

# Return and Restoration

## Ezra Chapters 1 – 10

### Introduction

We have seen the saga of Israel and Judah being sovereignly worked out through the providential hand of God, first in Israel's being chosen and set apart by God in the first 5 books of the bible. Then we saw the conquest of the land of Canaan, again supernaturally orchestrated by Yahweh, in the books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth. Through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, we see God's faithfulness working, even against the sin and faithlessness of the people. The time of the Judges gives way to the era of human monarchy under Yahweh, culminating in King David, with whom Yahweh made a covenant.

***I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:14-16)***

1 and 2 Kings give us a ray of hope with David passing on the throne to his son Solomon, under whose reign, Israel has a time of unprecedented unity, peace, and prosperity. However, Solomon's descent into apostasy near the end of his life, through marriages to multiple foreign wives, who lead him to worship false idols is distressing. This gives way to the kingdom being divided within the next generation. The 10 northern tribes within Israel spend the next several hundred years divided from and often warring against the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The remainder of 1 and 2 Kings describe the decline of both kingdoms, with Israel falling into idolatry very quickly, and Judah's decline progressing more slowly. Of course, there are some relatively good kings in both Judah, and to a lesser extent, Israel along the way. Israel falls to the nation of Assyria in 722 BC, with Judah being raided and plundered twice – first in 597 BC, and finally in 586 BC to Babylon, to which many of the inhabitants were deported. The nearly five centuries of the kings ends in disaster. However, as we have seen, God's sovereign control is highlighted through multiple prophetic fulfillments in the history of the kings. Throughout it all, Yahweh not only remains faithful, **but provides a remnant**, and preserves the lineage of David, which is ultimately expressed in the Savior millennia later. God is working out his plan of redemption through all these events.

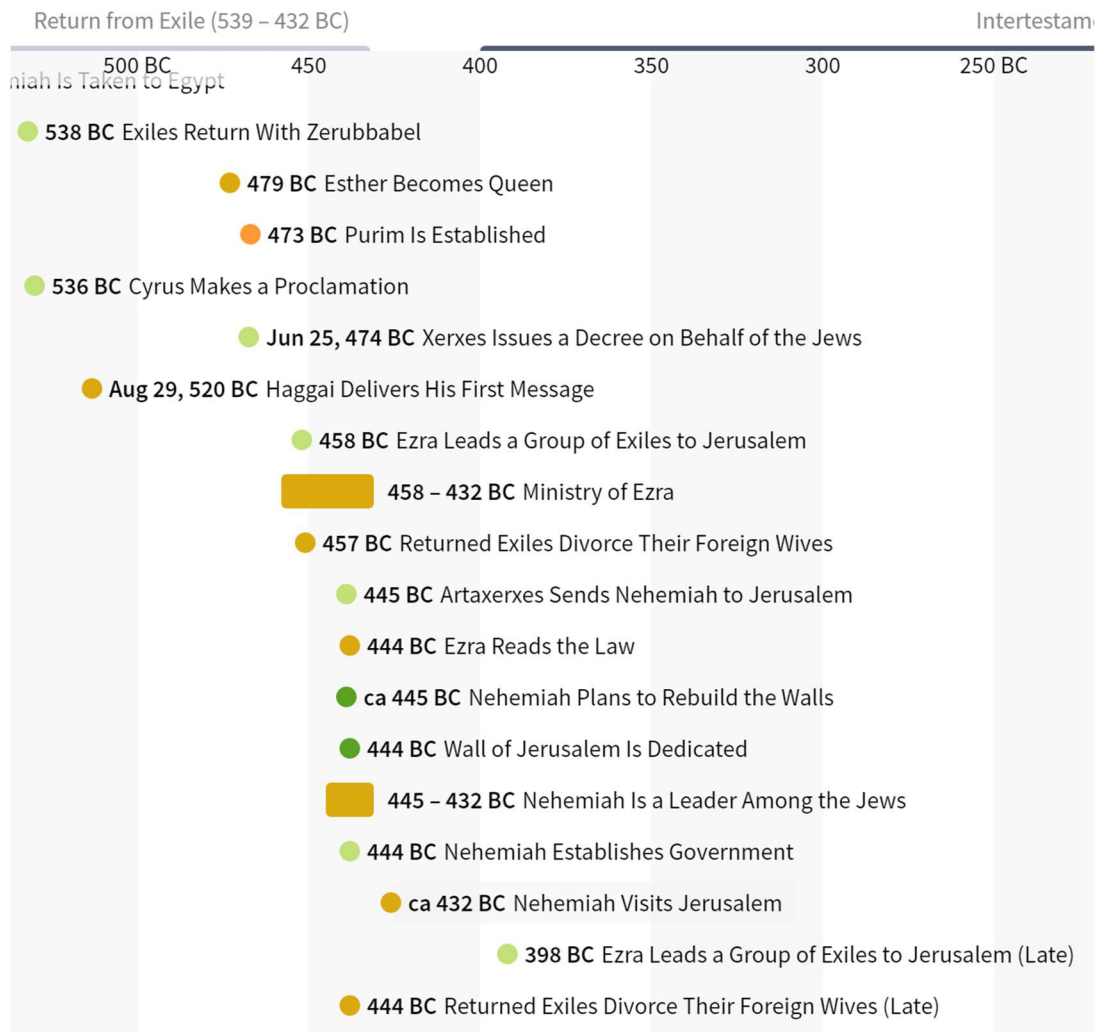
### Author and Timeframe

Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, are the last historical books, and they are concerned with the period after the Jews began to return after exile in Babylon. Three prophetic books were also composed during this time: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book (like 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles). The span of time covered by both books together is a little over 100 years; from 538 BC when we see Cyrus king of Persia,

send the exiles home to rebuild their temple to around 430 BC when Nehemiah entered his second term in office in Jerusalem.

As Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, each book completes the other; Ezra’s story is continued in Nehemiah (chaps. 8–10). Both are shed light onto and are necessary to the history of Israel. They are the next chapter of the history recorded in Chronicles, which we will go through after Nehemiah. Scholars are uncertain as to whom the ultimate compiler of the material in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah was, but most do believe that it was compiled and combined between 400-300 BC. There are a few sections in Ezra and Nehemiah that are attributed directly to each man and are often referred to as the “memoirs of Ezra” (Ezra chapters 7-10 and Nehemiah chapters 8-10) and the “memoirs of Nehemiah” (Neh. 1:1-7:73 and 11:1-13:31). Some believe that this compiler also wrote the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, and as such is often referred to as “the Chronicler.” The book of Ezra was written in Hebrew with two sections in Aramaic (Chapter 4:9 through chapter 6:18 and chapter 7:12-26).

(timeline of Israel’s return)



## Purpose and Theological Theme

Much as the books of 1 and 2 Kings demonstrated that Yahweh who created all things and was sovereign over them, was the One true God - Ezra carries a similar theme. The book of Ezra focuses on the activity of the people and the law. Of the 3 great returns after the exile, Ezra contains two. We see the patterns of return and reconstruction played out.

| THE RETURN FROM EXILE |          |                     |                      |                       |   |   |
|-----------------------|----------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| PHASE                 | DATE     | SCRIPTURE REFERENCE | JEWISH LEADER        | PERSIAN RULER         | EXTENT OF THE RETURN  | EVENTS OF THE RETURN  |
| FIRST                 | 538 B.C. | Ezra 1-6            | Zerubbabel<br>Jeshua | Cyrus                 | (1) Anyone who wanted to return could go.<br>(2) The temple in Jerusalem was to be rebuilt.<br>(3) Royal treasury provided funding of the temple rebuilding.<br>(4) Gold and silver worship articles taken from temple by Nebuchadnezzar were returned. | (1) Burnt offerings were made.<br>(2) The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated.<br>(3) The rebuilding of the temple was begun.<br>(4) Persian ruler ordered rebuilding to be ceased.<br>(5) Darius, King of Persia, ordered rebuilding to be resumed in 520 B.C.<br>(6) Temple was completed and dedicated in 516 B.C. |
| SECOND                | 458 B.C. | Ezra 7-10           | Ezra                 | Artaxerxes Longimanus | (1) Anyone who wanted to return could go.<br>(2) Royal treasury provided funding.<br>(3) Jewish civil magistrates and judges were allowed.  | Men of Israel intermarried with foreign women.  |
| THIRD                 | 444 B.C. | Nehemiah 1-13       | Nehemiah             | Artaxerxes Longimanus | Rebuilding of Jerusalem was allowed.  | (1) Rebuilding of wall of Jerusalem was opposed by Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab.<br>(2) Rebuilding of wall was completed in 52 days.<br>(3) Walls were dedicated.<br>(4) Ezra read the Book of the Law to the people.<br>(5) Nehemiah initiated reforms.                          |

Furthermore, one of the chronicler's favorite phrases "**The hand of our God**" is used several times throughout Ezra, which demonstrates that Ezra, and the returnees understood the gravity of the divine enabling and purpose that was upon them and their work.

Ezra was a priest and a scribe who was descended from Aaron through Phinehas. His name means, appropriately "Yahweh is my help."

The book of Ezra describes the exiles' return, the temple's restoration, and the re-institution of the law during the Persian Period (550–332 BC). "**The people of God**" is another prominent feature throughout Ezra and Nehemiah. The theme of the **remnant** features heavily. According to Derek Kidner, "...the three successive foci of activity in these two books, namely, the Temple, the law and the wall, bring into special prominence the character of Israel as God's minority group in an alien world, his 'own possession among all peoples'....

Whereas the true prophets of Yahweh realized a central place in 1 and 2 Kings, the written word, specifically the law of Moses takes priority in Ezra/ Nehemiah. Prayer, the law, and God's covenant are prominent after the kings and the people had previously departed from all three. The burden of Ezra's heart is expressed in **Ezra 7:10**:

***For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.***

God's people are to be a "people of the book." **The love of God's Word begins to be recovered and is seen in Ezra/ Nehemiah as God's revelation to be known, understood, and obeyed - to evoke prayer (faith) and godly action.**

## Outline

A basic outline of Ezra is as follows:

- I. **Return and Rebuilding the Temple (1:1-6:22)**
  - A. **Cyrus' Decree (1:1-11)**
  - B. **Return Under Zerubbabel (2:1-70)**
  - C. **Reconstruction of the Temple (3:1-6:22)**
- II. **Return Under Ezra and Reforms (7:1-10:44)**
  - A. **Ezra's Return (7:1-8:36)**
  - B. **Ezra's Reforms (9:1-10:44)**

## I. Return and Rebuilding the Temple

The Jews had been taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Cyrus, King of Persia overthrew the Babylonian King in 539 BC. In doing this, Persia took over a vast area which included the land of the former kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

### A. Cyrus' Decree (chapter 1:1-11)

The chronicler wastes no time in linking all the human activity to God's sovereign working.

***In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: (2) "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. (3) Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. (4) And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."*** (Ezra 1:1-4)

Jeremiah prophesied in Judah during the time of Josiah through Zedekiah into the fifth month of the captivity in Babylon. The prophecy was made in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (Jer 25:1) and entailed the prediction of captivity and the length of that captivity. It culminated in Jeremiah 25:11-13,

***This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (12) Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste. (13) I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.***

The seventy years probably refers to the time from Jehoiakim's exile (605 BC) to the time of the decree of Cyrus. The author credits Cyrus's decree to Yahweh, who fulfills his prophecies. The year of Cyrus' decree is 538 BC. As Yahweh had used the nations to discipline disobedient Israel, so now in his sovereign grace, He uses them to restore them. That the book of Ezra restates the last two verses of 2 Chronicles 36 (verses 22 and 23), demonstrates the continuity between the accounts.

Verses 5 through 11, show the Lord working in the people to gear up to go. These verses show the initial response to the king's decree.

***Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. (6) And all who were about them aided them with vessels of***

***silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. (Ezra 1:5-6)***

As Yahweh had stirred up Cyrus to make the decree, He had also stirred the hearts of those who would initially return to Jerusalem. Furthermore, there is an Exodus motif pictured here, as we will continue to see in chapter 2. The “all those about them aided them” evokes images of Israel’s exodus out of Egypt (Exodus 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36). In fact, the prophet Isaiah speaks of the return as second Exodus (Isa 43:14-21; 48:20-21). God is clearly the primary sovereign mover among the affairs of men.

## **B. Return Under Zerubbabel (chapter 2:1-70)**

Chapter 2 opens with the pronouncement of the first group of exiles returning to the land of Judah and the town of Jerusalem:

***Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. (2) They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel... (Ezra 2:1-2)***

Notice here that in the rest of the chapter, we are going to see a list of people and numbers. This might be enough to make our twenty-first century western minds glaze over and skim over this chapter as a bunch of disconnected names we don’t recognize. But the first name to notice is Zerubbabel. It would be easy to pass over, but we can see God’s providential care if we dig a bit deeper. Zerubbabel is mentioned in 1 Chr. 3:19; Ezra 2:2; 3:2, 8; 4:2, 3; 5:2; Neh. 7:7; 12:1, 47; Hag. 1:1, 12, 14; 2:3, 5, 24; Zech. 4:6, 7, 9, 10. He was a leader who became the governor or administrator of Judah following the exile. He was instrumental in rebuilding the temple. But even more, he is a descendant of David. In Matthew and Luke’s genealogies of Jesus, he is identified as the grandson of King Jehoiachin of Judah.

Furthermore, we can see that these initial pilgrims are not just a rag-tag group of Jews. We can see that great care has been taken to maintain impeccable family records. The naming of the eleven men with Zerubbabel in verse 2 (including Nahamani, from Nehemiah 7:7, in which the list from chapter 2 of Ezra is substantially repeated, in connection with a covenant renewal) suggests a complete restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Also, as I mentioned, this wasn’t a disparate group of people. God had preserved a remnant to be replanted in the land. There were people from all walks of Israelite life:

- ordinary families (verses 3-35)
- priests (verses 36-39)
  - The list of names was connected to the priestly orders laid out in 1 Chronicles

- The priests formed about one tenth of the total returnees.
- Levites, singers and gatekeepers (verses 40-42)
  - The Levites did a very lowly type of work, which might be why there were only 74 of them.
  - The gatekeepers were responsible for locking and unlocking the doors of the temple and to keep watch over the treasury (according to 1 Chronicles 9:17-29)
- temple servants (verses 43-54);
  - These would have been actual slaves, and they did even more lowly work than the Levites
- descendants of Solomon's servants (verses 55-58)
- those whose lineage could not be verified (verses 59-63).

And finally a total count:

***The whole assembly together was 42,360, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers. Their horses were 736, their mules were 245, their camels were 435, and their donkeys were 6,720. (Ezra 2:65-67)***

The final verses of 68 – 70, describe that some made freewill offerings and gave of their own personal funds to the treasury for the rebuilding of the temple. This indicates their solemn understanding of what they are doing. God again, has preserved a remnant of his people in his mercy and grace.

Chapter 2 closes with this:

***Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns. (Ezra 2:70)***

### **C. Reconstruction of the Temple (3:1-6:22)**

The connection between chapters 2 and 3 is logical. Once there were people in the land, they would desire to institute legitimate worship of Yahweh. This theme of reconstructing the temple takes up most of the next 4 chapters.

Incidentally, the reason Jewish people have synagogues today is because during the diaspora, when they were in exile, out of the land, away from the temple, the faithful remnant desired to maintain their covenant identity as they lived among the nations. They desired to participate in Sabbath worship and to provide a touchstone to maintain an educational, social and religious center, so synagogues were created to do this very thing.

#### **Rebuilding the Altar (3:1-7)**

***When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. (Ezra 3:1-5)***

It is significant that they built the altar even before the materials for the temple were procured. They sought Yahweh immediately and probably in view was the fact that they knew they needed help, so they desired to have proper access to Him through the altar. That this happens in the seventh month of the year (Tishri – September/October) is also significant. The Feast of Booths was celebrated. This feast commemorated God's gracious deliverance and protection of their ancestors during the exodus from Egypt as their journey to the Promised Land began. The author emphasized how these returnees conformed their worship to the Law of Moses which demonstrated that they no longer take the Law lightly. They were united in the sincere praise and worship of Yahweh.

### **Rebuilding the Temple (3:8-13)**

After the altar was established and regular sacrifices and festival observances were maintained, work was begun on preparing the temple itself.

***Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. (Ezra 3:8)***

In the second year of their being back in the land, they started building the temple. It is not coincidental that they started in the second month, as the second month was when the Passover was observed, and that work on Solomon's original temple had started (1 Kings 6:1) in the second month was no accident either. There was a deliberate purposefulness to all that the builders were doing.

The chapter closes rather strangely.

***And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. (Ezra 3:10)***



We see deliberate echoes of the events that occurred during the building of Solomon's temple. However, there are contrasts as well. *"This time there is no ark, no visible glory, indeed no Temple: only some beginnings, and small beginnings at that. But God is enthroned on the praises of Israel, and these could be as glorious as Solomon's."*<sup>1</sup>

Many were overjoyed and sang accordingly, but there were some among the worshippers who had been present during the time of Solomon's temple and seen its grandeur and glory, and wept in disappointment. Verse 13 closes the chapter,

***...so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:13)***

### **Opposition to the Work (4:1-5)**

From the beginning of chapter 4 through the end of the book of Nehemiah we see conflict between the returnees and their neighbors in the land. Two things that come out of this are, (1) nothing that is attempted for Yahweh will go unchallenged, and (2) God's will cannot be thwarted.

***Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, (2) they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here." (Ezra 4:1-2)***

That these men were adversaries is known right away. We are meant to see their faux friendly gesture, not as truly friendly, but as an opening ploy.

In verse 3, Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the households stated that they were to build the house of their God themselves, as these opponents ***"have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God" (v 3)***, as Cyrus King of Persia has decreed to them. God demanded exclusive worship.

Verses 4 and 5 describe the adversaries campaign of harassment. *"Discouragement (4a) relies on the subtle weapons of suggestion and sneers; intimidation (4b) and threats. Not content with*

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, [\*Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 53.

*these, they must get their victims discredited and on the wrong side of the authorities—and they were prepared to buy professional help (5) to achieve this.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Further Persecutions (4:6-24)**

Verses 6-23 form a parenthesis which point forward to two future oppositions and persecutions which occur in Nehemiah’s time. These serve to highlight the fact that Yahweh’s people face much opposition from enemies as they desire to serve Him faithfully. First, in verse 6,

***And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:6)***

King Ahasuerus of Persia is familiar from the book of Esther and is the Hebrew form of the Greek name Xerxes. He reigned from 486-465 BC, and the mention of him here gives the original readers (and us) a time stamp. This opposition is not detailed but shows that there was something that occurred.

As for verses 7 through 23, from the ESV Study Bible, “While the author is on the topic of the opposition by the people of the land, he jumps forward yet further to another hostile episode, when a formal letter of complaint was sent by leaders in the province to King Artaxerxes I (reigned 464–423 B.C.).”

***In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. (Ezra 4:7)***

What follows is an attempt to stop the work of the Jews. It is clear that it was as they were working on the walls for the city according to verses 12 and 13. One of the arguments of these opponents is that if the Jews are allowed to rebuild Jerusalem and temple worship, that they will not pay taxes to the king of Persia,

***Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. (Ezra 4:13)***

Verses 17 through 22 record Artaxerxes response, in which he orders the work on the city to be stopped.

***Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. (22) And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?” (Ezra 4:21-22)***

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Kidner, [\*Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 56.

Verse 23 says that they went to the Jews quickly and by force made them stop work. After this parenthesis, where the reader sees the current opposition is not just an isolated incident, but a long pattern that the returnees were facing opposition every step of the way, verse 24 brings us back to the narrative begun at the beginning of chapter 4,

***Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:24)***

### **Temple Work Resumes (5:1-5)**

Chapter 4, verse 24 indicates that the temple work was stopped in the time of the reign of Cyrus, and resumed in the second year of the reign of Darius – around 519 BC. The returnees had become discouraged by their defeat.

It is here that God breaks his silence and sends the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

***Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. (Ezra 5:1)***

These prophecies occur in (Hag. 1:2, 12; 21ff.; Zech. 3:1, 6). And it is strikingly clear that the rebuilding of the temple was to be regarded as the **top priority** for the returnees. Haggai chastised them for living in well-built houses and pursuing prosperous economic and agricultural activities while the temple was still sitting in ruins (Hag. 1:2ff.).

At these prophecies Zerubbabel and Jeshua took the initiative and began to rebuild the temple.

### **Further Opposition (5:6-17)**

Even though they began rebuilding, there was almost immediate questioning. Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai asked them who issued them a decree allowing them to resume work. The province of Judah, at the time was within the borders of the Persian province Beyond the River.

According to verse 5,

***But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.***

In verses 6-17, we see the opponents' letter to king Darius, in which they want to know by whose authority these Jews are working on a temple. This opposition is more neutral than that earlier in chapter 4. The letter, highlighted by Zerubbabel and the other Jewish leaders' response to the inquiry, sought to have Darius search the records for this decree the Jews were claiming authority upon.

It is worth quoting part of Tattenai's account of the Jews' response:

***And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. (Ezra 5:11-13)***

### **The Decree of Darius Found (6:1-5)**

Chapter 6 will bring the story of the first twenty-plus years of the return to a somewhat satisfying conclusion, the age of Zerubbabel and Jeshua will fade and a new age, that of Ezra and Nehemiah, will open in chapter 7, which is a lifetime away from the events in the first 5 chapters.

King Darius received the letter and in chapter 6 verse 1 through 5, he indeed makes a search of the records and finds a copy of the decree of King Cyrus,

***In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits...(Ezra 6:3)***

### **Darius Authorizes Work to Resume (6:6-12)**

After finding the decree of Cyrus, Darius honors the decree and orders that the work of the Jews should be allowed to continue unhindered. He writes back to Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates the governors. His terms are interesting and impactful: He tells them to keep away in verse 6, and in verse 7, ***“Let the work on this house of God alone.”*** He tells them to subsidize the Jews’ labor without delay, in verse 8. And to provide whatever is needed day by day in verse 9. He closes out in verse 12,

***May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.” (Ezra 6:12)***

Much like all the other events in redemptive history, it shines brightly that Yahweh’s providence is indeed orchestrating these events for His glory.

### **The Temple Completed (6:13-18)**

These verses describe the new energy and vigor that the Jewish leaders have in order to complete the temple.

***And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. (Ezra 6:14-15)***

Furthermore, once they completed it, they had a relatively small dedication ceremony. They sacrificed at the dedication 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and a sin offering of 12 male goats according to the number of tribes in Israel. This paled in comparison to Solomon's sacrifices of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. However, the temple itself was much smaller than the original temple and the circumstances were much different.

The book of Moses laid down the duties of the priests and Levites as indicated in verse 18. The people had retained some knowledge of the law and its ordinances and rules before Ezra returned in chapter 7.

### **Joyful Passover (6:19-22)**

A few weeks after the temple dedication the Passover feast was celebrated.

***On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. (Ezra 6:19)***

***And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. (Ezra 6:22)***

This marks the end of the first stage of exiles returning to the land and their rehabilitation of the people, land, temple. This would have occurred in 516 BC in the second half of April, according to our calendar. The religious activities of Israel are returning to normal after many decades. All of this happened because Yahweh "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus the king of Persia." (Ezra 1:1)

## **II. Return Under Ezra and Reforms (7:1-10:44)**

Between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7 there is a time lapse of about 57 years. And during that time, very little is known about the returnees to the land. As subjects of the Persian empire, the Jews had to live with their neighbors which most likely would have included continued acts of hostility toward them by their neighbors.

### **A. Ezra's Return (7:1-8:36)**

Chapters 7 through 10 are the second great wave of returning exiles in Ezra/ Nehemiah, with Zerubbabel and those with him in chapters 1-6 being the first.

### **Ezra Journeys From Babylon to Jerusalem (7:1-10)**

Chapters 7-10 are sometimes referred to as “Ezra’s memoirs” with the words being the first directly attributed to him. Nearly 60 years after the Passover described in chapter 6, Ezra went up to Jerusalem. The genealogy in verses 1 through 5 identifies Ezra as a priest with direct ancestry to Aaron. And as a descendant of Aaron, Ezra was genealogically qualified for the task of reconstructing the community based on the Mosaic Law. Verse 6,

***...this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. (Ezra 7:6)***

These chapters are represented as a “second Exodus” to worship Yahweh on the holy mountain. There is a theological, more than political flavor to these chapters. The returnees are more concerned with Yahweh than they are political freedom. Verse 9 says that it took Ezra four months to travel up from Babylonia to Jerusalem, with the second reference to “the good hand of his God was on him.”

#### The Hand of God in Ezra and Nehemiah

|              |  |   |
|--------------|--|---|
| Ezra<br>7:6  | The king granted Ezra all that he asked  | for the hand of the Lord his God was on him |
| Ezra<br>7:9  | Ezra began to go up from Babylon and came to Jerusalem   | for the good hand of his God was on him     |
| Ezra<br>7:28 | Ezra took courage before the king and his men, and gathered leading men from Israel to go with him | for the hand of the Lord his God was on him |
| Ezra<br>8:18 | Ezra is sent ministers for the house of God  | by the good hand of their God on them       |
| Ezra<br>8:22 | On all who seek God  | the hand of their God is for good           |
| Ezra<br>8:31 | God delivered them from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way                         | [for] the hand of their God was on them     |
| Neh.<br>2:8  | King Artaxerxes granted what Nehemiah asked  | for the good hand of his God was upon him   |

Verse 10 explains Ezra’s burden and mission.

***For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. (Ezra 7:10)***

Ezra had the heart of a pastor. He desired to “get it” and he desired that God’s returned and returning people would get it as well. *“He is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”*<sup>3</sup>

## Ezra’s Commission

In verses 11 through 26 King Artaxerxes instructed Ezra to improve the Jerusalem temple and to take command of the Judaeen community. His letter commissioned Ezra to take donations of silver, gold, vessels, and free-will offerings to the temple and present them before the God of Israel. The money was designated to purchase sacrificial animals and whatever else was necessary (Ezra 7:17–18). Artaxerxes provided funds from his own treasury and gave Ezra expense accounts in all the treasuries of the province (Ezra 7:20–22). This was done because the king understood Yahweh’s sovereignty over the situation. In his decree he stated,

***Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. Ezra 7:23)***

He also prohibited taxing priests, Levites, and other temple servants (Ezra 7:24). The letter also instructed Ezra to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of God (Ezra 7:14). He was also commissioned to appoint judges and magistrates, teach the law of God to those who do not know it (Ezra 7:25), and ensure that,

***Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.” (Ezra 7:26)***

Ezra then interjects his own thoughts into the passage as he praises Yahweh. He closes out the chapter appropriately,

***Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me. (Ezra 7:27-28)***

## Ezra’s Volunteers (8:1-14)

The tense changes here from Ezra in the third person, to first person.

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, [\*Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 71.

***These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king...(Ezra 8:1)***

The family names who went up with Ezra in verses 4–14 can all (except Joab, verse 9) be found in Chapter 2:3–15 (those who went up in the first group with Zerubbabel, and the present list opens with two priests, accompanied by several of their relatives (see verse 24) and a descendant of David (verse 2), who have likewise been preceded by their kinsmen. This underscores the fact that in the original challenge to return, in the days of Cyrus, there was a very mixed response, with some opting to stay in exile at that time.

### **Ezra Sends for Levites (8:15-20)**

On his way up to Jerusalem, as Ezra gathers his returnees with him, it seems he takes stock to see exactly who was with him and what he was lacking. As they are camped by the river on the way to Ahava for three days, he realized they were lacking Levites and other temple servants (verse 15). So, he called for specific men who were men full of insight and then sent them to Iddo, a leading man at Casiphia -a town near Babylon along the Ahava river (verses 16-17), and requested “minsters for the house of our God” to be sent (verse 17).

***And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18; (Ezra 8:18)***

In verses 19 and 20, another 240 Levites are said to have gone up.

### **Ezra's Prayer (8:21-23)**

As Ezra was skilled in the Law and lived in according to it, he proclaimed a fast at the Ahava River – probably once the Levites he had sent for arrived. This was accompanied by prayer, which was replete with humility and contrition. Seeking safe travel, as they had their entire families and all their belongings with them.

***For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” (Ezra 8:22)***

The prayer was a prayer of unrelenting faith in Yahweh. Verse 23 says that Yahweh heard their prayer.

### **Priests and Levites as Treasurers (8:24-31)**

*It now emerges that the two heads of priestly families who were mentioned in verse 2 must have brought with them a number of their kinsmen, as did the other chief men in that company (cf. 3–14). The treasure now entrusted to them for the journey was enormous (a talent weighed*



about 30 kilograms [[66 lbs]]). Ezra's refusal to have an armed guard, and his reminder to the priests of their sacred trust (28), gave them an abrupt initiation into the discipline of faith.<sup>4</sup>

**Whereas we will see Nehemiah going to Jerusalem as a political official, Ezra goes up as a religious official.** The priests and the Levites brought up all the silver and gold and vessels (verse 30). Their journey of nearly 1000 miles goes smoothly, God protects them.

*Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way. We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days. (Ezra 8:31-32)*

### **Treasure Placed in the Temple (8:33-34)**

Verses 33 through 35 indicate that the procedure for installing the treasure and utensils in the temple was straightforward, there was nothing missing, even though the journey was long and dangerous.

*At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven 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 commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God. (Ezra 8:35-36)*

The returnees offered sacrifices to Yahweh in thankfulness of the safe journey and arrival. Verse 36 shows that after they completed their obligations to God, they also completed their obligations to man.

### **B. Ezra's Reforms (9:1-10:44)**

The remaining two chapters are concerned with outworking of the Law of God concerning the issue of foreign intermarriage. Chronologically, this event probably occurs after what happens in Nehemiah 7:73-8:18 (after the reading of the Book of the Law). At around the same time this problem of foreign wives, the city wall is rebuilt. The incident is presented with the literary device of Chiasm.

#### **A Report of the Problem of Intermarriage (9:1-2)**

#### **B Ezra's Public Mourning (9:3-4)**

#### **C Ezra's Prayer (9:5-15)**

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 75.

## X Shecaniah's Confession and Request (10:1-4)

## C' Ezra's Exhortation and the People's Oath (10:5)

## B' Ezra's Private Mourning (10:6)

## A' Resolution to the Problem of Intermarriage (10:7-44)

The A/A' sections show movement of the passage, B/B' demonstrate the seriousness of the problem in Ezra's pastoral mind and heart. In C, Ezra's prayer, praise, and confession implicitly exhorts the people to put away their mixed marriages. This matches the explicit exhortation of C'. The pivot point of X leads to the people resolving to renew the covenant by ridding themselves of the foreign wives, who threaten the community's spiritual integrity.

## Report of the Problem of Intermarriage (9:1-2)

Much like 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles, there is a strong flavor of the Law of Moses in the way the mixed marriages are reported to Ezra. The list recalls to mind the ancient promises and warnings about Canaan. The language reminds of the language of **Exodus 34:11-16** and **Deuteronomy 7:1-4** particularly.

***After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from 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 to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." (Ezra 9:1-2)***

After the things in the previous chapter, coming into Jerusalem, installing the utensils in the temple, making offerings to Yahweh, and informing the local governing authorities that they had a kingly edict to do what they did, the officials approached Ezra. These leaders were possibly some of the family heads or maybe the priests.

The reason for the prohibition had nothing to do with racism and everything to do with concern for the purity of the worship of Yahweh. The influence of foreign wives who would worship foreign idols would ruin the identity and religious fidelity of the people. Drastic measures had to be taken. This was, after all, Ezra and the returned exiles' aim: to strive to keep religion and worship of Yahweh true and pure. Besides, we have to look no further than Solomon, who although was the wisest man who had ever lived up to that point, fell hard into apostasy by marrying many foreign wives, and being led into worship of their gods, and away from Yahweh. It would be easy to see this entire exchange in a negative light. However, as we will see, Ezra's zeal and reforms are beginning to work, as the fact that the problem has been addressed shows.

## **Ezra's Public Mourning (9:3-4)**

Ezra's reaction was typical for him. He tears his clothes and pulls the hair from his beard (v 3). This was a sign of anguish and dismay. They had newly won salvation by entrance into their land, and they were already returning to their old ways. And in fact, verse 4 shows that it led others to gather around him.

## **Ezra's Prayer (9:5-15)**

**First**, in verse 5, Ezra cried out to God. Strikingly, though personally innocent, he includes himself with the guilty. He numbers himself with the transgressors.

***"O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. (Ezra 9:6)***

**Second**, he recognizes the mayhem and punishment they had suffered – and deserved – as he looks back at Israel's past. In the following verses Ezra laments the loss of freedom they had experienced. Captivity and plundering (v7), slavery (vs 8, 9), and the decimation of their numbers is emphasized by the recurrence of the word remnant – four times (vs 8, 13, 14, 15).

**Third**, Ezra was very aware of God's staggering mercy. The very fact that there was a remnant was proof, Verse 8, ***"But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God..."*** Even the punishment they received was mercifully light,

***And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this... (Ezra 9:13)***

From verse 10 on, his prayer is specific,

***"And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.' (Ezra 9:10-12)***

And **finally**, *"The prayer ends with clear recognition that God has every reason to wash his hands of this community, as he had once threatened to do with an earlier generation (Exod.*

**32:10)**....His prayer was naked confession, without excuses, without the pressure of so much as a request.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Shecaniah’s Confession and Request (10:1-4)**

With Ezra’s actions and his prayer, the people’s consciences are pricked. The people now desire to seek hope for Israel. Noticeably, Ezra chapter 10 goes back to referring to Ezra in the third person. As Ezra prayed in chapter 9:6-15, more people assembled until there was a rather large crowd. *“The emotional situation in which Ezra was supplicating and weeping on behalf of his people proved infectious for the assembled crowd. They wept bitterly.”*<sup>6</sup>

***While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. (Ezra 10:1)***

In verses 2-4, This encouraged to Shecaniah, who was probably a family leader to take action. He confessed their sin of intermarriage. All was not lost; there was still hope for Israel. The logical outcome from the prayer of Ezra is that if the problem (foreign marriage) is removed, there would be forgiveness for their sin. God is righteous; he is a God of grace. Thus, there must be hope. In verse 4, he exhorts Ezra to take further action so as to ***“make a covenant with our God”*** (v 3).

***Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” (Ezra 10:4)***

### **Ezra’s Exhortation and the People’s Oath (10:5)**

***Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. (Ezra 10:5)***

### **Ezra’s Private Mourning (10:6)**

***Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles. (Ezra 10:6)***

After Ezra’s very public prayer and mourning in chapter 9:15-15, and his exhortation to the priests, Levites and all the people in chapter 10:5, he withdrew for solitary prayer, mourning

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<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, [\*Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 78.

<sup>6</sup> F. Charles Fensham, [\*The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah\*](#), The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 133.

and fasting. Incidentally, this affirms Ezra's sincerity and integrity. Who he was in public was who he was in private. He was genuine.

### **Resolution to the Problem of Intermarriage (10:7-44)**

After these things, all the people took action:

***And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles. (Ezra 10:7-8)***

This proclamation was corporate, not published in Ezra's name alone, although he did have the emperor's decree to punish (7:26). What would carry more moral weight than an imperial decree was the order of the local leaders – those who were in the trenches.

Verses 9 through 15 describe a mass meeting in Jerusalem to deal with the issue in practice. It was late in the year and the scene was miserable.

***Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. (Ezra 10:9)***

***And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." (Ezra 10:10-11)***

In the following verses, there is some back and forth and opposition to the decision, but in verse 14 Ezra declares that all those who have taken foreign wives must come at appointed times to divorce them and turn away Yahweh's fierce wrath. The hearings took three months and proved the wisdom of acting deliberately but also showed the depth of the sin within the community.

Verses 16 and 17 describe the process of rooting out all the foreign wives and in verse 17, it says that ***by the first day of the tenth month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.***

Verses 18 through 44 present a listing of all those who had married foreign women and then put them away. The listing is diverse. The first grouping were priests. This demonstrated the problem permeated the returned exiles at the deepest levels.

While divorce is always hateful to God (Mal. 2:16), and a is witness to human 'hardness of heart' (Mark 10:5), the situation described in Ezra 9 and 10 was an example of one in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen. Sin always compounds upon sin, and untangling it can be very difficult. If a serious reason for divorce could ever exist, this was it. Ezra and the other

leaders demonstrated pastoral skill and care for the glory of God, as well as the good of God's covenant community. Ezra demonstrated true reform, which can only flow out of confession and repentance. Dealing with sin may seem hard, but whatever difficulty is there, there would have been much worse difficulty if continued wholesale disobedience to God was allowed unchecked.

Through this incident, we can easily see implications for church discipline in our time. While dealing with sin is not pleasant and can often seem very harsh, not taking God's commands seriously can have severe repercussions. The goal of church discipline, like the goal of the putting away of foreign wives in Ezra, is first repentance and restoration of the sinning member, and a second goal is to keep the sin from permeating throughout the entire body. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. (Gal 5:9; 1 Cor 5:6).

## Conclusion

The end of Ezra isn't really the end of the story, since Nehemiah is the continuation of the story of return of the exiles, rebuilding, and restoration. There are great expectations. It seems in every episode in Ezra, things don't really work out how we think they should. There are signs of revival, but incremental. The Covenant of God is taken seriously and the book of the Law is reintroduced and begins to be obeyed.

When the new temple was rebuilt under Zerubbabel, many people were thrilled. Yet, we're told that many of the elders who saw the final days of Solomon's temple wept (Ezra 3:12-13). There was a great chasm between their depth of expectation and the reality of what took place.

When Ezra returns to lead in revival of the worship of God, he finds out that many of the leaders and others within the community of the returned exiles have been compromised by inappropriate marriages to non-Israelites (Ezra 9-10).

The Ezra/ Nehemiah story shows that the return of many Israelites to Jerusalem was only one step toward the fulfillment of the prophetic hope of the new covenant and the kingdom of God. God's people need real change and real revival and that only comes when their hearts are truly changed. The full realization of that hope comes only when God himself entered personally into the story in the person of the Messiah and king, Jesus. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and through the gift of the Spirit, the story will take a quantum leap forward.