:

2 of the descendants of Phinehas, Gershom; of the descendants of Ithamar, Daniel; of the descendants of David, Hattush

3 of the descendants of Shecaniah;

of the descendants of Parosh, Zechariah, and with him were registered 150 men;

4 of the descendants of Pahath-Moab, Eliehoenai son of Zerahiah, and with him 200 men;

5 of the descendants of Zattu, Shecaniah son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 men;

6 of the descendants of Adin, Ebed son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men;

7 of the descendants of Elam, Jeshaiiah son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men;

8 of the descendants of Shephatiah, Zebadiah son of Michael, and with him 80 men;

9 of the descendants of Joab, Obadiah son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men;

10 of the descendants of Bani, Shelomith son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 men;

11 of the descendants of Bebai, Zechariah son of Bebai, and with him 28 men;

12 of the descendants of Azgad, Johanan son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 men;

13 of the descendants of Adonikam, the last ones, whose names were Eliphelet, Jeuel and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men;

14 of the descendants of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with them 70 men.

15 I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there.

16 So I summoned Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, who were leaders, and Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of learning,

17 and I sent them to Iddo, the leader in Casiphia. I told them what to say to Iddo and his kinsmen, the temple servants in Casiphia, so that they might bring attendants to us for the house of our God.

18 Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 men;

19 and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 men.

20 They also brought 220 of the temple servants—a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name.

21 There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.

22 I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him."

23 So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, together with Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brothers,

25 and I weighed out to them the offering of silver and gold and the articles that the king, his advisers, his officials and all Israel present there had donated for the house of our God.

26 I weighed out to them 650 talents of silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold,

27 20 bowls of gold valued at 1,000 darics, and two fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold.

28 I said to them, "You as well as these articles are consecrated to the LORD. The silver and gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers.

29 Guard them carefully until you weigh them out in the chambers of the house of the LORD in Jerusalem before the leading priests and the Levites and the family heads of Israel."

30 Then the priests and Levites received the silver and gold and sacred articles that had been weighed out to be taken to the house of our God in Jerusalem.

31 On the twelfth day of the first month we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way.

32 So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days.

33 On the fourth day, in the house of our God, we weighed out the silver and gold and the sacred articles into the hands of Meremoth son of Uriah, the priest. Eleazar son of Phinehas was with him, and so were the Levites Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui.

34 Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time.

35 Then the exiles who had returned from captivity sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs and, as a sin offering, twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD.

36 They also delivered the king's orders to the royal satraps and to

In these chapters we are introduced to the person after whom this book is named. Tradition makes him also the author of the Books of First and Second Chronicles, as well as of this book.

We know that Ezra was a descendant of Aaron, which gave him right to the priesthood. Ezra names fifteen links of genealogy, covering a period of approximately one thousand years. It is possible that the names of some high priests, who, because of their sinful lives were not considered worthy to be mentioned, are left out. This is also done elsewhere in the Bible. If no names are omitted, a time span of 66 years is allowed for each generation, which is not an impossibility.

Ezra's departure occurred approximately 80 years after the first repatriation under Zerubbabel. His is therefore a new generation, probably rather the third than the second. The first captives had returned because the Holy Spirit had put the desire in their hearts. Approximately twenty years after their arrival, the temple is finally rebuilt. Nothing else seems to have happened after that. The city Jerusalem was not restored and no further repatriates had arrived.

We can say that God waited patiently for people who were conscious of who they are and of what God expects them to do. God always seeks men who will stand in the gap. There are generations in which He finds no one. We read in Ezekiel that God says: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none."²⁸ God found such a man in Ezra. We find the key of Ezra's vision in the words: "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."²⁹

For many people, Christians included, the law is often nothing more than a series of directives and regulations, not different from the American Constitution. If it is true, as some suppose, that Ezra is the author of Psalm 119, we must conclude that Ezra had a unique vision of the law. It is true that the term "the Law" comprised more than only the commandments. The books of Genesis, Joshua, Judges, as well as the books of Samuel, Kings and a considerable part of the Psalms and Prophets were considered to constitute "The Law." The Law stood for everything that dealt with God's revelation of Himself in this world, as well as the history of salvation of Israel. Ezra realized that the study of the written Word of God was the best way for man to learn to know God. In this respect, Ezra's life was a pointer to our Lord Jesus Christ. The man Jesus lived by the Book. As a twelve-year-old boy, He stated that He had to be "about My Father's business."³⁰ That He had memorized large portions of Scripture is obvious from His answers to Satan

²⁸ Ezek. 22:30

²⁹ Ezra 7:10 (NASU)

³⁰ Luke 2:49 (NKJV)

during the temptation in the desert.³¹ He allowed Himself to be guided by the Word in making decision in His everyday life,³² and in the accomplishing of His mission.³³ Thus the Lord showed us how we ought to live in this world as human beings. If we, like Ezra, set our heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, it will be the passion of our life to know the Word of God and to live it. Our lives will resemble the tree in Psalm One, of which we read: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”³⁴

Ezra’s vision became the nucleus for the restoration of the place of God’s revelation in this world. The temple had already been rebuilt for approximately 58 years when Ezra left for Jerusalem. The place of God’s revelation was there, but it was without content. Ezra understood that the solution to the impasse was the knowledge of the Word of God and obedience to it. The question arises again if in all this God had not taken a step back.

We ask: Is the revelation of God’s glory, as it was demonstrated in the tabernacle and in Solomon’s temple, not more than the book that describes it? The answer is: “Yes” and “No!” The facts are part of the past, but God who revealed Himself in those facts belongs to the present. He is the same yesterday and today and forever.³⁵ A Chinese proverb says that the weakest ink is stronger than the strongest memory. What is written in the Bible is more reliable than what Moses or Solomon could tell us today, were they raised from the dead. By placing God’s acts in the past before our eyes, the written Word spawns in us faith in God in the present. Jesus said to Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”³⁶ In that sense, the written Word is a step forward in the history of salvation.

It is also a link in the preparation of the coming of Jesus Christ. The book was written for His benefit. God gave to Him the written Word as the food for His soul during His pilgrimage through this desert of life. More than anyone else, He knew that “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”³⁷

And finally, every Word of God has creative power. Whether it created light to shine in the darkness of the universe, or to make the light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ,³⁸ it is the same Word. The fact that this Word comes to us in written form, as letters of ink on pieces of paper, will only mislead those have not devoted themselves to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord.

The fact that it was the passion of Ezra’s soul to study the Law of the Lord and to obey it also forms the basis of the second part of his vision: “teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” Needless to say that the latter was part of Ezra’s personal relationship to God’s Word. It would have been impossible for Ezra to teach without this. It was this vision that governed Ezra’s life and behavior.

³¹ See Matt. 4:4,7,10

³² See Matt. 4:12-16

³³ See Heb. 10:5-7; Matt. 26:31,52-54;27:46

³⁴ Ps. 1:3

³⁵ See Heb. 13:8

³⁶ John 20:29

³⁷ Matt. 4:4

³⁸ See II Cor. 4:6

King Artaxerxes sent an interesting letter to accompany Ezra, which is, in a way, a fulfillment of Haggai's prophecy. Haggai had said: " 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty."³⁹ The fact that the king's motives may not have been completely pure does in no way detract from the miracle of these coinciding circumstances.

The letter deals with six points:

1. It gives permission for the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. As such it is a confirmation of Cyrus' proclamation in chapter one.
2. Ezra is sent with the specific charge to investigate the conditions in Jerusalem in regard to the carrying out of the temple rituals.
3. The letter accompanies the gifts the king has given officially as donations to the temple.
4. All the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates district are ordered to contribute from their treasury whatever is needed, up to a certain limit.
5. The letter frees all who are connected with the temple from the obligation of paying taxes.
6. Ezra is given extraordinary powers to reorganize the judicial system.

In many respects, this letter goes well beyond Cyrus' proclamation. God, evidently, used King Artaxerxes to encourage the people of Israel in a special way. Ezra was the first one to receive encouragement from it. He breaks out in praise to the Lord, "the God of our fathers." To Ezra this proved that "The eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."⁴⁰ How good it is to look over one's life and praise the Lord for similar encouragements He has given to us!

The first part of chapter eight gives a list with names of the repatriates. The total comes to 1837 men. Ezra keeps careful check of who goes. How goal-oriented Ezra was is clear from verses 15-20, where we read that the party camped at the side of a canal and Ezra discovers that there were no Levites among them. They wait for three days until these have arrived. Ezra knew what he set out to achieve and he sees in the willingness of the Levites to accompany him and answer to prayer. We read: "the gracious hand of our God was on us."

The delay at the Ahava canal was used as a time of reflection upon the purpose of the journey. Ezra reflected not only on the purpose of the expedition but also on the course. There were dangers on the road that they could encounter. He mentions "enemies on the road." Evidently, the Persian Empire was not a safe place for traveling. Ezra states beautifully: "I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, 'The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.' " He saw that it would be inconsistent with his testimony about God if he had turned to men, instead of to God, for his personal protection. On the other hand, Ezra does not consider it to be self-evident that God would automatically hear his prayers. Not only are there enemies on the road, there is also the enemy inside. There was the subtle danger of pride because he boasted in trusting God instead of men. The use of the words, "that we might humble ourselves before our God" reveals the enemy within. Ezra realized that God

³⁹ Hag. 2:8

⁴⁰ II Chr. 16:9

could only help if he came before Him with a pure and broken heart. It is through confession and forgiveness of sin that “the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him.”

Ezra’s conscientious attitude is also revealed in the way in which he delegates the responsibility for the delivery of the gifts. Many Christians fail at this point. Paul’s testimony, when he was entrusted money is not always taken seriously. Paul wrote: “We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.” Failure to follow this example can have disastrous consequences.

IV. Ezra’s Measures against Mixed Marriages ch. 9,10

Chapter 9:1 – 10:44

1 After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.

2 They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness."

3 When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.

4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

5 Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God

6 and prayed: "O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

7 From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

8 "But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.

9 Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

10 "But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands

11 you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: `The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.

12 Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.'

13 "What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this.

14 Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?

15 O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence."

10:1 While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. 2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

3 Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law.

4 Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it."

5 So Ezra rose up and put the leading priests and Levites and all Israel under oath to do what had been suggested. And they took the oath.

6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

7 A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem.

8 Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders, and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

9 Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt.

11 Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."

12 The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: "You are right! We must do as you say.

13 But there are many people here and it is the rainy season; so we cannot stand outside. Besides, this matter cannot be taken care of in a day or two, because we have sinned greatly in this thing.

14 Let our officials act for the whole assembly. Then let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us."

15 Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah, supported by Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite, opposed this.

16 So the exiles did as was proposed. Ezra the priest selected men who were family heads, one from each family division, and all of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to investigate the cases,

17 and by the first day of the first month they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women.

18 Among the descendants of the priests, the following had married foreign women: From the descendants of Jeshua son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah.

19 (They all gave their hands in pledge to put away their wives, and for their guilt they each presented a ram from the flock as a guilt offering.)

*20 From the descendants of Immer:
Hanani and Zebadiah.*

*21 From the descendants of Harim:
Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uzziyah.*

*22 From the descendants of Pashhur:
Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasah.*

*23 Among the Levites:
Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah and Eliezer.*

*24 From the singers:
Eliashib.*

*From the gatekeepers:
Shallum, Telem and Uri.*

*25 And among the other Israelites:
From the descendants of Parosh:
Ramiyah, Izziyah, Malkijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malkijah and Benaiah.*

*26 From the descendants of Elam:
Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth and Elijah.*

*27 From the descendants of Zattu:
Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad and Aziza.*

*28 From the descendants of Bebai:
Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai and Athlai.*

*29 From the descendants of Bani:
Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal and Jeremoth.*

*30 From the descendants of Pahath-Moab:
Adna, Kelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui and Manasseh.*

*31 From the descendants of Harim:
Eliezer, Ishijah, Malkijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch and Shemariah.*

33 From the descendants of Hashum:

Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh and Shimei.

34 From the descendants of Bani:

Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Keluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,

37 Mattaniah, Mattenai and Jaasu.

38 From the descendants of Binnui:

Shimei,

39 *Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah,*

40 *Macnadebai, Shashai, Sharai,*

41 *Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah,*

42 *Shallum, Amariah and Joseph.*

43 From the descendants of Nebo:

Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel and Benaiah.

44 *All these had married foreign women, and some of them had children by these wives.*

It soon becomes clear why life has ebbed away from the soul of the people after the completion of the temple. The Jews had begun to mingle with the surrounding heathen nations and intermarry with them. Moses had warned the Israelites against these unions even before they entered the Promised Land. We read in Deuteronomy: “Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.”⁴¹ And even before that, Moses had said: “And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same.”⁴² It was through this kind of intermarriage that Balaam tried to lure Israel away from under the protecting hand of God. We read in Numbers: “While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD’s anger burned against them.”⁴³ From a later incident, it becomes obvious that Israel’s moral failure at Shittim had been part of Balaam’s plot. We read: “Moses, Eleazar the priest and all the leaders of the community went to meet them outside the camp. Moses was angry with the officers of the army--the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds--who returned from the battle. ‘Have you allowed all the women to live?’ he asked them. ‘They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD’s people.’”⁴⁴

We see how Satan used the same tactics during this time in Israel’s history, obviously with considerable success. The Israelites had managed to avoid the devil’s snares in chapter four, when the heathen inhabitants of the lands had offered to assist in

⁴¹ Deut. 7:3,4

⁴² Ex. 34:16

⁴³ Num. 25:1-3

⁴⁴ Num. 31:13-16

the rebuilding of the temple, but when they were tempted in their sexual life, they succumbed. The devil knows that this is man's weakest point of resistance.

As with most temptations, our problem is that we allow ourselves to be pushed back too far. If temptation is not arrested when it reaches the eye, it becomes more and more difficult to resist. Eve fell into sin when she surrendered to the desires of her eyes.⁴⁵ Job gives us the safeguard with his testimony: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl."⁴⁶ In his book *The Taste of New Wine*, Keith Miller confesses that it was the strongest temptation for him to overcome in looking at girls. He had to admit that he easily excused himself by saying: "Boys will be boys." We often face defeat because we refuse to recognize dirty thoughts for what they are. If we make an honest confession to the Lord, we can ask Him to put a watch before our eyes. If moral tensions are generated by problems within the marriage, they must, of course, be solved where they originate. Adultery will be unlikely to occur, or even be impossible, if there exist honest love and mutual honor between marriage partners. And if we look upon a marriage relationship as a physical and emotional expression of our spiritual relationship with God, adultery and fornication will be completely removed from our field of vision. If we have surrendered our body to the Lord, it is implied that He has the right to control our sexuality also. I consider it to be an important part of my own marital bliss that my wife and I have determined from the onset of our relationship to love the Lord more than we would love one another.

The problem Ezra faced was not only marital infidelity. Malachi states the real issue in his prophecy, when he says: "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another? Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty. Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, 'Why?' It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith."⁴⁷ This means, first of all, that the Israelite, who took seriously the covenant of God, was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. The primary reason that God's people were not allowed not mix with the heathen nations was to keep this hope alive and make the coming of the Messiah a physical possibility. Behind these acts of adultery stood the dark purpose of the devil to make the birth of "the seed of the woman" impossible.

⁴⁵ See Gen. 3:6

⁴⁶ Job 31:1

⁴⁷ Mal. 2:10-16

In a wider sense, we can interpret these words as a mandate to create the right spiritual climate in which our children can grow up. Marriage with a pagan woman would make it very difficult for the children who were born to follow the Lord. We see again that all such problems are solved if we give our first love to the Lord.

The sins of the Israelites broke Ezra's heart. The mention of the names of "the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites" places the problem in the right perspective. We find these people mentioned as the early inhabitants of Canaan.⁴⁸ This is the same enemy as in the olden days. God had given Israel the victory over these people. He had said to Moses: "I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites."⁴⁹ Joshua had given the people this object lesson. We read: "When they had brought these kings to Joshua, he summoned all the men of Israel and said to the army commanders who had come with him, 'Come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings.' So they came forward and placed their feet on their necks. Joshua said to them, 'Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the LORD will do to all the enemies you are going to fight.'"⁵⁰ And to indicate that God gives us the same victory, the apostle Paul writes to the Romans: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."⁵¹ The Book of Judges, however, gives us a sad account of Israel's failure in this respect. We read: "The LORD was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots."⁵² This caused the corruption to remain unchecked in the midst of the nation of Israel. As a result of this, Israel ultimately went into captivity. Moses' warning in Deuteronomy was literally fulfilled: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations--the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you--and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you."⁵³ Ezra must have realized that his people were about to lose it all again.

The fact that the leaders of Israel came to warn Ezra that "the godly seed" of Israel was being mixed with the heathen nations is proof of the fact that they knew that God had given His messianic promise to Judah. These mixed marriages would make the coming of the Messiah more difficult, and ultimately, impossible. Ezra's reaction demonstrates that his knowledge of the Word of God had made him into a man who could recognize the enemy. His impulsive behavior also shows how deeply this Word was rooted in his soul.

⁴⁸ See Gen. 12:6^c; 15:16

⁴⁹ Ex. 3:8

⁵⁰ Josh. 10:24,25

⁵¹ Rom. 16:20

⁵² Judges 1:19. See also verses 27-35

⁵³ Deut. 7:1-4