

BIBLE COMPANION COMMENTARY: EZRA

EZRA

PREFACE

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Are there errors of thought and intellectual process in these volumes? Surely there are. Let me know about them. But don't fail to see the wood for the trees. Never let the wonder of the simple, basic Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom become obscured by all the angst over correctly interpreting this or that Bible verse. Believe it, respond to it, be baptized into Him, and let the word become flesh in you as it was so supremely in Him.

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Duncan Heaster

EZRA CHAPTER 1

Ezra 1:1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished- The reference must be to the first year when Cyrus conquered Babylon. Bullinger claims Cyrus was the son of Astyages and Esther, who named him Cyrus in conscious fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies. That however creates huge chronological difficulties. Daniel understood from Jeremiah's prophecies that Jerusalem's fortunes would be revived after the 70 year period was ended. Yet he goes on to ask God to *immediately* forgive His people, as if Daniel even dared hope that the period might be shortened. Daniel lived into the reign of Cyrus (Dan. 6:28), and so he would have witnessed "the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem" (Dan. 9:25; Ezra 1:1). But it seems to me that whilst the prophecy of the 70 years came true in one sense, the Jews didn't respond as they should, and so the time of Zion's true freedom in the Messianic Kingdom was delayed. Daniel had been petitioning the Father to not delay beyond the 70 year period in doing this. But in another sense, the prophecy was re-interpreted; Daniel was now told that there was to be a "seventy weeks of years" (Dan. 9:24 RSV) period involved in order to gain ultimate forgiveness for Israel as Daniel had just been praying for. The 70 years had become "seventy weeks of years". The command to rebuild Jerusalem was given in the first year of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1); but Daniel must have watched in vain for any sign that Zion's

glad morning had really come. And so it is recorded that in the third year of Cyrus Daniel was given a vision that confirmed to him that “the thing was true, but the time appointed was long [Heb. ‘extended’; the word is also translated “greater”, “more”]: and he understood the thing” (Dan. 10:1). What was “the thing” that was true, which Daniel sought to understand? Surely it was the vision of the 70 years that he had sought to “understand” in Dan. 9:2. The Hebrew *dabar*, translated “thing”, is usually translated “word”. He was comforted that the word of prophecy would come true; it was “noted in the scripture of truth” (Dan. 10:21). It was just that it had been extended in its fulfilment; “for yet the vision is for many days” (Dan. 10:14). And this was how he came to “understand the thing / word”. The essential and ultimate fulfilment of the 70 years prophecy would only be after a long time, involving 70 “weeks of years”. Thus Daniel came to “understand” the vision (Dan. 10:1); hence he was so shocked, depressed and disappointed that the fulfilment would not be in his days. But he is set up as a representative of those of us in the very last days who shall likewise “understand” (s.w. Dan. 12:10) the very same prophecies which Daniel studied. Daniel is described as both understanding, and also not understanding (Dan. 10:1; 12:8). Surely the idea is that he understood the principle of deferment and the outline meaning of the prophecy; but he didn’t understand the details. And so perhaps it is with us who will, or do, likewise “understand” as Daniel did. And yet all this is not to say that the restoration couldn’t have then happened. God revealed His foreknowledge to Daniel. But the reality was that Zerubbabel / Sheshbazzar failed to achieve the restoration, the people didn’t respond nor repent as they should have done, Cyrus didn’t respond as the prophecies about him said, and Ezra’s brave attempt at another return from exile in Ezra 7,8 didn’t come to anything because the Jews intermarried and as Haggai and Malachi observe- focused on their own houses rather than God’s.

Ez. 4:6 revealed the variable nature of Divine time periods: “You shall lie on your right side, and shall bear the iniquity of the house of Judah: forty days, each day for a year, have I appointed it to you”. Ezekiel was asked to prophecy that Judah would suffer for their sins for 40 years. Perhaps something could’ve happened after 40 years... And then, the starting point of the 70 or 40 years was somewhat flexible- for Ez. 22:3,4 records Ezekiel’s prophecy that the desolation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians [the starting point of the time periods] was actually being hastened, brought forward, by the terrible behaviour of the Jews living there after the initial Babylon invasion of the land. Closer study reveals the variableness of outworking of the time periods. Jer. 25:11,12 and Jer. 29:10 speak of a 70 year period of Babylonian rule over Judah, beginning with the invasion of BC597. But Babylon only ruled over Judah for 49 years, before Babylon fell to the Persians. This would connect with the way that Zech. 4:3 speaks of 7 menorah candlesticks each with 7 lamps, making 49 lamps. 49 is the cycle of 7 Sabbath years that culminated in the jubilee year, and the jubilee year, the proclamation of liberty to the land (Lev. 25:8-12; 27:7-24) is a figure used so often in Isaiah to describe the freedom of Judah once released from Babylon. Lev. 26:34,43 speak of the land enjoying her Sabbaths whilst Israel were in exile for their sins- i.e. for 49 years. So it seems that there could have been some restoration after 49 years- but it didn’t happen. But Dan. 9:2 and 2 Chron. 36:21 seem to reinterpret those 70 years of Jeremiah’s prophecies as speaking of a 70 year period during which Jerusalem and the temple would be desolate. See on Ez. 6:8.

Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation- This is the same word for “noise” in Ez. 37:7: “So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone”. This meant that the “whole house of Israel” was to stand up from their graves and return as a mighty army to the land. Their attitude in Babylon was exactly as in Ez. 37:11: “behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts”. These were the very sentiments of Jeremiah in Lamentations, and those who wept by the

waters of Babylon when they remembered Zion. They were revived by the gift of the Spirit, the breath / spirit which was blown into them by God's initiative.

We could take a positive view of Cyrus according to his own claims in the Cyrus Cylinder and the Nabonidus Chronicle. But there is a very negative image of Cyrus presented in Herodotus' *The Histories* and Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. The spirit of Cyrus is there presented as despotic and narcissistic, a cruel man who loved blood shedding for the sake of it. If that was indeed so, and it probably was the case, then we are left the more in awe of Yahweh's stirring up of even such a spirit to be gracious to His people. He can work on equally hard spirits today.

The Babylonian writer of the "Annalistic Tablet" claims that the god Merodach stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, so perhaps Ezra's point is that in fact it was Yahweh who did so: "Merodach ... appointed a prince who should guide aright the wish of the heart which his hand upholds, even Cyrus ...".

The stirring up [Heb. 'opening the eyes'] of Cyrus is a parade example of the ability of God to work directly on the human mind, inserting ideas and initiatives, and confirming a person in their responses to various psychological stimuli. This is the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers today, and it was and will be seen in the revival of the dead bones of Israel. Not visible miracles, but internal mental working. And that Spirit can be resisted, as it was by many of the exiles; for we are not mere puppets in God's hand. Yet grace means that God takes the initiative; "He first loved us". That initiative is seen through His working on the human heart in calling us to action (s.w. 2 Chron. 21:16; Is. 13:17; Jer. 50:41; Joel 3:9) and Cyrus was a parade example of this (Is. 41:2,25, 45:13). The hearts of the returnees were likewise stirred up (see on :5). But this was not some irresistible manipulation of the human person; Zion was called to be stirred up ["awake"], but she refused to be stirred up (Is. 51:17; 52:1 cp. Is. 64:7). Zerubbabel had his mind or "spirit" stirred up to be the king-priest Messianic figure (Hag. 1:14 "Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remainder of the people"); but he let the baton drop.

*Throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying-*The restoration prophecies speak of how "all nations" are to be gathered to Zion; they are those who scattered Judah amongst the nations; not every literal nation. And who "scattered" Israel? The Hebrew word is used in Jer. 50:17 to describe how Babylon scattered Judah amongst the nations. And most significantly, the same word occurs again in Est. 3:8: "And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people *scattered abroad* and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom...". It is quite wrong for us to imagine Judah sitting quietly by the rivers of Babylon, all huddled together. They were scattered throughout all the many provinces / colonies of the Babylonian empire. This was why Cyrus' decree bidding the Jews return to rebuild Jerusalem had to be published "throughout all his kingdom" (Ezra 1:1), and Jews living "in any place" of that kingdom were included in the invitation. It was Babylon who had "parted my land" by dividing it up amongst the various 'Samaritan' peoples who were transported there from other conquered territories. And their being in Babylon is paralleled with being scattered to the four corners of the world as it was known to them: "Ho, ho, come forth, and flee from the land of the north, saith the LORD: for I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heaven, saith the LORD. Deliver thyself, O Zion, that dwellest with the daughter of Babylon" (Zech. 2:6-7). And consider Zech. 7:14: "But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them [i.e. this concerns the Babylonian invasion], that no man passed through nor returned". Indeed, Zech. 8:7,8 speaks of the restoration as coming from both

West and East of Israel, implying that the Babylonians had sold some of the Jews as slaves in Greece and north Africa.

This proclamation was the fulfilment of many prophecies in Isaiah about "the messenger of good tidings" who announces salvation and God's return to Zion (Is. 52:7). "Go you forth from Babylon... proclaim this... make it go out even to the end of the earth [land]; say: The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob" (Is. 48:20). But this was a Gospel, a message of salvation, that was largely ignored by God's people because they were blindsided by materialism and cozyness in Babylon. Just as we see today.

Ezra 1:2 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He has commanded me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah-

This fits exactly how Darius I is called in his Persian "display" inscription, erected in Egypt, "The great king, king of kings, king of countries, containing all (kinds) of men, king of this great earth, far and wide". But we note the contradiction with the inscription on Cyrus' Cylinder which names Marduk as the god who appointed Cyrus as King. The term "God of heaven" is the equivalent of the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda; the implication is that Yahweh and not Ahura Mazda is the God of Heaven. So perhaps here in Ezra 1:2 we have what Cyrus actually thought in his heart; or perhaps in his decree to the Israelites he used terms which they would relate to. Likewise it could be argued that Cyrus had a policy of giving subject peoples religious autonomy and some local political autonomy- in order, so he reasoned, to preserve his power over the empire. Whatever his motives, God worked through this to achieve His purpose. Although I would suggest that it was God's intention that Cyrus did actually become a believer who consciously, willfully served Him. But Cyrus failed in that, just as God's people failed to realize their intended potential at this time.

Cyrus clearly had a sense of relationship with Yahweh, and I have argued that he was one of the potential Messiah figures who could have reestablished the Kingdom at the restoration. Is. 44:28 is crystal clear about this. God "says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, and shall perform all My pleasure', even saying of Jerusalem, 'She will be built;' and of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'". It was God's intention that Cyrus repent and become a proselyte, and Yahweh would then use him to save His people "out of all places where they have been scattered". The decree of Cyrus was addressed to "Whoever is left [of the Jews], in any place where he lives" (Ezra 1:4). "Cyrus" literally means "sun" and so contrasts with the cloudy and dark day. But Cyrus let the ball drop and didn't carry through the Divine purpose as he might have done and neither did the Jews respond as they should have done. Cyrus was Yahweh's anointed (Is. 45:1), and so the essence of these prophecies is to come true in the last days in the person of the Lord Jesus. We could say that the prophecies are transferred from Cyrus to the Lord Jesus. LXX "Who bids Cyrus be wise, and he shall perform all my will" suggests Cyrus had a choice; he was commanded, and it seems he partially obeyed, but not enough to the Messiah figure envisaged.

It is significant that Ezra and Nehemiah speak of the "God of Heaven" (e.g. Ezra 1:2) whilst Zechariah speaks of the "God of the earth" or 'land' of Israel, perhaps because the Angel of Israel literally went to Heaven when the glory departed from Jerusalem, and returned, in a sense, at the restoration- to depart again at the Lord's death ("Your house is left unto you desolate"; of the Angel that once dwelt in the temple).

Critics have noted the difference between this decree and the record of it in Ezra 6 when it was it were dug out of the archives. I suggest the document of Ezra 6, which is recorded in Aramaic rather than Hebrew as in Ezra 1, was a memorandum to the king's treasurers.

Ezra 1:3 Whoever there 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 build the house of Yahweh, the God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem-

Repeatedly the emphasis is upon the command to "go up to Jerusalem" (:4,11; Ezra 2:68 also). Yet the lament is that the Jews settled in the towns around Jerusalem or ran to reclaim the land and houses of their ancestors. They lost the focus upon Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, as Haggai and Malachi lament.

"Of all His people" could be read as a hint that all members of Israel, from whatever tribe, were to return and therefore form a 12 tribe kingdom in Israel. This would explain the frequent usage of the term "Israel" in Ezra, rather than simply "Judah". See on Ezra 2:64. "His God..." sounds as if Cyrus had not adopted Yahweh as his own God. And yet he does recognize that "He is God". We can know things *about* God, without grasping their personal reality. That is the lesson of Cyrus.

Amos 9:11-15 is most comfortably interpreted when read as referring to the restoration of Judah and the "remnant" of the ten tribes to the land under Ezra: "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God". "I will *raise up*" uses a Hebrew word very commonly featured in the records of the restoration, when the people were exhorted to "rise up and build" (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 10:4,15; Neh. 2:18,20). The statement that they would "close up the breaches thereof" is exactly the language of Neh. 6:1, which records that the walls were rebuilt so that there was no breach [s.w.] therein. It was after the Babylonian invasion that Zion was "fallen" and 'ruined' (s.w. Jer. 31:18; 45:4; Lam. 2:2,17). "I will build it" is exactly the theme of the records of the return from Babylon (Ezra 1:2,3,5; 3:2,10; 4:1-4; Neh. 2:5,17,18,20; 3:1-3, 13-15; 4:1,3,5,6,10,17,18; 6:1,6; 7:1). Surely Amos 9 is saying that at the rebuilding at the time of the restoration, God's people could have ushered in the Kingdom age of agricultural plenty and victory over their Arab neighbours. But they intermarried with Edom, and suffered drought because they didn't fulfill the requirements to rebuild Zion correctly. But the words of Amos were still to come true in some form- they are given an application in Acts 15:17 which may appear to be way out of context, i.e. to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus words which could have had a plain fulfilment at the restoration were given a delayed fulfilment; but they were not fulfilled in a literal sense, but in a spiritual one. And so it is with prophecies like Ezekiel 38, and the temple prophecies of Ezekiel. They will be fulfilled in spiritual essence, but probably not in strict literality, although they *could have been* had God's people been more 'fulfilling' of them.

Ezra 1:4 Whoever is left, in any place where he lives, let the men of his place help him with silver, with gold, with goods, and with animals, besides the freewill offering for God's house which is in Jerusalem'-

The original could mean that whoever is left because he can't afford to migrate to Judah, the [Gentile] people around him were commanded to assist him to make the journey.

Assistance from Gentiles prior to leaving is one of many impressions given that a second exodus is underway. Thus "we are slaves this day" (Neh. 9:36) suggests they were in Egypt and had to leave, even though they were hardly slaves in Babylon / Persia. The same term for "heads of families" is used also in the Exodus record. This command for the Gentiles to help those Jews who couldn't otherwise return would reflect an assumption that the command of :3 would be obeyed by all other Jews who could leave. But Cyrus was so sadly wrong.

"Sojourns" is the idea behind "lives"; Cyrus recognized the Jews were only sojourners, temporary residents. The language suggests he accepted the Jews were only temporarily in Babylon. The Divine hope was that Cyrus would accept the Holy One of Israel (Is. 41:25 "I have raised up one from the north... one who calls on My name...") although initially Cyrus is the one God had called who knew Him not (Is. 45:4 "I have called you by your name... I have surnamed you, though you have not known Me"). Although Cyrus initially didn't know God's Name, he would come to a point when he did "call on My name". That was the hope, but it seems it didn't happen. We could read Is. 45:4 "yet you have not known Me" as a Divine lament that Cyrus did not respond to Yahweh and enter personal relationship with Him. It is repeated again in Is. 45:5.

It's surely intentional that the repentance and subsequent witness of Jonah led to the King of Assyria [often paralleled with Babylon in the prophets] making a phenomenally unexpected decree and published it (Jonah 3:7)- which ought to have prepared the faithful in exile for the possibility that such a decree could be forthcoming from the King of Persia, if they like Jonah repented and witnessed their faith to the world. It did in fact happen (Ezra 1:1-4). But it happened by grace, for there seems to have been little true repentance let alone preaching by the Jews in exile.

God had told His people to flee from Babylon before she fell, to come out of her and return to His land and Kingdom (Is. 48:20; 52:7; Jer. 50:8; Zech. 2:7). Babylon offered them a secure life, wealth, a society which accepted them (Esther 8:17; 10:3), houses which they had built for themselves (Jer. 29:5). And they were asked to leave all this, and travel the uncertain wilderness road to the ruins of Israel. They didn't leave as asked, and so after Babylon fell, Cyrus the Persian was moved still to as it were push them to return to the land. We see here God's continual effort to get people to respond to His message even if they at first refuse. They are cited in the NT as types of us in our exit from this world (2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4). Those who decided to obey God's command and leave Babylon were confirmed in this by God: He raised up their spirit to want to return and re-build Jerusalem, and He touched the heart of Cyrus to make decrees which greatly helped them to do this (Ezra 1:2-5). And so the same Lord God of Israel is waiting to confirm us in our every act of separation from the kingdoms of this world, great or small; and He waits not only to receive us, but to be a Father unto us, and to make us His sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:18).

Ezra 1:5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, even all whose spirit God had stirred to go up, rose up to build the house of Yahweh which is in Jerusalem- This fulfilled Joel 3:7 "I will raise them out of the place whither ye have sold them". The same Hebrew word is used in Ezra 1:1,5 concerning how God raised up the spirit of Judah to return to the land. But despite their spirits having been stirred up [also Ezra 9:9 "To give us a reviving"], it is apparent from Haggai and Malachi that their motives for returning were mixed. They desired to get land for themselves and enjoy good harvests, building ornate houses for themselves rather than building up God's house. We see how as with the Corinthian church, the Spirit can be given and it begins to work on the human spirit, but there has to be further freewill response on the human side.

When this is lacking, as in Corinth, those affected are unspiritual. I observed this happening with so many converts after baptism of water and the subsequent work of the Spirit.

God 'stirred up' the spirit of Cyrus (see on :1) and also of the Jews who returned (Ezra 1:1,5). Isaiah uses the same Hebrew term to describe how Israel's saviour would be "raised up" [s.w.]- Is. 41:2,25; 45:13. And yet Isaiah pleads with Zion, i.e. the faithful, to indeed be stirred up- Is. 51:17; 52:1 appeals to Zion to "Awake!"- the same word translated "stirred up". But Isaiah tragically concluded that there were so few who would 'stir up themselves' (Is. 64:7 "There is none who calls on Your name, who stirs up himself to take hold of You"). God had given them the potential to be 'stirred up' in their hearts and minds to leave Babylon and return- but they wouldn't respond. And today, the same happens. God is willing to change hearts, to stir up materialistic and complacent spirits- but because we're not robots, we have to respond. And yet, God's grace still shines through. 1 Kings 8:47-50 had predicted that God would give the exiles compassion in captivity *if* they repented. They didn't repent, as passages like Ez. 18 make clear (they blamed everything on their fathers and protested their personal innocence)- and yet still God gave them compassion in the eyes of their captors, through the amazing decrees of Cyrus enabling them to return to their land and rebuild the temple at his expense.

"Rose up / arose" is a word used often of the 'rising up' of the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 9:5; Neh. 2:18; 3:1). This was a fulfilment of the command to "Arise... Jerusalem!" (Is. 51:17; 52:2; 61:4). But this 'arising' was to be associated with the dawning of Zion's light in the form of Yahweh's glory literally dwelling over Zion (Is. 60:1). This didn't happen at the time, because the appearance of 'arising' by the exiles was only external and wasn't matched by a spiritual revival. Yahweh cut off the "master" ['the stirred up one', s.w.] because they divorced their wives and married Gentiles (Mal. 2:12). The potential work of God on men's hearts was frustrated by their hardness of heart.

Ezra 1:6 All those who were around them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with animals, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered- The book of Esther has explained how the Jews were popular in captivity. These precious gifts recall those given to Israel when they left Egypt. The whole narrative of their return from Babylon is framed by Isaiah in terms of the exodus from Egypt. As Israel were intended to use these gifts to build the tabernacle, so the exiles were to use them to rebuild the temple. Ez. 40:42 speaks of the vessels to be used in the temple [AV "instruments"] with the same word used for the temple vessels which were brought up out of Babylon back to Judah, in fulfilment of several of Isaiah's 'Kingdom' passages (Ezra 1:6-11; 8:25-33 cp. Is. 52:11; 66:20). The restoration of the kingdom could potentially have happened at the time of Ezra. But so much potential was wasted.

Ezra 1:7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of Yahweh, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out of Jerusalem, and had put in the house of his gods- This sounds very much like at least some element of repentance, although it has been argued that this was standard Persian practice and policy at this time. For the other captive nations were also bidden return to their homelands with their religious paraphernalia which had been taken into captivity by them.

Ezra 1:8 Even those, Cyrus king of Persia brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah- Note how "the prince" is very much the language of Ezekiel 40-48 concerning a mortal "prince", and also Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:8; there is good reason to think that Sheshbazzar was an official name for

Zerubbabel- see Michael Ashton, *The Exiles Return*). And Isaiah 53 is prefaced in chapter 52 by the command to return from Babylon and to proclaim the good news of the Messianic Kingdom which Cyrus' decree could have brought in; as if it *could* have come true then. He shall "grow up" as a root from a dry land (Is. 53:2) uses the word frequently used about the 'going up' from Babylon to Jerusalem.

There could have been a fulfilment of Jer. 23:5 by Sheshbazzar / Zerubbabel: "Behold, the days come says Yahweh, that I will raise to David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land". I suggested on Jer. 22:24 that the king in view was potentially Zerubbabel, "the branch of God from Babylon". Zech. 6:12 interprets this as a reference to Zerubbabel: "the man whose name is the branch... shall build the temple of the Lord". Zerubbabel being a king-priest was in the kingly line, and thus can correctly be called a king in the line of David (Mt. 1:12; Lk. 3:7; 'Sheshbazzar' of Ezra 1:8 is the Babylonian equivalent of 'Zerubbabel'; Ezra 3:8 describes his brothers as "priests and Levites"). Great prince Nehemiah humbly entered Jerusalem incognito on an ass (Neh. 2:11-15)- it is a wild speculation that Zerubbabel did the same, and thus provided a primary basis for Zech. 9:9 "Thy king cometh unto thee (also unrecognized, in the case of Jesus entering spiritually ruined Jerusalem)... lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass".

Ezra 1:9 This is the number of them: thirty platters of gold, one thousand platters of silver, twenty-nine knives- "Platters" or "chargers" is an unusual word; "Aben Ezra derived it from two words meaning 'to collect' and 'a lamb', and understood it to be applied to 'vessels intended to receive the blood of victims'".

Ezra 1:10 thirty bowls of gold, silver bowls of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels one thousand- Of a second sort" is LXX "double".

Ezra 1:11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand four hundred- This is larger than the sum of the vessels listed in :9,10. In addition to the 1000 "other vessels" (:10), there may have been other vessels of gold and silver, perhaps belonging to the royal family rather than to the temple (see 2 Chron. 36:18); and the total sum is given here.

Sheshbazzar brought all these up, when the captives were brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem- Those who truly waited upon Yahweh [waiting for the restoration prophecies to be fulfilled] would renew their strength; they would "mount up as eagles" (Is. 40:31), the s.w. used throughout Ezra and Nehemiah for the 'going up' or 'bringing up' to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3,5,11; 2:1,59; 7:6,7,28; 8:1; Neh. 7:5,6,61; 12:1). The idea of mounting up with wings as eagles also connects with Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim, mounting up from the captives by the rivers of Babylon, and returning to the land. This was the strength available to confirm them in their desire to return. But the reality was as in Neh. 4:10: "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall". Examination of the context shows that they had just had plenty of strength; they lost physical stamina because of their spiritual weakness.

There is no account of the actual journey to Zion of the first exiles in Ezra 1:11, but the apocryphal 1 Esdras 5:1-6 speaks of the returnees playing the restored musical instruments of the temple and singing as they came. This was therefore a primary fulfilment of the restoration prophecies about God's people coming with singing unto Zion (Is. 35:10; 51:11). We note how Ezra 2:65 mentions "singers" as amongst the exiles who returned.

EZRA CHAPTER 2

Ezra 2:1 Now these are the children of the province, who went up out of the captivity of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon- "The province" could refer to Judah, or Babylon. In which case we have a list here specifically only of those who came from Babylon. The majority of Jews preferred to stay in Persia / Babylon. Archaeological and inscription evidence (see Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*), as well as Josephus, suggests there may have been 1 million of them in Persia at the time of Cyrus. Ezra 2:1 may suggest that only a relatively few Jews who lived in the province of Babylon returned (one out of 127 provinces), even though there were significant numbers of Jews in all the provinces, as the book of Esther makes clear (as also does Nehemiah 1:8, which says that the Babylonian captivity fulfilled God's prophecy to scatter Israel amongst all nations). The Persian records even suggest that some of those who obeyed the call to 'return' actually only made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and then returned to their homes in Persia. And the mighty political and linguistic changes taking place *purely for our sakes* are often ignored by us. Like the Jews in Babylon, we figure that *surely* such huge changes couldn't have occurred *only* for us. But they do, and have done. Isaiah frequently shows the folly of worshipping Babylonian idols. And yet it seems that it was Judah's worship of these idols that kept them in Babylon. See on Is. 50:10,11.

And who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each one to his city-

The purpose of the return was to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. The stress is always that they were to return to Jerusalem. But in reality, the motives of the returnees were mixed. Ostensibly they returned to Jerusalem, but in reality "each one to his city", to reclaim ancestral property. Hence the later problems with getting enough people to dwell in Jerusalem, and the disinterest in rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple when their focus was on building their own "ceiled houses". Haggai is all about this problem.

Ezekiel's temple prophecies begin with a man / Angel with a measuring reed, measuring Jerusalem and the temple. This recurs in Zech. 2:1, where the Angel again measures the temple and then promises that Yahweh will be a protecting wall of fire around the city, meaning that the Jews should fearlessly return from Babylon (Zech. 2:5-10). There follows a description of God's Kingdom on earth, with God Himself dwelling in Zion and all nations converting to Him. Yet the Jews returned with fear from Babylon- or some of them did. And they fussed so much about building a wall to protect them, in studied disregard of God's promise here. God helped them build the wall- He was still so keen to work with them. And He later encouraged them that "I will encamp about mine house because of the army, because of him that passeth by, and because of him that returneth [s.w. used about Judah's return from captivity, Ezra 2:1; 6:21]: and no oppressor shall pass through them any more" (Zech. 9:7,8).

Ezra 2:2 who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel-

Zerubbabel suddenly appears as the leader. Sheshbazzar was the named leader in Ezra 1, but quite possibly they are the same person. His absence in the record at this point is otherwise strange. Zerubbabel started using his Hebrew name ['stranger in

Babylon' or 'born in Babylon'] rather than the paganistic Babylonian name he had of Sheshbazzar. As Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were the names given to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Dan. 1:6,7). Both are called the "governor of Judah" (Ezra 5:14; Hag. 1:1; 2:2,21). The Nehemiah mentioned is probably not the same as the later Nehemiah in the record.

The mention of 11 leaders perhaps leaves us wondering why not 12; perhaps the implication is that the intention of regathering all 12 tribes was not to be fulfilled completely.

The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7). When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (Neh. 1:10). he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come to Zion and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then.

Ezra 2:3 The children of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-two- "Children of..." can be understood literally; or the 'children of' a geographical area are the people who live in it. It seems that in :3-19 we have a list of the literal families who returned. Then in :20-35 those who returned, arranged according to geographical localities; in :36-39 the numbers of the priests, arranged according to families, and then according to their localities (:40-42); then the families of the Nethinim (:43-54) and of Solomon's servants (:55-57).

Ezra 2:4 The children of Shephatiah, three hundred and seventy-two- The Persian and Babylon practice was to replace Hebrew names with local names, as we see with Daniel and his friends. The fact some retained their Hebrew names, especially a name like "Yah has judged", may be an indication of faith; although it may also have been mere cultural loyalty.

Ezra 2:5 The children of Arah, seven hundred and seventy-five- "Arah" is 'wandering', perhaps aware that the Jews had been exiled to the east just as Cain was to wander east of Eden.

Ezra 2:6 The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve- 2818 in Neh. 7:11. The numbers in the parallel record in Neh. 7 are often higher. I suggest that that was a list of those who began the journey, or expressed interest in it; whereas Ezra 2 is the list of those who completed it. And there was far more interest in starting the journey than actually finishing it, as we see in response to the Gospel of the Kingdom today.

Ezra 2:7 The children of Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four- Elam was the name of a neighbouring nation, so we wonder whether this was a Jew very influenced by secularism who then repented and had a spiritual revival. And he was one of the largest families to return.

Ezra 2:8 The children of Zattu, nine hundred and forty-five- Neh. 7:13 says 845. 100

didn't actually make it. There was far more interest in starting the journey than actually finishing it, as we see in response to the Gospel of the Kingdom today.

Ezra 2:9 The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and sixty- "Pure", perhaps once a Nazirite (Lam. 4:7 s.w.).

Ezra 2:10 The children of Bani, six hundred and forty-two- "Builder", perhaps so named because he was keen to rebuild Jerusalem.

Ezra 2:11 The children of Bebai, six hundred and twenty-three- "Bebai" isn't a Hebrew word; some of the exiles had so assimilated that they only had local Persian names. To leave all they had known was therefore a major challenge.

Ezra 2:12 The children of Azgad, one thousand two hundred and twenty-two- The differing sizes of the families may not simply mean that some were larger than others, but that some families divided more than others over this question of returning to Judah. Some stayed, and others went. And of course many families didn't respond at all.

Ezra 2:13 The children of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-six- 'Lord of the sunrise', a pagan, cultic name; again reflecting the extent to which the exiles had assimilated. I have noted on Esther how "Esther" and "Mordecai" were both local names associated with idolatry.

Ezra 2:14 The children of Bigvai, two thousand and fifty-six- A relatively large number. We are again faced with the question of why some families and geographical areas responded to the call more than others.

Ezra 2:15 The children of Adin, four hundred and fifty-four- "Adin" is s.w. "given to pleasures" (Is. 47:8). And yet the message of return to restore the Kingdom was somehow attractive even to such a person.

Ezra 2:16 The children of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight- "Ater" is 'maimed'. Perhaps he was an invalid, which might account for the relatively small family size. The call of the Kingdom is going to be more attractive to those in such situations.

Ezra 2:17 The children of Bezai, three hundred and twenty-three- Perhaps the same as Besai one of the Nethinim (:49).

Ezra 2:18 The children of Jorah, one hundred and twelve- We note the lack of the 'Yah' prefix or suffix in these names. Those who responded were apparently secular people, not known for their devotion to Yahweh. That may explain why the records of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi complain that they were not well motivated and were largely only looking for personal benefit and advantage through returning to Judah. See on :19.

Ezra 2:19 The children of Hashum, two hundred and twenty-three- "Enriched" or 'seeking enrichment'; see on :18.

Ezra 2:20 The children of Gibbar, ninety-five- "Children of..." can be understood

literally; or the 'children of' a geographical area are the people who live in it. It seems that in :3-19 we have a list of the literal families who returned. Then in :20-35 those who returned, arranged according to geographical localities; in :36-39 the numbers of the priests, arranged according to families, and then according to their localities (:40-42); then the families of the Nethinim (:43-54) and of Solomon's servants (:55-57).

"Gibbar" is Gibeon in Benjamin (Neh. 7:25), and we note that a disproportionate number of the returnees were from Benjamin.

Ezra 2:21 The children of Bethlehem, one hundred and twenty-three- These are pathetically small numbers, bearing in mind there were around 1 million Jews in the empire (see on :1).

Ezra 2:22 The men of Netophah, fifty-six- Counted together with Benjamin in Neh. 7. The majority of those who returned were from Benjamin and Judah. The prophetic vision of all the tribes of Israel returning didn't come about at the time.

Ezra 2:23 The men of Anathoth, one hundred and twenty-eight- The very existence of "men of Anathoth" who returned was a sign of God's grace. For because of their persecution of Jeremiah, Jer. 11:21,23 had prophesied: "There shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth". Perhaps like Nineveh some repented and therefore the threatened judgment didn't come about; or Jeremiah prayed for them his enemies and was heard; or Yahweh simply pitied His people.

Ezra 2:24 The children of Azmaveth, forty-two- The small number was because this was known as literally "fields" near to Jerusalem (Neh. 12:29). And yet 42 people returned from this area. Whereas from far larger settlements, not one.

Ezra 2:25 The children of Kiriath Arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty-three- They may have been listed together because these villages were close to each other, or they travelled together as if one family. The men of Kirjathjearim (s.w. "Kiriath Arim") had looked after the ark previously (1 Sam. 7:1,2) and been blessed for it. There had been a faithful prophet there at the time of the captivity (Jer. 26:20); these considerations may account for the relatively large number who returned from that area.

Ezra 2:26 The children of Ramah and Geba, six hundred and twenty-one- "Gaba" is s.w. "Gibeah of Benjamin" (Jud. 20:10). This was a priestly city, given to the Levites, although very few Levites returned (Josh. 21:17).

Ezra 2:27 The men of Michmas, one hundred and twenty-two- The order of the towns appears to be geographical, as "Michmas" was close to "Geba" (s.w. "Gibeah") of :26 (1 Sam. 14:5).

Ezra 2:28 The men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred and twenty-three- Mentioned together because they were geographically close (Josh. 7:2; 8:9). Bethel was in the ten tribe kingdom, so it seems that some of the Israelites did return along with Judah; but not to the extent of the prophetic vision, whereby a repentant Israel and Judah would be united together in a reestablished Kingdom of God in the land.

Ezra 2:29 The children of Nebo, fifty-two- Neh. 7:33 "the other Nebo", perhaps to differentiate it from Nebo in Moab; or as LXX "Nabia".

Ezra 2:30 The children of Magbish, one hundred and fifty-six- There is no other reference to this village. The impression is given that those who returned were largely from insignificant villages rather than the larger cities. Perhaps it was in those areas that there was greater faithfulness to Yahweh. Or perhaps the urban dwellers didn't want to return and rebuild their cities, whereas the rural dwellers guessed that their land would still be there for them to take.

Ezra 2:31 The children of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four- LXX Elamar. We wonder why so many, relatively speaking, should return from an unknown small village. Perhaps there was a community of faithful there.

Ezra 2:32 The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty- Whilst in this section we are reading of the names of towns and not people, this location is unknown, and means 'flat nosed' as if referring to a person. Perhaps the interesting case of the person Harim is being emphasized, in that people from his village also returned with him. See on :39.

Ezra 2:33 The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred and twenty-five- Neh. 7:37 gives 721. The fact is noted that even four people began the journey, or were willing to start it, but didn't make it. These details show the abiding value to God of every human person.

Ezra 2:34 The children of Jericho, three hundred and forty-five- There was a community of "sons of the prophets" there which may account for this (2 Kings 2:5).

Ezra 2:35 The children of Senaah, three thousand six hundred and thirty- A relatively large number. We are again faced with the question of why some families and geographical areas responded to the call more than others. The larger cities such as Lachish had apparently not a single one who returned from there.

Ezra 2:36 The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred and seventy-three- As noted on :3, in :36-39 we have the numbers of the priests, arranged according to families, and then according to their localities (:40-42). They were not particularly faithful for by the time Ezra came, many of them had married Gentile women. Only four families of priests are mentioned in :36-39, whereas 24 priestly families went into exile.

Ezra 2:37 The children of Immer, one thousand and fifty-two- Only four courses of priests returned, when there were supposed to be 24 of them, namely Pashhur, Jedaiah, Immer, and Hardin (1 Chron. 24:7, 8,14). The priesthood had been deeply corrupt at the time of the exile, and it seems most of them preferred to remain in Babylon.

Ezra 2:38 The children of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred and forty-seven- Perhaps descendants of the unfaithful Pashur the priest of Jer. 20:1-3.

Ezra 2:39 The children of Harim, one thousand and seventeen- "Harim" means

'snubnosed'; the priest in whom there was a physical defect, such as to exclude him from priestly service. For this is the word used of how a 'flat nosed' man was excluded from priestly service (Lev. 21:18). Perhaps they were eager at the chance to serve in the restored temple, guessing that the regulations would be relaxed due to the relative lack of priests and Levites returning. Or the idea could simply be that the requirements of the law were not followed by the priests who returned.

Ezra 2:40 The Levites: the children of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the children of Hodaviah, seventy-four- As noted on :3, in :36-39 we have the numbers of the priests, arranged according to families, and then according to their localities (:40-42). These Levites of :40 are the ordinary Levites; :41 refers to the Levites who sung, and :42 to those who kept the gates. But only two families of the ordinary mass of Levites returned- a pathetic response. Only 431 Levites returned compared to 4289 priests, and we note the lack of Levites again in Ezra 8:15. Perhaps nobody wanted to return to the land just to do humble temple service and get no land inheritance- as the Levites had no land inheritance to return to. This underlines how the motive for the returning exiles was land for themselves, rather than a true desire to do Yahweh's service and reestablish His Kingdom. Yet they returned because He stirred up their spirit / heart. But the unspiritual side of their hearts came to dominate. Just as in the movement of the Spirit in many hearts today.

Ezra 2:41 The singers: the children of Asaph, one hundred and twenty-eight- This was very poor response. We note that apparently the famous singing families of Heman and Jeduthin didn't return (1 Chron. 25:1).

Ezra 2:42 The children of the porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, in all one hundred and thirty-nine- This is a very small number for the families of the gate keepers. The number of ordinary Levites compared to priests is very low (4289 priests, and 341 Levites). There were far more Levites than there were priests, but it seems the Levites didn't want to return and do the dirty work; everyone wanted to be religious leaders. Hence Ezra's problem in finding Levites to return (Ezra 8:15). We can note that it was this tension between Levites and priests which resulted in Korah's rebellion (Num. 16:1-10).

Ezra 2:43 The Nethinim: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth- The Nethinim were grouped beneath the Levites but above "the servants of Solomon" (Ezra 2:55). "Nethinim" is literally 'those who are given' and many presume they were originally the Gibeonites, who were 'given' by Joshua to the Levites to do their more menial work (Josh. 9:3-27). Whenever Gentiles were captured in war, some of them would have been devoted to Yahweh in that they were given to His service through joining the Nethinim (Num. 31:28). Thus in Ezra 8:20 we find mention of some "whom David and the princes had appointed (Heb. 'given') for the service of the Levites".

Ezra 2:44 the children of Keros, the children of Siaha, the children of Padon- These names could well be Persian and not Hebrew. The Nethinim were Gentiles (see on :43), and had unsurprisingly adopted Persian names in the exile. But they wanted to return to rebuild Judah. It's hard to guess whether the push or pull factor was strongest. Perhaps they felt they had never been accepted in Persian society just as

they hadn't been in Jewish society and therefore felt a 'push' from exile; or perhaps they were truly faithful to the God of Israel they served, and were thereby 'pulled' by that back to His service.

Ezra 2:45 the children of Lebanah, the children of Hagabah, the children of Akkub- "Lebanah" is "the moon"; "Hagabah" is "the locust". These names suggest a high level of assimilation into Persian society.

Ezra 2:46 the children of Hagab, the children of Shamlai, the children of Hanan- We note the lack of the 'Yah' prefix or suffix in these names. Those who responded were apparently secular people, not known for their devotion to Yahweh. That may explain why the records of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi complain that they were not well motivated and were largely only looking for personal benefit and advantage through returning to Judah. See on Ezra 2:19.

Ezra 2:47 the children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, the children of Reaiah- "Reaiah", 'Yah has seen', is one of the few names which has the 'Yah' suffix. And he was of the Nethinim, a Gentile, who had retained his devotion to Yahweh despite being made a servant of Yahweh's apostate people.

Ezra 2:48 the children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, the children of Gazzam- "Nekoda" is a female name. This female head of house, a Gentile of the Nethinim, meaning literally "speckled" (s.w. Gen. 30:33,35), led her family back to Judah when many Jews wouldn't respond.

Ezra 2:49 the children of Uzza, the children of Paseah, the children of Besai- We note that "Uzza" and not "Uzziah" is mentioned; as noted on :46, the 'Yah' suffix or prefix is notably missing in these names. "Paseah" means 'limping', suggesting as noted on :32,48,51,52 that it was those who had some physical infirmity who returned. Thus was fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy of limping Jacob returning from Babylon to Zion. And today likewise, it is those who are marginalized for whatever reason who are more likely to respond to the Gospel of the restored Kingdom.

Ezra 2:50 the children of Asnah, the children of Meunim, the children of Nephisim- "Meunim" is literally 'from Maon', a location in the desert where Nabal and Abigail were from (1 Sam. 25:2). Perhaps some of their Gentile servants became Nethinim and remained faithful- despite all the bad examples they saw from God's ethnic people.

Ezra 2:51 the children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur- "Hakupha" means bent or crooked; "Harhur" means 'inflamed'- suggesting as noted on :32,48,52 that it was those who had some physical infirmity who returned.

Ezra 2:52 the children of Bazluth, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha- "Bazluth" means 'peeled skin'; see on :32. "Harsha" is 'magician', confirming the impression that those who returned weren't the religious zealous but generally very secular people.

Ezra 2:53 the children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Temah- These names are all non-Hebrew; the Nethinim were originally Gentile, and these ones

appear to have retained that despite returning to the land. The question is whether they were as it were pushed or pulled to return to the land; see on :44.

Ezra 2:54 the children of Neziah, the children of Hatipha- These names could arguably include the 'Yah' suffix, although most of the Nethinim and even the Jews listed here don't have 'Yah' within them. They were of the Nethinim, Gentiles, who had retained their devotion to Yahweh despite being made servants of Yahweh's apostate people.

Ezra 2:55 The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Hassophereth, the children of Peruda- As noted on :43, these appear to have been reckoned beneath the Nethinim. "They have been traditionally understood to be the descendants of those inhabitants of the land 'that were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites' of whom Solomon had hired 'bondservants' for the work of building his temple (1 Kings 5:13)". It was therefore the most despised classes who responded to the call of the Kingdom. And it is the same today.

Ezra 2:56 the children of Jaalah, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel- "Jaalah" is the word for "profit" used of the idols whom Israel believed would profit them (Is. 44:9,10; 47:12; Jer. 2:8,11; 16:19 etc.). This again rather suggests that the majority of those who returned were secular folks who were not doing so from religious, spiritual motives but for secular reasons.

Ezra 2:57 the children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth Hazzebaim, the children of Ami- Shephatiah, "Yah has judged", is one of the few names in these lists which includes 'Yah'. Amongst these largely secular people who returned (judging by their names) there were some who were doing so from spiritual reasons. But they were a minority. And that impression accords with the historical information about their later behaviour in the land as found in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi.

Ezra 2:58 All the Nethinim, and the children of Solomon's servants, were three hundred and ninety-two- This figure is exactly the same as that given in Neh. 7:60, whereas the numbers in the parallel record in Neh. 7 are often higher when it comes to the Jews who returned. I suggest that that was a list of those who began the journey, or expressed interest in it; whereas Ezra 2 is the list of those who completed it. And there was far more interest in starting the journey than actually finishing it, as we see in response to the Gospel of the Kingdom today. But the despised Gentile classes of the Nethinim and Solomon's servants were actually more committed.

Ezra 2:59 These were those who went up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses, and their genealogy, whether they were of Israel- These people may have included Gentiles; for it is unlikely that many Jews apart from the Levites could prove their descent, and that is why those who returned are not listed according to their tribes. Indeed it would appear that the genealogical records were destroyed when the temple was burnt. So the reference here may be to those who lived near to the original encampments of the exiles who wanted to return with them. This had been the prophetic vision- that Judah and Israel would repent, Babylon would be judged and fall, and the repentant remnant

of the Gentiles would return with the repentant ones of God's people to form a new, multiethnic people of God in His restored Kingdom. But the impenitence of God's people meant that things didn't work out like that. Babylon didn't "fall" in the way that was potentially possible, the majority of God's people chose to remain in exile. And only a handful of Gentiles returned, probably the poorest of the land, perhaps captives from other nations who had been grouped along with the Jews, and likely motivated by the chance of a better life.

Ezra 2:60 the children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred and fifty-two- As explained on :59, these were likely Gentiles, and their names suggest that. However, "Delaiah" means 'Yah has delivered', so perhaps this was a Gentile who wished to share in Yahweh's deliverance from Babylon / Persia.

Ezra 2:61 Of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Hakkoz, the children of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name- Barzillai was famous in Israel from the times of David. This priestly family had taken the name of this family, seeking for kudos and prestige; and thereby had lost their priestly lineage.

Ezra 2:62 These sought their place among those who were registered by genealogy- Ezra 2:62 records Judah being 'reckoned by genealogies', using the same Hebrew word which is the hallmark of the Chronicles genealogies (1 Chron. 4:33; 5:1,7,17; 7:5,7,9,40; 9:1,22). And in this context, Is. 40:26 compares God's 'bringing out' of Judah from Babylon with His 'bringing out' the stars by their individual names, all wonderfully known to Him. Ps. 87:6 had prophesied something similar about the restoration of Zion's fortunes: "The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there". The Kingdom of God was to be the restoration of Israel's Kingdom- but they had to actually get on and restore it rather than wait for it to come.

But they were not found: therefore were they deemed polluted and put from the priesthood- There is a clear connection here with Is. 43:28: "Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary; and I will make Jacob a curse, and Israel an insult". They were put forth "as polluted from the priesthood" (Ezra 2:62). This is tacit proof enough that the restoration from Babylon failed to be the potential restoration prophesied. Indeed, the behaviour of the Jews at that time attracted further curses and judgment.

Ezra 2:63 The governor told them that they should not eat of the most holy things, until there stood up a priest with Urim and Thummim- This situation precluded the fulfilment of the restoration prophecy of Ezekiel 42:13: "Then said he unto me, The north chambers and the south chambers, which are before the separate place, they be holy chambers, where the priests that approach unto the LORD shall eat the most holy things". The same words are found in Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65- it wasn't possible for the priests to eat of the holy things [signifying God's acceptance of His people], because there was no record of their genealogy. Their names were not written in the "register" in fulfilment of Ezekiel 13:9: "neither shall they be written in the writing [s.w. 'register', Ezra 2:62] of the house of Israel". Only if a priest stood up with urim and thummim could they eat of the holy things. And this never happened. These were two engraven stones carried in a pouch in the breastplate which flashed out Divine decisions (see H.A. Whittaker, *Samuel, Saul And David* for an excellent

study of this). Zechariah 3:9 prophesies that Joshua the High Priest would have the engraven stone with seven eyes- the urim and thummim. It would thereby have been possible for a priesthood who had lost their genealogy record during the sacking of the first temple to eat the holy things, and thus fulfill Ezekiel 42:13. In a restoration context, Is. 66:21 had prophesied that Yahweh would regather Judah, “And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the LORD”. This implies, surely, that He would accept some as Levites who could not otherwise prove they were. Zech. 6:11,13 speaks of Joshua being crowned with the High Priestly mitre and ‘bearing the glory’, i.e. carrying the urim and thummim in the breastplate. But all this was *conditional* on Joshua’s obedience: “This shall come to pass, if ye will diligently obey” (Zech. 6:15). Because Joshua failed, he didn’t have urim and thummim, therefore no decision could be given about who was an acceptable priest, and therefore the ‘Kingdom’ prophecy of Ez. 42:13 was left unfulfilled. So much depended upon that man. And likewise, the eternal destiny of many others depends on us. Isaiah’s prophecies of the restoration feature “the servant”- who was a symbol of both the people and a Messianic individual. His success was bound up with theirs. Thus Is. 65:9: “And I will bring forth a seed [singular] out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor [singular] of my mountains: and mine elect [plural] shall inherit it, and my servants [plural] shall dwell there”. His obedience would enable the peoples’ establishment as the Kingdom.

Ezra 2:64 The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty- As noted on :1, this was but a tiny minority of the 1 million or so exiles in Babylon / Persia; and the prophetic intention that the ten tribes returned at the same time was not realized, because they too preferred the life of exile from God rather than returning to Him.

The total number of returned exiles given in Ezra 2:64 is 42360 but this is far greater than the sum of those listed in Ezra 2 as coming from Judah. We conclude that the difference is in the fact that many Israelites from other tribes are within this larger number and they also returned. The chapter begins in Ezra 2:2 with the description of the list as being the number of the children of Israel- rather than simply Judah. Some from Ephraim and Manasseh are specifically mentioned as living in Jerusalem with men of Judah and Benjamin (1 Chron. 9:3). See on Ezra 1:3. Alternatively the larger figure might be some kind of summary of the three waves of the return of the exiles: that during the years of Cyrus and led by Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8-11), the second wave in the early days of Darius I led by Zerubbabel [perhaps another term for Sheshbazzar] (Ezra 2:1-2), and the third wave during the reign of Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7-8).

Ezra 2:65 besides their male servants and their female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven: and they had two hundred singing men and singing women- 7337 servants for 42360 people (:64) suggests that on average each family had a servant. We therefore get the impression that those who returned weren't the poorest of society, although as noted with regards to the meanings of their names above in this chapter, many of them were probably slightly marginalized. They returned seeking material benefit (Hag. 1:9), as lower middle class people often do; rather than seeking to do God's work. See on :67.

Ezra 2:66 Their horses were seven hundred and thirty-six; their mules, two hundred and forty-five- See on :67. This picture of the Jews returning on various animals is to

be connected with the prophecies of the restoration, where the leaders of the nations of their exile were to also make the journey to Zion, carrying the children of the Jews (Is. 49:22,23); and using all the animals here listed in order to bring the Jews back to Zion, and then help them rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Is. 60:4-10). Especially Is. 66:20 "They shall bring all your brothers out of all the nations for an offering to Yahweh, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to My holy mountain Jerusalem". But there were only 245 mules; this is very different to the scene we have here; of a very few Gentiles returning with a few Jews (see on :59), and those Jews not even having enough animals for each of them to ride on (see on :67). Comparison with the prophecies of what was potentially possible makes for a rather sad impression. So much Divine potential was wasted; just as it is by the millions who refuse the call to the Kingdom today. See on :69.

Ezra 2:67 their camels, four hundred and thirty-five; their donkeys, six thousand seven hundred and twenty- Haggai's criticism of the returnees is more understandable if we understand that most of them were the lower classes, who hadn't 'made it' in Babylon. It would be fair to infer that only the lower class Jews returned from Babylon. The record in Ezra 2:64-70 speaks of 42,360 people returning, along with 7,337 servants and 200 singers, making a total of 49,837. And yet only 8,100 animals went with them to transport them. This means that many would have walked. They carried 5,400 vessels for use in the temple- so the picture could be that their more wealthy brethren laded them with goods, but only the poor returned. Further, the list of towns of origin in Ezra 2 suggests it was mainly those who had originally lived in peripheral villages who returned, rather than the inhabitants of Jerusalem and larger cities.

Ezra 2:68 Some of the heads of fathers' households, when they came to the house of Yahweh which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for God's house to set it up in its place- Note the stress on "some"; see on :52. It's stressed twice that only "some" of the returned exiles supported the work of the temple (Ezra 2:68-70)- which was supposed to be the main reason for their return. This hardly sounds like the glorious, positive, confident return of the captives to Zion prophesied in the restoration prophecies.

Ezra 2:69 they gave after their ability into the treasury of the work sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver and one hundred priests' garments- This may sound significant, but it is nothing compared to the entire wealth of the lands of their exile which was intended to be brought to Jerusalem at the restoration (Is. 60:5-10). See on :66. Giving according to ability is alluded to by Paul in 1 Cor. 16:2; and he notes some gave beyond their ability (2 Cor. 8:3).

Ezra 2:70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinim, lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities- The priests in the restored Kingdom were to live in one specific area near the temple (Ez. 45:4), whereas under the Mosaic Law, the priests were given land to live on in each of the various tribes of Israel. And yet the record of the restoration stresses that the priests lived not around the temple, but in various cities throughout Judah (Ezra 2:70; Neh. 7:73; 11:3,20; 12:44). Note the word "some"; see on :68.

EZRA CHAPTER 3

Ezra 3:1 When the seventh month had come and the children of Israel were in the cities- The seventh month could have been the seventh month after they arrived. But at this time they kept the feast of tabernacles (:4), which was to be kept in the seventh month of the Jewish year, so that is probably the month in view here. We note they were in their cities and had to gather to Jerusalem. The intention was that they returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple; but they had gone to their ancestral lands and reclaimed them.

The people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem- This seems to imply a strong unity amongst them; the same phrase is found in Jud. 20:11.

Ezra 3:2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak stood up with his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God- "Rose up / stood up" is a word used often of the 'rising up' of the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 9:5; Neh. 2:18; 3:1). This was a fulfilment of the command to "Arise... Jerusalem!" (Is. 51:17; 52:2; 61:4). But this 'arising' was to be associated with the dawning of Zion's light in the form of Yahweh's glory literally dwelling over Zion (Is. 60:1). This didn't happen at the time, because the appearance of 'arising' by the exiles was only external and wasn't matched by a spiritual revival. Joshua and Zerubbabel between them were intended to be the priest and king of the restored kingdom, but when that didn't work out, Zechariah's prophecies seem to have envisaged the appearance of a singular king-priest. But this too didn't happen. God was trying by all means to bring about the reestablishment of the Kingdom despite so much human dysfunction and disinterest, just as He is today.

Note that Zerubbabel was the adopted son of Shealtiel, and only on that basis was reckoned his "son".

Ezra 3:3 In spite of their fear because of the peoples of the surrounding lands- The same word is used of the fear and dread which came upon the peoples of the lands because of the Israelites in Joshua's time (Josh. 2:9 etc.). The hint is that the exiles were wrong to be in fear of those peoples.

Time and again, Isaiah's restoration prophecies told Judah that they should not fear, as Yahweh would mightily be with them in their work (Is. 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8,11; 54:7,14; 59:19). But Judah feared the surrounding nations- Ezra and Nehemiah are full of this theme. Nehemiah refused to be put in fear by the Samaritan opposition because of his faith in Isaiah's promises (Nehemiah 6:14). And Isaiah further spoke to Judah's heart in Isaiah 51:12,13: "I, even I, am he that comforteth you: who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass; And forgettest the LORD thy maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations [s.w. re. the foundation of the temple being laid] of the earth ['heaven and earth' often refers to the temple]; and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy? and where is the fury of the oppressor?". The fact they did fear meant that they had forgotten Yahweh who was so eager to re-establish their Kingdom.

The restoration prophecies had stated clearly that the returned exiles would not be afraid. Jer. 30:10: "Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and

none shall make him afraid". Isaiah's restoration prophecies contained not only many clear commands to *not fear* at the time of the restoration (Isaiah 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8; 51:7; 54:4), but also a clear statement that if they were truly the re-established Kingdom, they would not fear: "Thou afflicted, tossed with tempest [s.w. Zechariah 7:14 re. how Judah was 'tossed around' by the 70 years captivity] I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires...and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children. In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee... and all thy children shall be taught of the LORD" (Is. 54:11-14). But the adversaries to the rebuilding *did* make the returned exiles afraid (and also Neh. 6:9). Nehemiah exhorted the people *not* to be afraid perhaps on the basis of Jeremiah's words (Neh. 4:14). Their fear and problem-oriented view of life stopped the Kingdom bursting forth into their experience. That fear was rooted in an obsessive self-interest that eclipsed a true faith in that which is greater and larger than us as individuals. And so it can be with us.

They set the altar on its base- That is, they built it on its previous site.

And they offered burnt offerings on it to Yahweh, even burnt offerings morning and evening- These were the daily offerings commanded for each day under the law of Moses.

Ezra 3:4 They kept the feast of tents, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the ordinance, as the duty of every day required- This was in the "seventh month" (:1). Even with Ezekiel's prophecies behind him concerning "the prince", Zerubbabel was easily discouraged in the rebuilding, and needed the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah to encourage him again. He kept the feast of tabernacles (Ezra 3:4) but without dwelling in booths (Neh. 8:17)- i.e., half heartedly. He *could* have been Messiah, perhaps- he may well have been 30/33 at the time of the restoration (Mt. 1:12,13). When Judah returned, they could have entered into the new covenant, featuring "nobles [an intensive plural, meaning 'the great noble']... and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them" (Jer. 30:21). Zerubbabel the Governor could have fulfilled this; but he flunked out. Yet God lifted up his spirit a second time (Hag. 1:14 cp. Ezra 1:5); he was given a second chance, such was God's enthusiasm that he should achieve what was potentially possible for him. But again, he failed. He saw the glory of Babylon as more attractive than the hard work required to bring about Yahweh's eternal glory in Zion. It is noteworthy how God worked through this man's failures, and desired to give him (and all Israel) further opportunities.

The restored kingdom would feature a feast of tabernacles attended by the Gentiles (Zech. 14:16,17), and the restored tabernacle would house the remnant of the Gentile nations (Amos 9:11,12). Indeed, Gentiles were to be invited to participate in the feast of Tabernacles (Dt. 16:14); the 70 bulls sacrificed at the feast represented the acceptance of the Gentiles (Num. 29:12-34). But here, that feast was kept in fear of the surrounding Gentiles (:3). Clearly the restoration was not going as potentially intended. Indeed, as discussed on :11, we see the development of a cult-like dislike of Gentiles in the returnees. At this point, their keeping of the feast of Tabernacles seems to only involve sacrifices. Five times within the first six verses of Ezra 3 we are told that the religious leaders sacrificed the "burnt offerings", and "in accordance with the Law". But we read nothing of the other requirements for keeping that feast- the

celebration of the harvest, the cessation of work, the reading of the law and the building and inhabiting of booths. It was all about technical obedience rather than the spirit of the feast. And the stress on burnt offerings raises the question as to why they were not preceded by sin offerings, as was usually the case. As Ez. 18 laments, the captives had no sense of repentance. Yet their return [*shub*] to the land was predicated upon their return [*shub*] to God. God had forced things through by making them return to the land... but they didn't follow through on that grace by making the required repentance. Haggai presents them as focused solely on their own possible benefit from having returned, with no sense of grace nor repentance. Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel all tried to as it were repent for them in their prayers of penitence (Ezra 9; Neh. 9; Dan. 9). But they were not Jesus. Even they could not get an impenitent people counted as penitent.

Ezra 3:5 and afterwards the continual burnt offering, the offerings of the new moons, of all the set feasts of Yahweh that were consecrated, and of each one who willingly offered a freewill offering to Yahweh- Their technical obedience in offering sacrifice was commendable, but it was not being done according to the commandments for the restored temple in Ez. 40-48. They were still attempting to keep the old covenant, the law of Moses; ignoring the plain teaching of Jeremiah that they had broken this, and were being offered a new covenant which was not at all identical to the old covenant. Their motivation was therefore religious, historical and cultural, rather than spiritual and based upon God's word.

Ezra 3:6 From the first day of the seventh month, they began to offer burnt offerings to Yahweh; but the foundation of Yahweh's temple was not yet laid-

The work was in three stages. First the altar was built, then foundation of the temple laid (:10-13) and then the temple was built on that (Ezra 4-6). It is commendable that they built the altar first, and God accepted it. There was no need for a temple or any structure to as it were sanctify the altar. Offering can be made to God in any context, without any surrounding religious structure.

The impression given is that they focused upon the sacrifices rather than laying the foundations of the temple, which ought to have been laid out according to the dimensions clearly given in Ez. 40-48. The prophets had often reminded God's people that He was not so interested in sacrifices as in hearts broken in repentance; but their focus upon sacrifice and ritual reflected their lack of repentance.

Ezra 3:7 They also gave money to the masons, and to the carpenters. They also gave food, drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus King of Persia- Lebanon was not under Persian control so presumably they used "the grant" of 'all expenses met' to order these trees. Again we see how material resources will never be a barrier to serving God. They were consciously trying to imitate how Solomon had built the first temple. But instead they should have been seeking to build according to the dimensions and details of the plans given to them in Ez. 40-48. Their attempted replication of Solomon suggests they were rebuilding *his* temple rather than building the new structure of Ez. 40-48. Their motivation was in recreating their national past, following national heroes, rather than moving in line with the Spirit.

Haggai's prophecy can be dated quite precisely- it was given August-September 520 BC. This was harvest time. And at this very labour intensive season, where all hands had to be on deck out in the fields, the prophet called for a dedication of labour

to building up God's house. Yet Judah were too concerned with their own harvests than the harvest of God's glory. They were asked to do something counter-instinctive- to take time out from harvest, and spend that time on building up God's house. And they failed the challenge. But it wasn't that they were simply lazy. Hag. 1:8, a prophecy given 18 years after the decree of Cyrus, orders the people to go up into the hills of Judah and get wood with which to build the temple. And yet according to Ezra 3:7, the decree of Cyrus 18 years earlier had resulted in cedar wood being brought from Tyre and Sidon, enough for the temple to be built. Where had the wood gone? Is the implication not that the leadership had used it for their own "cieled houses" (Hag. 1:4)? It all seems so petty minded. But this is what we are tempted to do, time and again- build up our own house and leave God's house desolate and in a very poor second place. And even worse- Hag. 1:9 records that the people expected "much" harvest, and were disappointed at the poor yields in Palestine. This would confirm the suggestion that many of those Jews who did return from Babylon were amongst the poor in Jewish exile society, and returned in home for personal betterment- rather than because they wished to obey the call of the prophets and establish God's glory in the land. That's a sober warning for all of us who may go through an external appearance of zeal for our God, whilst having very selfish and human motives underneath.

Ezra 3:8 Now in the second year of their coming to God's house at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come out of the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to have the oversight of the work of Yahweh's house- I noted on Ezra 2 how very few Levites there were who returned. Only 341 members of Levitical families are listed in Ezra 2:40-42; and if only males over 20 were counted, that total number may have been as low as only 30- and that is assuming all the Levites who returned were obedient to this command, none were sick or handicapped etc. Levites were supposed to start work at 25 (Num. 8:24,25; a similar reduction was made by David in 1 Chron. 23:24,27) but they reduced this to 20 because of the lack of Levites- who had no land inheritance and so were less interested in returning to Judah. This is tacit reflection of how the real motive of the returnees was to reclaim their ancestral land, rather than to build the temple and live in Jerusalem.

Ezra 5:16 says that Sheshbazzar laid the foundations of the temple while Ezra 3:8-10 says that Zerubbabel did. Possibly Sheshbazzar ['glory of the sun god'] was the Babylonian name for the Hebrew 'Zerubbabel'. Or perhaps Sheshbazzar began to lay the foundations, there was a delay, and Zerubbabel completed the work. The delay may have been caused by the famine sent for their lack of zeal to build the temple (Hag. 1:6) as well as the local opposition. Zech. 8:9,10 describes the situation just prior to the foundations of the temple being laid: "...the prophets who were in the day that the foundation of the house of Yahweh of Armies was laid, even the temple, that it might be built. For before those days there were no wages for man, nor any wages for an animal; neither was there any peace to him who went out or came in, because of the adversary. For I set all men everyone against his neighbour". The implication is that the Jewish builders demanded wages for their work and even for the work their animals did; and when they weren't given them, they argued with each other and thus the work stopped.

Ezra 3:9 Then Jeshua stood with his sons and his brothers, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, having the oversight of the workmen in God's house: the sons

of Henadad, with their sons and their brothers the Levites- "Henadad" means 'the grace of Hadad', a Syrian king. Even the Levites still had their pagan names. This was all a far cry from the restoration prophecies of the Gentiles carrying the repentant Jews back to Judah and then themselves working to rebuild the temple for the Jews (Is. 60:10; Zech. 6:15). The Jews had to do so themselves, and as noted on :8, there were very few of them doing the work.

Ezra 3:10 When the builders laid the foundation of Yahweh's temple, they set the priests in their clothing with trumpets, with the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise Yahweh, according to the directions of David king of Israel- They were attempting to restore what had once been, as David had established things, from nationalistic and cultural reasons, just as they tried to replicate Solomon's usage of cedars from Lebanon. Instead they should have been trying to rebuild the temple according to the commands given in Ez. 40-48. This would have been why some wept and others shouted for joy in :12. The scene would not have been that impressive, for they only had 100 sets of priestly clothing (Ezra 2:69). The system of praise instituted by David would have only been very poorly replicated. Ezra 2:41 says that only 128 people from the singing family of Asaph returned, and not all of them would have been adults. This was very poor response. We note that apparently the famous singing families of Heman and Jeduthun didn't return (1 Chron. 25:1).

Ezra 3:11 They sang to one another in praising and giving thanks to Yahweh: For He is good, for His grace endures forever toward Israel. All the people shouted with a great shout when they praised Yahweh, because the foundation of the house of Yahweh had been laid- The "shouts" with which it was laid were the "shouts" of the foundation ceremony described in Zech. 4:7. This passage describes the Messianic kingdom of God which could have been restored in Israel at the time. But as explained on :12, the shouts were tinged with unreality, because it was clear that what had been built was not in obedience to the dimensions and system of Ez. 40-48, and was not even the size of the previous temple which the older men remembered from their youth in Jerusalem. Such great potential was precluded by Judah's limited vision. We notice that the young and old didn't rejoice together- the old men wept at how small the temple was compared even with Solomon's, whilst the younger ones rejoiced. Yet the restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:13 had spoken of how "Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old together".

The refrain "For He is good, for His grace endures forever toward Israel" is based upon the frequent usage of similar words in David's Psalms, which they were using for their praise (:10), and in the restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:11. But those scriptures speak of how "For He is good, for His grace endures forever". They have added "toward Israel", and yet as discussed on :4, the restoration prophecies were all about the Gentiles also worshipping at Zion. Here we see the beginnings of a nationalistic, anti-Gentile stream of thought that was to get progressively worse over time.

These words were an attempt to fulfil the restoration prophecy of Jer. 33:10,11: "Yet again there shall be heard in this place, about which you say, It is waste, without man and without animal, even in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem... the voice of joy and the voice of gladness... the voice of those who say, Give thanks to Yahweh of Armies, for Yahweh is good, for His loving kindness endures forever". But those words are prefaced by the prophecy that the sound of joy would be heard in

Jerusalem. This sound was heard, but it was mixed with the sound of weeping that the temple was not going to be built according to the required specifications of Ezekiel.

Ezra 3:12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice-

The weeping was perhaps because the temple foundations were laid and there was the singing of praise, just as had happened at the dedication of the first temple. But then, God's glory had come down. Now, nothing happened. Ezekiel and the restoration prophets repeatedly spoke of that glory descending visibly onto Zion. But nothing happened. They all knew that they had disregarded Ezekiel's commands of the size and structure of the temple, preferring to just replicate Solomon's temple, the structure they were familiar with and which represented their historical and cultural tradition.

There is the hint in Hag. 2:3-9 that despite the planned temple being smaller than that commanded by Ezekiel, causing some to weep when the foundations were laid rather than rejoice (Ezra 3:12), God was still willing to force through His intention of restoring the Kingdom: "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Isn't it in your eyes as nothing? Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel!" says Yahweh. 'Be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest! Be strong, all you people of the land', says Yahweh, 'and work, for I am with you', says Yahweh of Armies... 'Don't be afraid'... 'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former', says Yahweh. Likewise Zech. 4:10 appealing for the faithful not to despise the day of small things.

The language of Israel's return from captivity as found in Isaiah and Ezekiel all has evident reference to the second coming and the final establishment of the Kingdom. It isn't just that Israel's return under Ezra and Zerubbabel was a type of that final homecoming. It could have been the Kingdom- had they obeyed the prophecies. It was all about a potential Kingdom of God. But they were too caught up with their own self-interest, with building their own houses rather than God's; and so it was all deferred. Using the prophetic perfect, God had prophesied that at the time of the restoration, He would come and dwell in rebuilt Zion (Zech. 8:3)- just as Ezekiel's prophecy had concluded: "The name of the city from that day shall be, The LORD is there" (Ez. 48:35). Clearly, Ezekiel's prophecies could have been fulfilled at the restoration; God was willing that they should be. But human apathy and self-interest stopped it from happening as it could have done. When the foundation stone of the temple was laid, there should have been excited acclamation: "Grace, grace unto it" (Zech. 4:7). But instead the old men wept when the foundation was laid, knowing that the temple was nothing compared to what it ought to be (Ezra 3:12). The glory of the restored temple was prophesied as being far greater than that of the former (Hag. 2:9); Is. 60:17 alluded to this in prophesying that "For brass [in Solomon's temple] I will bring gold, and for iron [that was in Solomon's fixtures] I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron". The super generous decree of Cyrus had potentially enabled all such valuable metals to be provided. But it simply didn't happen, because God's people were satisfied with a small, inglorious temple so that they could get on with building their own "cieled houses" (the same word is used in describing how the temple of Solomon was "covered", or cieled, with cedar). And the old men wept at the fact that the glory of the new house was *less than* that of the earlier one.

Is. 65:17-19 describes the new creation of Zion as it was possible at the restoration, when the former heavens and earth would not come into mind. The

former “heavens” of Solomon’s temple *did* come to mind, and the old men mourned because of how far superior the former had been (Ezra 3:12). The voice of weeping was heard in the streets of Zion, as Judah mourned for their sins of marrying the surrounding nations and breaking the Sabbath.

Many also shouted aloud for joy- The returnees were to lift up their voice with joy at Zion’s restoration. But at the very humble dedication of the temple, the younger people lifted up their voice with joy (Is. 40:9 same words), but the older men wept, as the temple was not even as great as Solomon’s, and certainly not that commanded in Ezekiel and Isaiah.

Ezra 3:13 so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people; for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard far away- "The people" may refer to the people of the land. They did not get a clear message, for it could not be discerned; when instead the joy of the restored Zion was intended to be a witness to the Gentiles. Instead they heard a sound which was a mixture of weeping and rejoicing.

EZRA CHAPTER 4

Ezra 4:1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity were building a temple to Yahweh, the God of Israel- This opposition was real and actual; LXX "And they that afflicted Juda and Benjamin...". They were opposed to the newcomers and were against the idea of a temple being built. This opposition was not at all the scenario presented in the restoration prophets. I noted on the preceding Ezra 3:8-12 that the returnees had no intention of building the city or temple structure according to the dimensions commanded them in Ez. 40-48. And they had rejected the offer of a new covenant deal, instead attempting to still keep the old covenant, however imperfectly, even though they had broken it. And so God as it were reflected His opposition to them through these local adversaries. But as the vision of Zech. 3:1 makes clear, if they had faith then even this 'satan' or adversary would have been removed.

The adversaries included the Israelites already living in Judah as well as the Samaritans, the peoples moved in to live in Judah after the Jews had been deported. The returnees naturally wanted to reclaim their ancestral land and homes- where the Samaritans were living. Samaria was the local capital, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem would suggest this was now going to be shifted to a Jewish-controlled Jerusalem. Hence they claim that if this happens, tax will likely not be collected for the empire (:14) as the capital city was used as a centre for taxation. The Samaritans had a good argument. It was only God's hand that overturned it. Their argument about Jerusalem's history in :15,20 was correct. Her kings like Solomon had indeed dominated territory up to the Euphrates and had tax paid to them. Their suspicion was that the Jews wanted to take control of all land up to the Euphrates (:16). And that was indeed the land promised to Abraham which they felt was rightfully theirs. The subsequent history of the Jews in the time of the Maccabees shows that indeed they did seek to rebel and gain independence.

Even after the temple had been destroyed, it seems those left in the land still worshipped there and there was some kind of altar there: "there came men from Shechem, from Shiloh, and from Samaria... with meal offerings and frankincense in their hand, to bring them to the house of Yahweh" (Jer. 41:5). These were perhaps

those who wanted to help rebuild the temple, protesting they had been sacrificing to Yahweh during the captivity. This also shows that the setting up of the altar was more like restoring whatever was already being used.

Ezra 4:2 then they drew near to Zerubbabel, and to the heads of fathers' households and said to them, Let us build with you; for we seek your God, as you do; and we sacrifice to Him since the days of Esar Haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here- These people may have been Israelites who were sent to Judah not at the time of the exile of the ten tribes into Assyria, but later. Because Esar Haddon was some time after Sennacherib. They ended up being adversarial specifically to Judah and Benjamin (:1), although they were Israelites from other tribes. Or quite possibly these people were sincere proselytes who had been taught the way of Yahweh by the poor Jews who remained in the land after the exile (see on :4). In this case, it was perhaps wrong and elitist to refuse their assistance. The community of returnees would have argued that Cyrus' decree gave them exclusive command and power to rebuild the temple, applying only to those in the list of Ezra 2. I will discuss on :3 as to whether or not this refusal of Gentile help was correct. These people were Gentiles who had been brought to Palestine after the Assyrian deportation of the ten tribes. But the desolated land meant lions running wild, and they assumed this was because they were not worshipping the "god of the land", Yahweh (2 Kings 17:26). And so they had been taught to worship Yahweh as the ten tribes had- which meant worshipping the local idols in the name of Yahweh worship. The Jews in Babylon were doing the same, as Ezekiel's criticisms of them make clear. And we note how later when Persia took over, both Esther and Mordecai had names reflective of idol worship. So indeed they did worship Yahweh "as you do". So the objection to working with them was not on religious grounds.

Ezra 4:3 But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel, said to them- Zerubbabel was the 'head' of the house of David (Ezra 4:3; Hag. 2:23; Zech. 3:8; 6:12,13), as was his descendant Hattush (Ezra 8:1-3 cp. 1 Chron. 3:22). As the grandson of Jehoiachin, Judah's exiled king, Zerubbabel would've been the legitimate king of Judah. Potentially, Hos. 1:11 could have come true: "Judah and... Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head [Zerubbabel?]; and they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel" (RSV). And perhaps as head of the house of David, Zerubbabel was intended to be the "David my servant" who would be the one king and one shepherd who would lead Israel back to the land from exile (Ez. 37:22,24). Significantly, Neh. 7:7 describes Zerubbabel as being at the head of twelve leaders of the returning exiles, who are called "the people of Israel" (cp. Ezra 2:2). And yet he let the baton drop. The prophecies and potentials were therefore reapplied and rescheduled for fulfilment in the Lord Jesus.

You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves together will build to Yahweh, the God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us- See on :2. It could be that their refusal of Gentile help to build the temple, insisting that *only* Jews work in it (Ezra 4:3 cp. Neh. 2:20), was actually going too far; by being so exclusive, they were disallowing the fulfilment of the prophecies both in Zech. 6:15 and in Isaiah 60:10, that Gentiles would help in the final rebuilding of Zion. As with some of us, their refusal to allow "the adversaries of Judah" (Ezra 4:1) to fellowship with us in the work can lead us to an exclusive approach to fellowship, that actually disallows the essentially outgoing and inclusive

spirit of the God we serve. The Jews returned from Babylonian having swung to the opposite extreme from their earlier worldliness; they returned proud and refusing contact with the Gentile world, considering themselves saved by their own strength. And this is perhaps reflected in the way they refused on principle to allow any Gentiles to help them in the building work. Is. 60:10,11 had foretold: "And the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee [as in the decree of Cyrus]... Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night"; and them as Ez. 43 had also described, "I will glorify the house of my glory" (Is. 60:7).

The stress perhaps is on "commanded *us*... you have nothing to do with *us*". They felt that only the returnees had been commissioned to build the temple, and so they rejected the help offered by the Jews or Israelites who had remained in the land after the deportations. And here we have the seeds of exclusivism that led to the extreme elitism at the Lord's time.

Ezra 4:4 Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building- Hands becoming feeble / weakened is the phrase used of Divine judgment (Is. 13:7; Jer. 6:24; 49:24; 50:43; Ez. 7:17). The restored Zion would not have such weakened hands (Zeph. 3:16 "In that day it will be said to Jerusalem, Don't be afraid, Zion. Don't let your hands be weak"). The builders were 'terrified' (Heb.). Clearly, the rebuilding was not even beginning with God's blessing but rather His displeasure.

"The people of the land" were to have a part in the new system of things in the kingdom of God which could have been restored in Israel (Ez. 45:16,22; 46:3,9), and yet this very phrase is repeatedly used concerning the Samaritan people who lived in the land at the time of the restoration (Ezra 4:4; 10:2,11; Neh. 9:24; 10:30,31). God's intention was that they should eventually be converted unto Him; it was His intention that Ezekiel's temple be built at the time of the restoration under Ezra. And yet Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5 criticize the Jews who returned and built the temple for continuing to oppress the stranger / Gentile. Israel would not.

It could also be considered that "the people of the land" were not only the Samaritans, but also those very poor Jews who had remained behind in the land after the exile. In this case, the exiles disliked them and didn't want their participation in rebuilding the temple. Perhaps those "people of the land" had inhabited property and land belonging to the exiles who had now returned. If those exiles had lived in Jerusalem as commanded, then this point of conflict would not have existed. We note the phrase is used several times about those Jews left in Judah: "the poorest sort of the people of the land [remained]... people who were left in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left... the people who were left in the land" (2 Kings 24:14; 25:22; Jer. 40:6). And "the people of the land" is a term used very many times for God's people in Judah. Ezra and Nehemiah make no mention of these people joining in the community of the returned exiles. That community clearly saw themselves as the exclusive people of God- originally because they returned from economic motives and wanted all the land for themselves, perceiving the local Jewish population as poor whereas they had come from the wealth of Persia and Babylon. The closest we get to seeing any acceptance of the other Jews is in Ezra 6:21,22: "The sons of Israel who had returned from the exile ate, along with all those [i.e. other sons of Israel] who had separated themselves from the impurity of nations of the land to them to seek Yahweh God of Israel". This community are specifically referred to multiple times, in titles like "the children of the exile", "those who returned".

The "people of the land" ["lands" is not a helpful rendering] are not the same as the Canaanites, etc. In Ezra 9:1, the people of the land were doing the abominations of the original inhabitants of the land- that's the point. The term "people[s] of the land", *am ha'eretz*, is used of the large community of Jews who had remained in the land after the exile (s.w. "none remained, except the poorest sort of the people of the land", 2 Kings 24:14; "the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to work the vineyards and fields", 2 Kings 25:12). They were "the people that remained in the land" over whom Gedaliah was made ruler (2 Kings 25:22). "The people of the land" is a term specifically used of Judah (2 Chron. 23:13,20,21; 26:21;33:25; 36:1). Only a few chapters after those usages, we find "the people of the land" opposing the Judean exiles in rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4:4).

Ezra was trying to resolve this problem by redefining God's people to exclude those Jews who had remained in the land. His concern was because the Jewish exiles who had returned under Zerubbabel had married the Jews who were already in the land. And so he creates a situation whereby if they didn't separate themselves from the peoples of the land, then they would be separated from the congregation of God's people (Ezra 9:8 s.w.). It is of course so that we cannot be both with the world and with God. But Ezra is legalistically playing with definitions, and trying to label the spiritually second class people of God as in fact not being His people at all. Indeed God had separated His people from the other peoples (1 Kings 8:53; Lev. 20:24), but they had to make the freewill choice to separate themselves (Ezra 10:11). If they did, then God was working with them to separate them from the world and unto Himself. By not doing so, they were precluding His help and denying fellowship with Him. But Ezra is making a fundamental error in defining who is "in" and "out" of God's people. And ignoring the huge sins and impurity of the Jews whilst in exile, as documented by Ezekiel and Isaiah.

Ezra 4:5 And hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia- Yahweh "performs the *counsel*" or "purpose" of rebuilding Jerusalem (Is. 44:26). But the Samaritan opposition sought to frustrate Judah's "purpose" / counsel (Ezra 4:5 s.w.), and succeeded. Yahweh allowed Himself to be limited within how His people performed His purpose. His 'purpose' is therefore conditional upon those whom He allows to fulfill it. God is so invested in the freewill responses of His people that He even allows His own purpose to be 'frustrated' in the short term. Ultimately His purpose for His Kingdom will of course be fulfilled. We note that Ezra records the opposition from the local people, who naturally resisted the return of the Jews because they feared they would claim the land they were living on as their ancestral inheritance. And want to push them off it and live on it themselves. However, Haggai and to an extent Zechariah emphasize the weakness of the Jews, their poor motivation and unspirituality as being the reason why the restoration was delayed. Ezra 1 began with the idea that God's purpose worked out through the decree of Cyrus, but all the days of Cyrus that purpose was frustrated- ostensibly, visibly, by the adversaries, but only reflecting how God used this or created this opposition in response to the indolence and disinterest of the returnees.

Ezra 4:6 In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem- RVmg. "Xerxes". The

well-known Xerxes, the son of Darius, who reigned 20 years (BC 485–465). He is generally identified with the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther.

Ezra 4:7 In the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his companions, to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in Syrian, and set forth in the Syrian language- This Artaxerxes could have been the son of Ahasuerus / Xerxes of :6; so this would refer to a second letter to that in :6. Or it could be the same king; for 'Arta' means 'great', 'the great Xerxes', of :6 (see note there). The reference to it being "set forth" suggests Ezra saw it and remembered it exactly as seen, as if traumatized by it. Another view is that this Artaxerxes is Cyrus, as the names each have the same numerical value [520]. In this case, we have a backtrack in order to make the point that complaints were made in the time of Ahasuerus (:6) just as they had been in the time of Cyrus. In this case they sent a letter to Cyrus (:11) and he replied repealing his decree made in Ezra 1:1. He failed to live up to the potential as Judah's deliverer according to the prophecies of Isaiah about him.

Ezra 4:8 Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this way- Rehum and Shimshai were the local Persian officials, who now took the side of the Samaritan opposition of :7, probably having been bribed or manipulated by them. It could be that they wrote separately, or were giving a stamp of approval to the letter of :7.

Ezra 4:9 then Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions, the Dinaites, and the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Shushanchites, the Dehaites, the Elamites- This list of nine nations along with the local "people of the land" makes ten nations. This is not a literal number because there were other nations there too (:10), but we note a similar ten neighbouring nations against Israel in Ps. 83 and Ez. 38, and these are the historical basis for the ten toes of Dan. 2 and the ten horns of the beast. These nations are geographically throughout the Persian and Babylonian empires. It could be argued that had the returnees allowed these nations to be involved with the temple, then the restoration prophecies of all nations worshipping in Zion could have come true.

Ezra 4:10 and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar brought over, and set in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the country beyond the River, and so forth, wrote- Assur-bani-pal, the great Assyrian king, is probably the king in view; for it was he had conquered and deported the peoples of :9. "He was the only Assyrian king who captured Susa and could carry off 'Susanchites'; no king so fully deserved the titles of 'great and noble'; this name ('Assur the father of the son') by a strong contraction of the middle word, is not so far removed from the sound of 'Osnappar', especially if the final 'l' of 'pal' is changed to 'r' (cf. 'Porus' for 'Pul', or 'Babiru' for 'Babilu'), and the 'r' of 'Assur' is weakened to 'n' (cf. Nebuchadrezzar and Nebuchadnezzar)".

Ezra 4:11 This is the copy of the letter that they sent to Artaxerxes the king: Your servants the men beyond the River, and so forth- Zech. 9:8-10 is a prophecy of Zerubbabel or Joshua which had to have its real fulfilment deferred until the coming of Jesus: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding

upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass [Did Zerubbabel / Joshua like Nehemiah enter Jerusalem on a donkey?]. And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem [the opposing Samaritans], and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth". This latter phrase contrasts with the repeated reminder that the Persians had dominion "on this side the river" (Ezra 4:10,11,16; 5:3,6; 6:13; 8:36; Neh. 3:7). The coming King (and Joshua was prophesied as a king) was to free Judah from Persia's dominion, and establish God's Kingdom, with boys and girls playing in the streets of Jerusalem (Zech. 8:5).

Ezra 4:12 Be it known to the king, that the Jews who came up from you have come to us to Jerusalem; they are building the rebellious and the bad city, and have finished the walls, and repaired the foundations- There had been three or four revolts against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1,9,10,20; 25:1-30) and two against Assyria (2 Kings 18:7; 2 Chron. 33:11). The walls were not finished until Nehemiah's time, so the accusation was false and exaggerated. It was designed to provoke the Persian authorities, and to give the impression that the Jews were far exceeding the instructions of Cyrus's decree, which limited them to the rebuilding of the Temple.

Ezra 4:13 Be it known now to the king that if this city is built, and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and in the end it will be hurtful to the kings- "Tribute" = the contribution of provinces / districts to the central budget; "custom" = tax on goods or on agricultural produce; "toll" = travel tolls levied for maintenance of the infrastructure and roads.

Ezra 4:14 Now because we eat the salt of the palace, and it is not right for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and informed the king- Throughout the Biblical record, the kings of Babylon and Persia are presented as naive despots whose pride makes them easy prey for vain flatterers. Those writing the letter had themselves been the enemies of the empire not so long ago, and their complaints surely ought to have led to an investigation which revealed the very recent decree of Cyrus. Persian satraps had no salaries, but taxed their provinces for the support of themselves and their courts. This was another obvious reason why the locals were against any restored Jerusalem.

Ezra 4:15 that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers: so you shall find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful to kings and provinces, and that they have made rebellion within the same city from old time; for which cause this city was laid waste- "From old time" was only 70 years previously; any serious investigation would have sensed major exaggeration in the complaints, and sought to investigate deeper before making a rash decision. But again the rulers are presented as always acting too hastily and being prone to flattery. For the abiding lesson from them which the Bible presents is their pride.

Ezra 4:16 We inform the king that if this city be built and the walls finished, because of this you shall have no portion beyond the River- We note the contradiction with their statement in :12 that the walls were already finished. Their exaggerations were such that they couldn't be hidden, as with all lies against God's people.

Ezra 4:17 Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions who dwell in Samaria, and in the rest of the country beyond the River: Peace, and so forth- We notice that the opposition was based in Samaria, in the former ten tribe area; and they opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the people of Judah. Not all the ten tribes were taken into captivity. Those who remained still may have retained this sectarian spirit, believing Samaria to be the preferred dwelling of God rather than Jerusalem. The Samaritan opposition may well have been fuelled by those local Israelites. This is all so far from the prophetic vision of a repentant Judah and Israel being united together with repentant Gentiles in a new multiethnic people of God in the reestablished Kingdom. Human pride, impenitence and sectarian thinking precluded so much that was possible then, just as it does today.

Ezra 4:18 The letter which you sent to us has been plainly read before me- The Biblical record again seems to emphasize the relative simplicity of these powerful kings; for he was illiterate and needed to have the letter read before him (as in Esther 6:1).

Ezra 4:19 I decreed, and search has been made, and it is found that this city of old time has made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it- The Babylonian records would only have covered the rebellions of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:1,10,20). And these were only around 80 years previously. So the king is presented as making an exaggerated response just as the complaints had been exaggerated. And apparently they didn't search in the record house in Babylon mentioned in Ezra 5:17. And yet the accusations were true- highlighting how it was God's hand alone that made this decree to cease be overturned.

Ezra 4:20 There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, who have ruled over all the country beyond the River; and tribute, custom, and toll, was paid to them- Again an exaggeration, as this was only really true in Solomon's time. But the king wishes to give a nod toward the apparent concern about loss of taxation.

Ezra 4:21 Make a decree now to cause these men to cease, and that this city not be built, until a decree shall be made by me- The king is presented as hopelessly proud, speaking of how he made a decree to research the matter (:19) and now decreed the work should stop until he were to make another decree. The decree to rebuild Zion had of course been given by God, and in this we see the word of God and the word of man compared. The very decrees the king so prided himself in making were all subject to God's decrees, finally.

Ezra 4:22 Take heed that you not be slack herein: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?- The king surely realized that the authors of the letter had their own agenda as to why they wanted the rebuilding to cease. And so this urging of speedy response is clearly tongue in cheek. He knows this is what they are wanting to hear.

Ezra 4:23 Then when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their companions, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power- LXX "with horses and force". The

broken down state of the walls in Nehemiah's time may partly have been due to this use of force and power, which implies significant military strength. Zech. 4:6 is Yahweh's response to this: "Not by might (s.w. "force") nor by power, but by My Spirit". The Jews were not in step with God's Spirit; for His work cannot be hindered like this. The whole incident was to make the Jews consider their motives in this work and to perceive how they were largely doing it all for themselves and their own religious agendas rather than for God. Our work for the Lord is often likewise paused at times, so that we might consider the same question- as to whether we are doing it in the flesh or in His Spirit.

Ezra 4:24 Then ceased the work of God's house which is at Jerusalem; and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia- see on Zech. 3:1. The statement in Ezra 5:16 that they had been continuously building it would suggest that some faithful ones did continue building after they were told to stop, although the majority gave up. God will confirm us in the way we chose to take. Ezra 4 says that the reason the temple was not further rebuilt was because of the decree of Artaxerxes suspending the building program; then Haggai came and told Israel that the temple wasn't built because they had preferred to build their ceiled houses (Ezra 5:1). So God had confirmed the people in the way they chose. They preferred to build their houses rather than His, so He stopped them from building His house altogether until they wholeheartedly recommitted themselves to Him. Throughout this period of their history, Israel knew what they ought to do, and they knew very well their weaknesses. They should *all* have returned from Babylon; but many remained, although they gave those who returned material support.

The Rabbis calculate that the first year of Cyrus was 52 years after the exile of Zedekiah. The work revived in the second year of Darius, which they calculate as 18 years later- when Judah had fully been 70 years in captivity. Yet the 70 years prophecy could have come true in the first year of Cyrus. It depends whether we start the period with the first deportations, or with the full destruction of the temple. We see here God's flexibility and openness to fulfilment, but always wanting to achieve fulfilment of His word of restoration as soon as possible.

EZRA CHAPTER 5

Ezra 5:1 Now the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem; in the name of the God of Israel they prophesied to them- see on Ezra 4:24; Hag. 1:2. These prophets were critical of the returned exiles, and yet it seems they were responded to; because despite the legal problems, they arose and built. Indeed it seems that the people responded by resuming work on the temple within 23 days of Haggai's prophecy (Hag. 1:15). Although we note Haggai had to appeal to them to keep on building about a month after this (Hag. 2:1). This is a parade example of people hearing God's word, being convicted and seriously responding after a period of reflection.

Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah returned from Babylon and were intended to be leaders who would crown Joshua / Jesus as the Messiah-Priest-Branch who would rebuild Jerusalem. But nothing is heard of them further. Perhaps it is to them that Zech. 11:8 refers: "Three shepherds also I cut off in one month; and my soul loathed them... then said I [on God's behalf], I will not feed you: that that dieth, let it die". They had gone into captivity because of poor shepherds, and now at their return they

again lacked men willing to be their Saviours; and God is saying that He would not do the shepherding job which He had delegated to others. It could be that Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah all died in one month as a result of Zechariah's prophecy at the time of Ezra 5:1. Or it could be that the three potential shepherds who failed were Zerubbabel, Joshua and Nehemiah.

We might expect the message of Haggai and Zechariah to have been "Have faith! Keep building although you've been told to stop, God will be with you, all will be good in the end". Instead Haggai focuses upon the spiritual weakness and poor motivation of the Jews and appeals for their repentance. This would suggest that the real reason God allowed the command to cease building was because He was only confirming the Jews in their lack of desire to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. Zechariah speaks of how the armies of Heaven are operative in the restoration- and perhaps the takeaway message from that was that the Jews were not to fear a mere human command to cease doing God's work, seeing His Spirit was with them.

Ezra 5:2 Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build God's house which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them- The fact Ezekiel gave prophecies- or what sound like prophecies- of a restored temple doesn't mean that they would come true regardless of Israel's obedience. 19th century Christians looked at the prophecies relating to Israel's return to the land and worked to enable them to happen- by financially supporting the Jews etc. It is therefore no mere coincidence that we read that the prophets who 'prophesied' of the rebuilding of the temple also helped physically to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:2). They worked for the fulfilment of their prophecies.

Ezra 5:3 At the same time came to them Tattenai, the governor beyond the River, and Shetharbozenai, and their companions, and said thus to them, Who gave you a decree to build this house, and to finish this wall?- Tattenai was in charge of the entire area west of the Euphrates and was based in Damascus. He came specially to Jerusalem to find out first hand what the situation was.

We know that finally, the work of rebuilding wasn't done in obedience to the commands in Ez. 40-48 and the envisioned rebuilt temple and reestablished Kingdom didn't come about. The essence of the prophecies will come true in the last days, but they were also reapplied and reinterpreted with reference to the building of a spiritual house for God to indwell. We therefore perceive a similarity here with the attempts of local authorities to close down the preaching of the early apostles of the Lord Jesus. They too were asked in whose name they were operating (Acts 4:7) and they likewise continued in God's work despite being told not to. We conclude that the work of building God's house was now being understood in terms of preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and baptizing people into the Lord Jesus. See on Ezra 6:6,7.

Ezra 5:4 Then we told them in this way, what the names of the men were who were making this building- It seems from :5 that the names of the "elders of the Jews" were given (see too :9,10).

Ezra 5:5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not make them cease, until the matter should come to Darius, and then answer should be returned by letter concerning it- "The eye of their God" may refer to the Angel giving

them power to continue the work. Again we note the similarities with the preaching of the apostles, who refused to cease the work of the new temple when ordered to (see on :3). The elders of the Jews [LXX "those of the captivity", as if referring to all the people] don't present as particularly righteous, and yet God's eye is "on" the righteous: "The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him... The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous" (Ps. 33:18; 34:15). This was by the grace of imputed righteousness, and again shows God's desire to almost force through His plan of restoring the Kingdom despite human weakness.

Ezra 5:6 This is the copy of the letter that Tattenai, the governor beyond the River, and Shetharbozenai, and his companions the Apharsachites, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king- As noted on :3, Tattenai was in charge of the entire area west of the Euphrates and was based in Damascus. He came specially to Jerusalem to find out first hand what the situation was. It seems from Ezra 4:9 that the Apharsachites were a favoured group of exiles who collaborated with the Persians in maintaining order west of the Euphrates.

Ezra 5:7 They sent a letter to him, in which was written thus: To Darius the king, all peace- The inspired author of Ezra apparently had access to this correspondence; it likely was in the public domain, as it were, and not confidential.

Ezra 5:8 Be it known to the king, that we went into the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is built with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls; and this work goes on with diligence and prospers in their hands- These impartial observers couldn't but note that despite the command to cease the work, the work was 'prospering'. This prospering was from God (s.w. Neh. 1:11; 2:20). No device formed against the program of rebuilding the Kingdom would prosper (Is. 54:17 s.w. , LXX "I will not suffer any weapon formed against thee to prosper; and every voice that shall rise up against thee for judgment, thou shalt vanquish them all; and thine adversaries shall be condemned thereby"), and the Divine word of restoration would prosper (Is. 55:11 s.w.). Any attempt to bring about the intended reestablishment of the Kingdom would be prospered by God; the fact that ultimately didn't happen was because the exiles ceased to make use of His potential assistance.

Ezra 5:9 Then we asked those elders, and said to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house, and to finish this wall?- Again we note the similarities with the preaching of the apostles, who were demanded to provide human authority for their work of building the spiritual temple, and refused to cease the work of that new temple when ordered to (see on :3).

Ezra 5:10 We asked them their names also, to inform you that we might write the names of the men who were at their head- This demand for names was answered, apparently, by the statement that "We are the servants of... God" (:11). It recalls John the Baptist being asked for his name, and responding that he was merely "a voice" in obedience to God's voice.

Ezra 5:11 Thus they returned us answer saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and are building the house that was built these many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished- See on :10. They were unashamed of their connection with the previous Israel, which had been researched as rebellious and

the land of "great kings" (Ezra 4:20). It's almost as if they allude to that. They were unashamedly about reestablishing the Kingdom of God in Israel, and they were not pretending otherwise. They were brave to title their God "God of heaven and earth" because this was the title given to the Persian gods. They were making the point that in fact their God Yahweh was the true God. We note Darius uses this term of Yahweh (Ezra 6:19), perhaps suggesting he was inclined to believe in Yahweh.

Ezra 5:12 But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon- This confession of sin and just punishment was not easily forthcoming. For Ezekiel had argued with the exiles against their view that the whole exile had been due to Yahweh being too heavily handed with His people. But it seems there was at least a minority who recognized the guilt of their fathers, or at least did in words. But it appears there was not the personal repentance required to activate the huge potential plans God had to reestablish His Kingdom at the time.

Ezra 5:13 But in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree to build this house of God- Cyrus was king of Persia, but they call him "king of Babylon" because he took over Babylon and therefore governance of the Jews.

Ezra 5:14 The gold and silver vessels also of God's house, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought into the temple of Babylon, those Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor- This "Sheshbazzar" may be a title, and could refer to Nehemiah or Zerubbabel; for in Ezra 1:8 he is defined as "prince of Judah". The "governor" was Zerubbabel in Hag. 1:1 (s.w. "governor"); see on :16.

Ezra 5:15 and he said to him, 'Take these vessels, go, put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let God's house be built in its place' - The problem with this command is that it involved building the temple according to the dimensions of Cyrus (see on Ezra 6:3) which were far smaller than those given in Ezekiel 40-48. Building it "in its place", as if restoring what once was, precluded fulfilling the Kingdom vision of Ezekiel. And so the preference of the word of man (Cyrus) over that of God through Ezekiel precluded the fulfilment of the Kingdom then.

Ezra 5:16 Then the same Sheshbazzar came, and laid the foundations of God's house which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now has it been in building, and yet it is not completed- It was Zerubbabel who laid the foundations in Ezra 3, so it seems he was the Sheshbazzar; see on :14. Their statement that they had been continuously building it would suggest that some faithful ones did continue building after they were told to stop, although the majority gave up (Ezra 4:24). Ezra 5:16 says that Sheshbazzar laid the foundations of the temple while Ezra 3:8-10 says that Zerubbabel did. Possibly Sheshbazzar ['glory of the sun god'] was the Babylonian name for the Hebrew 'Zerubbabel'. Or perhaps Sheshbazzar began to lay the foundations, there was a delay, and Zerubbabel completed the work. The delay may have been caused by the famine sent for their lack of zeal to build the temple (Hag. 1:6) as well as the local opposition. Zech. 8:9,10 describes the situation just prior to the foundations of the temple being laid: "...the prophets who were in the day that the

foundation of the house of Yahweh of Armies was laid, even the temple, that it might be built. For before those days there were no wages for man, nor any wages for an animal; neither was there any peace to him who went out or came in, because of the adversary. For I set all men everyone against his neighbour". The implication is that the Jewish builders demanded wages for their work and even for the work their animals did; and when they weren't given them, they argued with each other and thus the work stopped.

Ezra 5:17 Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let a search be made in the king's treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter- The records quickly searched in Ezra 4:19 would have been kept in a different location. We suspect that Tattenai was in fact aware of the decree of Cyrus. See on Ezra 6:2.

EZRA CHAPTER 6

Ezra 6:1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the archives, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon- Apparently nothing was found and if Darius was the least bit against the Jews, he would have said so. But he continued the search until the document was found at Achmetha (:2). Darius had married two of the daughters of Cyrus, so he was likely eager to continue the wishes of Cyrus. The internal correspondences within the record (see on :2) are significant, and give the ring of truth to the claim that this is indeed the inspired word of God and not something written by secular men long after the events.

Ezra 6:2 There was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of Media- It had apparently been moved from the record house in Babylon where it had previously been (Ezra 5:17).

A scroll, and therein was thus written for a record- The reference to a scroll fits with what is known from archaeology: that the Persians used parchment or vellum for their records, not baked clay, like the Assyrians and Babylonians, or paper, like the Egyptians.

Ezra 6:3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king made a decree: Concerning God's house at Jerusalem, let the house be built, the place where they offer sacrifices, and let its foundations be strongly laid; its height sixty cubits, and its breadth sixty cubits- Ezekiel's temple was 500 cubits by 500 cubits. The problem with this command is that it involved building the temple according to the dimensions of Cyrus which were far smaller than those given in Ezekiel 40-48. Building it "in its place" (Ezra 5:15), as if restoring what once was, precluded fulfilling the Kingdom vision of Ezekiel. And so the preference of the word of man (Cyrus) over that of God through Ezekiel precluded the fulfilment of the Kingdom then.

The temple which Cyrus commanded the Jews to build in Jerusalem was of different (smaller) dimensions to that of Ezekiel (Ezra 6:3,4). Two possibilities arise here. Either Israel chose to listen to the words of man rather than those of God through Ezekiel; or (more likely) God reduced the dimensions, knowing that this was within the capability of Israel to achieve. In any case, Israel were encouraged by Divine prophesy in the work of building according to the pattern which Cyrus had

given (Ezra 6:14). God is so eager to work with men that He will work with us on our lower level, even if it is a level lower than what we are capable of. And so we should treat our weaker brethren. See on :9.

We could also note that Cyrus only defined the height and breadth, but not the length. This may have been purposeful; to allow the Jews to themselves decide upon this.

Ezra 6:4 with three courses of great stones, and a course of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house- Great stones are literally rolled stones, stones of greater size than could be carried. The LXX interprets this as meaning four storeys high, three storeys being built of stone, and one of timber. Not all the expenses were in fact met from the king (Ezra 2:69; 3:7). At every moment in the whole story we find potential promises not realized, for whatever reason.

Ezra 6:5 Also let the gold and silver vessels of God's house, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored, and brought again to the temple which is at Jerusalem, each one to its place; and you shall put them in God's house- The Medo-Persians would have recalled that they captured Babylon at the very moment when the Babylonian king was blasphemously using these vessels in a drunken feast (Dan. 5:2,3). Their superstitious thinking would therefore have actually wanted to return these vessels to their appropriate deity. And again, in all these things God's hand was at work; there is an internal credibility within the entire account, as noted on :2.

Ezra 6:6 Now therefore, Tattenai, governor beyond the River, Shetharbozenai, and your companions the Apharsachites, who are beyond the River, you must not hinder this matter- This continues the points of similarity with the attempts to stop the apostles building the spiritual house of God. For this is in essence the same advice as Gamaliel gives in Acts 5:39, warning not to hinder God's work: "You will not be able to overthrow / hinder them. You might be found to be fighting against God". See on Ezra 5:3.

Ezra 6:7 Leave the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in its place- The LXX is pretty much quoted by Gamaliel in Acts 5:38: "Refrain from these men and *let them alone*; if *this work* be of men, it will come to nothing". As explained on Ezra 5:3, the work of building God's house is reinterpreted with reference to the people of God building His spiritual house through preaching in the Christian dispensation. And the apostles who were being persecuted by the elders of the Jews and the leader of the Jewish council in the first century- are thereby presented, in the analogy, to the true elders of the new Israel that the Lord Jesus had founded.

Ezra 6:8 Moreover I make a decree what you shall do to these elders of the Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the River, expenses be given with all diligence to these men, that they be not hindered- Isaiah makes many allusions to Israel's leaving Egypt. The Jews in Babylon were intended to live out the type by leaving Babylon and making the wilderness journey to the land- and God helped them in it. For example, Ezra records how God moved the local authorities to pronounce that the residents around the returning exiles should give them silver, gold and goods. This was an exact re-living of how Israel left Egypt

with Egypt's gold and silver (Ex. 12:35). Yet most of the Jews didn't want to return, they didn't want to live out the type.

"Be not hindered" is s.w. Dan. 6:15 of how "no decree... may be changed". The idea clearly is that the decree was changed- and the connection shows that Darius ought to have known this and humbled himself to change the decree about Daniel. Because changing the unchangeable decree was perfectly possible for the emperor, despite the apparent loss of face and suggestion that he was not in fact Divine but fallible.

Ezra 6:9 That which they have need of, both young bulls, and rams, and lambs, for burnt offerings to the God of heaven; also wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the word of the priests who are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail- Absolutely everything physical which was required for obedience to the law was to be provided. The lesson is that if we wish to live the kingdom life and build that kingdom, lack of resources can never ultimately be cited as a reason for disobedience. We must note however that the Jews had broken the old covenant, and had been offered a new covenant deal with God in Jer. 33 and Ez. 20. They apparently rejected that and still tried to keep the old covenant. And yet clearly God worked with them through that immaturity. He comes over as ever eager to work with His people at whatever level they are at. See on :3. "According to the word of the priests" is LXX "whatsoever they shall ask". There is almost a blank cheque offer to hear our requests- if they are in order to do God's will and work. But not merely for ourselves.

Ezra 6:10 that they may offer sacrifices of pleasant aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and of his sons- Let's remember that the exiles were symbols of us. We in this life are passing through "the time of our exile" (1 Pet. 1:17 RSV). Paul exhorts us to pray for kings and governors, in the very language of the LXX in Ezra 6:10 about the returnees praying in the new temple for the kings of Babylon. Again, as noted on Ezra 5:3, the whole narrative of the rebuilding of the temple and Kingdom is applied to the work of the Christian church in this age.

Ezra 6:11 Also I have made a decree, that whoever shall alter this word, let a beam be pulled out from his house, and let him be lifted up and fastened thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this- The condemnation upon those who tried to change the decree was severe, and clearly had in view the local Samaritan opposition to the Jews. However the idea of cursing those who changed the word of a king was still alluding to the pagan idea that kings were divine, and therefore to try to change their word was an act of blasphemy. This pagan concept reveals how far the Persian kings were from Yahweh; and yet He worked their arrogance in order to enable His people to get on with His work- if they wished to.

The punishment of hanging on a gallows [possibly a form of crucifixion] and his house made a dungheap recalls the judgment of Haman and those who supported him. This confirms our suggestion that the events of the book of Esther had happened around this time. Those events resulted in a "fear of the Jews" which would explain this change of policy about stopping the building of the temple.

Ezra 6:12 and the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow all kings and peoples who shall put forth their hand to alter the same, to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with all diligence- The kings and peoples likely to want to overthrow Jerusalem at that point

were those who were going to be opposed to Persia; and so this decree was in its own way a restatement of Persian dominance in the area. To alter the word of Persian command (:11) is seen here (in the AV) as seeking to alter the house of God. They wished to perceive the rebuilding of Yahweh's temple as a function of their word of command concerning it. The rebuilding of the temple was to be the result of Yahweh's prophetic word; but He allowed others to perceive that it was their word which was causing the fulfilment.

Ezra 6:13 Then Tattenai, the governor beyond the River, Shetharbozenai, and their companions, because Darius the king had sent a decree, did accordingly with all diligence- See on :3. Their diligent ('speedy') obedience to the decree of Darius was meant to be an example to the Jews to respond speedily and diligently to the Divine decree to rebuild Jerusalem. For that was what was behind the decrees of Cyrus and Darius. The two decrees, of God and man, are paralleled in :14.

Ezra 6:14 The elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia- As noted on :13, the two decrees, of God and man, are paralleled. As Gentile men like Tattenai diligently responded to the human decree, so God's people should have done more so to the Divine decree. The real reason for prospering in fulfilling the decree was through the Divine word through Haggai and Zechariah- which was in fact highly critical of the Jews, with Haggai accusing them of not continuing to rebuild the temple because of their desire to build their own homes, with elegant ceilings, whilst God's house remained waste. They were only using the command to stop the work as an excuse for their own laziness and lack of commitment. That hard hitting message apparently was responded to. For here we read that the work prospered because of it.

Ezra 6:15 This house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king- Hag. 1:15 says that the work began on the 24th of Elul in the second year of Darius. From Zerubbabel's laying of the foundation (Ezra 3:10), 21 years had passed. Since the prophets Haggai and Zechariah had challenged the people to repent and get to work, it took exactly four years, five months and ten days to complete it. This shows a commendable speed of response.

Ezra 6:16 The children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy- Clearly seeking to emulate Solomon's grandiose dedication of his temple; but they were missing the point that Isaiah had made, that God doesn't delight in huge numbers of sacrifices as Solomon made, but rather seeks humble hearts. The reference to "Israel" rather than Judah connects with the offering of 12 goats for the 12 tribes in :17. The prophetic vision was that both Israel and Judah would be reunited in this restored Kingdom. But the majority of the ten tribes didn't return, and relatively few of the 1 million of Judah in Babylon. This feast of dedication is that of Jn. 10:22, and the LXX calls Psalms 145-148 the Psalm of Haggai and Zechariah- so they may have been used at this time. The difference between "the children of Israel" and the returnees may suggest that despite the returnees' dislike of the Israelites who were in the land at their return, they allowed them now to dedicate the temple. But :19 suggests the returnees alone kept the Passover- they didn't let their other brethren as it were 'break bread'.

The "joy" may have been in the words of Ps. 148-150, called in the LXX 'Psalms of Haggai and Zechariah'.

Ezra 6:17 They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel- As when the tabernacle was dedicated (Num. 7:87; 8:17). Again they were missing the point- the old covenant was over. And any attempt at emulating Solomon's ridiculously grandiose offering of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep to dedicate his temple was also being made in the wrong spirit; see on :16. The dedication offerings of Solomon, Josiah and Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30:24; 35:7) involved far more animals- and yet the returnees had the empowerment by the emperor to have as many animals as they wished.

"The Jews" is used synonymously with "Israelite" (Nehemiah 2:10; 4:1; 5:1,8; 7:73; 12:47). 12 he-goats and 12 bulls were offered for "all Israel" in Ezra 6:17; 8:35. But still Judah and Israel remained divided; and no "prince" arose to fulfill the prophecies. Israel and Judah were to become one nation in the land, "and my servant David shall be a prince in the midst of them" (Ez. 37:16-24). This is clearly the same "prince" as referred to in Ezekiel 45-48. The restoration prophecy of Jer. 30:9 speaks of a returned Judah serving "David their king, whom I shall raise up unto them"- implying that David would have been resurrected at the restoration, if all had gone according to what was possible. Some of the ten tribes did return with Judah but the scale of prophesied reunion was simply not achieved, and the offering of the 12 goats was therefore but external symbolism.

Ezra 6:18 They set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses- But as noted on Ezra 2, only four of the 24 courses returned. And hardly any Levites. Their attempts to keep the old covenant were compromised; and yet they had been told in Ezekiel and Jeremiah that they had hopelessly broken that covenant, and needed to accept the new covenant, which they stubbornly refused to do.

Ezra 6:19 The children of the captivity kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month- It seems they were proud of their technical obedience to the old covenant; see on :18. At this point, the book of Esther reverts to Hebrew from Chaldee (which began to be used in Ezra 4:18). I discussed on :16 how the other Israelites were allowed to rejoice at the dedication of the temple, but apparently weren't allowed to keep Passover / break bread. This is stressed in :20 . The Passover was slain only "for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves". Despite this God "made them joyful" (:22), just as He still fellowships with the most exclusive of brethren and seeks to work with them.

Ezra 6:20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure- I suggest this was just a technical purification, just as people may be baptized in water but refuse the birth or cleansing of the Spirit. Ez. 36:24-29 had prophesied: "For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh". The captives were taken from among the many nations that comprised

Babylon / Persia; they were brought, as many as could be bothered to go, to their own land. They were cleansed there (s.w. Ezra 6:20; Neh. 12:30). But they became un-cleansed through allowing Tobiah into the temple chambers, by trading on the Sabbath, and by marrying Gentiles (Neh. 13:9,22,30). The priesthood needed to be “cleansed” again (Mal. 3:3 s.w.). The promise of Ezekiel 36 sounds unconditional- as if, whoosh, God would make His sinful people righteous regardless of their own will. And so some have misunderstood the operation of God’s Spirit in our own days. But although not directly stated, the promise of entry into the new covenant, whereby God would encourage obedience through the work of His Spirit, was conditional. Judah could have entered the new covenant there and then, with all its requirements for a Messiah figure to abrogate the Mosaic law. But they turned back to their uncleanness, they would not keep God’s statutes, and their potential Messiah figures failed to appear. Yet again, the promise of entry into a new covenant was deferred, to be fulfilled in a new Israel who are sprinkled through the waters of baptism. The promise was fulfilled, but in a far different context to that intended.

And they killed the Passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brothers the priests, and for themselves- The Mosaic legislation was that each head of house should kill the Passover. But they now considered that only the clean could kill the Passover, and the Levites were supposed to be super clean- even though we are soon to read that some of them were so uncommitted to Yahweh that they had married Gentiles. So their zeal for technical, casuistic purity meant they ended up breaking the law, as has so often been seen amongst God’s people.

Ezra 6:21 The children of Israel who had come again out of the captivity- Time and again, Jeremiah had prophesied how Yahweh would *bring again* His people and the vessels of the temple back to the land (Jer. 28:3,4,6; 30:3,18; 31:23); and this all had a fulfilment in the return from captivity under Ezra and Nehemiah. It was then that in some sense Yahweh ‘brought again Zion’ (Is. 52:8). The very same word used by Joel [translated “bring again”] is to be found in the references to Judah’s return at the restoration (Ezra 2:1; 6:21; Neh. 7:6; 8:17). The same word is to be found in Ezekiel 38:8 and 39:27, where again, the invasion is to happen once Judah had been ‘brought again’ from captivity. Judah returned, and yet they didn’t rebuild the temple as they were commanded. Therefore the invasion didn’t come, and therefore the Kingdom wasn’t then established. As if knowing this, Hos. 6:11 had prophesied [otherwise strangely] that Judah would reap their punishment, *when* they returned from captivity. They returned [s.w. ‘bring again’], but not to the Most High (Hos. 7:16). Joel 3, however, speaks from the perspective that Judah would be ‘brought again’ from Babylon under Ezra; and then Joel 3:2 “I will also gather all nations...and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land”.

And all such as had separated themselves to them from the filthiness of the nations of the land, to seek Yahweh, the God of Israel, ate- They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by Ezra 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by Ezra 10:11 likewise; then they separate (Ezra 10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Neh. 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God’s law (Neh. 10:28).

But the reference is probably to Gentiles keeping the Passover along with Israel. We notice that there is no mention of their being circumcised to do so. I have

suggested elsewhere that the command for only the circumcised to partake of it was relevant only to the first Passover, as later in the Mosaic law and Jewish practice, all of one mind with Israel were welcome to partake of it. And this has relevance to the openness of the breaking of bread service.

However it is the Jews who are described as needing to separate themselves from the filthiness of the nations of the land (Ezra 9:1; 10:11). Perhaps the category here referred to those Jews who had remained in the land throughout the exile, and now separated themselves from the idolatry of the land. See on Ezra 4:4.

Ezra 6:22 and kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for Yahweh had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, to strengthen their hands in the work of God's house, the God of Israel- This verse emphasizes the direct work of God on human hearts (as in 1 Kings 18:37; Mal. 4:6): making them joyful, turning the heart of the king, and strengthening their work for Him. Despite their many weaknesses as discussed in the previous commentary, God was eager to work with them. Although they had not accepted the new covenant, with its promise of the Spirit in their hearts, He still worked directly upon their hearts in confirming them in the way they had apparently chosen. We naturally enquire why the king of Persia is called "the king of Assyria". It could be that the Assyrian kings were famed for their hardness and cruelty; and even such a hard heart was turned by God. Just as His Spirit can work today.

EZRA CHAPTER 7

Ezra 7:1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah-

"After these things" refers to the 58 year gap between the events at the end of Ezra 6, during the first return under Zerubbabel, to this second return under Ezra. And there was to be a third return under Nehemiah, the three returns matching the three deportations of the Jews. The book of Ezra includes the historical information about the return under Zerubbabel, as historical background to Ezra's inspired reminiscence of his own return.

A call to flee Babylon was made by Zechariah in the second year of Darius, at the time of Ezra 5 when the exiles were forbidden to continue rebuilding the temple and Zechariah and Haggai prophesied to them. So now, there was another return led by Ezra as recorded in Ezra 7. This may well have been in direct response and obedience to the call to "flee from the land of the north!" made in Zech. 2:6,7. Although Babylon had fallen to Cyrus, he left the city intact. The total destruction of the city envisioned in the prophets didn't happen at that time- perhaps because God's people weren't ready to leave as they should have done. For the exit of the Jews from Babylon was envisaged as preceding Babylon's total destruction. Although the people hadn't left Babylon, God in Zech. 2:6 gives another scenario- they could leave now, and then Babylon would fall as predicted. Ezra leads another group from Babylon in response to this call (Ezra 7), but again there was very limited response to his efforts to get the Jews to leave. We marvel at God's desire to somehow make it all work out...

A fair case can be made that the book of Esther occurred between Ezra 6 and 7. Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah may well have been contemporaries. We appear to have a gap of 58 years covered by "after these things". Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes, the king at the time of Esther. The book of Esther closes with the Jews popular and

wealthy. This was surely the real reason why so few wanted to return. Ezra is to be commended for perceiving the need to leave that comfortable society and return to Zion.

Seraiah was High-priest in the days of king Zedekiah and was slain at Riblah by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:18-21). So immediately we see that generations are omitted here, as often in the Biblical genealogies. Ezra was however the descendant of the high priest; but he is presented as the scribe of Yahweh's law. He made no attempt to leverage his ancestry to become High Priest, but rather focused on the essence- the teaching of God's word to people.

Ezra 7:2 the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub- There is reason to think that it could have been possible for the Messianic Kingdom to have been established at the time of the restoration, and the temple prophecies would fit perfectly into this context. Thus Ezekiel emphasized that the sons of Zadok were to organize priestly work in the temple (Ez. 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11); and it was surely not incidental that Ezra, the leader of the initial restoration, was one of the sons of Zadok (Ezra 7:2). He was in a position to fulfill those prophecies, although the bulk of his brethren seem to have precluded this. See on :27.

Ezra 7:3 the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth- 15 names are listed between Ezra and Aaron- covering about 1000 years. Clearly many generations were omitted. We note there are 26 names listed between Zerubbabel (a generation or two before Ezra) and Nashon a contemporary of Aaron, in 1 Chron. 2:10-15; 3:1-19). Some details of the omitted generations are found in 1 Chron. 9:10,11; Neh. 11:11. Why was that information not included here? Perhaps because the intention was to focus upon various individuals who were historically known as involved in temple and priestly work, as if to really emphasize how Ezra was qualified for his work through being part of a long line of such workers. Thus Azariah is mentioned in 1 Chron. 6:10 as 'having executed the priest's office in the house that Solomon built in Jerusalem'.

Ezra 7:4 the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki- Ezra's genealogy is carefully traced back to Aaron, because there were some who could not prove their genealogy at the time. If indeed the genealogical records were destroyed when the temple was sacked, we wonder how he actually managed to prove such a long genealogy.

Ezra 7:5 the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest- Ezra's great grandfather had been High Priest (:1), and he could trace his descent right back to Aaron. He was really well qualified to be the next high priest. The fact he wasn't could imply there was some degree of internal politics going on, or he failed to rise up to the call; and so the prophecies of a Messianic high priest in the restored Kingdom were left unfulfilled.

Ezra 7:6 this Ezra went up from Babylon: and he was a willing scribe in the law of Moses, which Yahweh, the God of Israel, had given- The Hebrew word for "scribe" doesn't simply mean one who writes down or copies. It carries the idea of publishing, teaching, openly declaring- and is the word used in passages like Is. 43:21 "shew forth My praise". Ezra was an enthusiastic teacher of the law of Moses, and he wanted the returned exiles to be obedient to the old covenant and thereby be blessed. We might

note however that Jeremiah and Ezekiel had made clear that the old covenant had been broken with Judah; and they had been offered a new covenant with those who repented, involving the gift of the Spirit and inclusion of any Gentiles who wished to accept it. Ezra was contemporary with Jeremiah and certainly Ezekiel; surely he was aware of the new covenant, and surely he knew the prophecies of Isaiah relevant to the exiles. They clearly offered a new covenant. But still God's good hand was upon him, because he wanted to teach the old covenant (:9,10). God will still work with those who have wrong theology and mistaken emphases, if their heart is clearly for Him. This is something that denominational Christianity can't cope with, as each denomination basically feels that God is only working with those who share their positions. So Ezra's passion for the old covenant was to some degree zeal not according to knowledge. He was missing the point of the wonderful offer of the new covenant, and not giving due weight to God's statements in the prophets that the old covenant was effectively over. And yet despite this wrong focus upon law and traditional positions, God clearly worked with Ezra.

And the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of Yahweh his God on him- The hand of God operating on human hearts is a great theme of Ezra and Nehemiah. It was the outworking of grace and the gift / work of the Spirit. For the human spirit is primarily where God's Spirit works.

Ezra 7:7 There went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the porters and the Nethinim, to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king- These are the same six categories who had returned with Zerubbabel initially (Ezra 2:70). But the order is different. Here, the first category is the ordinary people; whereas before it was the priests and Levites who were listed first. This may be read as positive, in that the ordinary people were now responding; or negative, in that the priests were less responsive than they had been.

Ezra 7:8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king- This was according to Yahweh's "hand" (:6). When Nehemiah speaks of Judah having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (Neh. 1:10), he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come to Zion and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7).

Ezra 7:9 For on the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon; and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God on him- The continual reference to the hand of God in Ezra is another way of saying that God was acting through His Spirit. There was (and is) a power higher than that of human endeavour, a hidden hand, which alone makes our way to the Kingdom ultimately prosperous; and our salvation therefore by grace rather than our own device.

As the crow flies, the journey was about 520 miles; but they would've taken the standard route along the Orontes valley, which was nearly double that, around 900 miles. They averaged around 10 miles / day, assuming they didn't travel on the Sabbath- implying they were travelling at walking speed and perhaps with further breaks for the Mosaic feasts.

All we read of Ezra in the book of Ezra concerns the events around his coming to Jerusalem and what he did there. We read no more of Ezra until in Neh. 8:1 he is asked to read God's law to the people in Nehemiah's time. Ezra returned from Babylon in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7:7) in 458 BC, and Nehemiah arrived in the same king's twentieth year (Neh. 2:1) in 445. Ezra's work over those 13 years isn't recorded. In that time, Jerusalem had gone from a populated city (Ezra 1:1) to a depopulated city with broken down walls (Neh. 7:4; 11:1-3; 13:10-13). Possibly Ezra had returned to Babylon in that period; or perhaps he had a ministry which, like that of so many, produced little fruit. Yet still he kept on, for he reappears in Neh. 8:1 to read the law to the people. His attempt to fix the mixed marriages didn't go well, because Nehemiah had to address the same problem. But nearly all the prophets were failed reformers, and only a very few believers ever seem to remain consistently faithful to the Lord. In fact only Jonah, of all the prophets, had a successful ministry.

Ezra 7:10 For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of Yahweh, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances-

We have here a powerful pattern: A heart set, seeking God's word, personally doing it- and then teaching it to others. Ezra definitely presents as sincere. However, his message should have been of the new covenant. He was surely aware of the prophetic position on this, but instead sought to return Israel to the old covenant. This is the problem with getting 'doctrine' wrong; we can end up going down rabbit holes, wasting our life ministry, misguiding others into irrelevancies, and in the worst cases, "The time shall come when he who kills you will think he does God's service". Indeed, a focus on God's law and devotion to teaching it didn't stop Israel from murdering God's Son.

The compelling hand of God (:9) was in response to Ezra's desire in his heart to do God's law and teach it to others. I discussed on :6 how his zeal for the law of Moses was in fact misplaced, and he ought to have given more attention to the new covenant. But still God worked with him in respect for his misplaced idealism. And his setting of his heart to seek God is clearly wonderfully positive (s.w. 2 Chron. 19:3). His "set" or 'prepared' heart could be seen as a fulfilment of Solomon's prayer in 1 Chron. 29:18, where He asks God to keep the hearts of His people focused upon the temple, keeping it "in the imagination of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and prepare their heart unto You". Ezra's set or prepared heart (s.w.) was therefore a result of his willingly allowing God to work directly upon his heart. Again we see the direct working of God upon the human heart or spirit, all performed by His Spirit.

Ezra 7:11 Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, even the scribe of the words of the commandments of Yahweh, and of His statutes to Israel- It could be that Ezra was a "scribe" in the court, but more importantly he was a scribe or proclaimer of the words and commandments of Yahweh, and His statutes- as well as those of the king. The word for "scribe" can mean a court secretary, and the word is used like that in describing the reigns of David and others. It is also the title used in the Persian empire for someone who would assist the colonization process, teaching the subject people the civil laws of Persia. "The scribe, even the scribe" may be trying to say that although he was a scribe of the Persian empire, he was also a scribe of God's law. Possibly he was the scribe in the sense of a Persian secretary, maybe 'Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs', as well as a Jew, a priest who in fact could have been the High Priest. If indeed Ezra was a senior Secretary, this would explain his ease of access to the king.

We know that the Jews had assimilated into Babylon, so to preserve the transmission of the extant scriptures and to be able to read them, it was necessary that some like Ezra still knew original Hebrew. We recall how the children of the returned exiles could not speak fluent, pure Hebrew. Whether Ezra was right to do this... raises many ethical questions. I see the book of Ezra as his personal memoir, a kind of autobiography recorded under Divine inspiration. And if you were to write a memoir looking back at your life, you likewise might muse about your motives and wisdom in various decisions. But it is for us to reflect upon his life decisions. As with every human life, behaviour reflects mixed motivations.

Ezra 7:12 Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace and so forth- Ezra 1:2 records Cyrus originally defining Yahweh, Israel's God, as "the God of heaven". This was in allusion to the Persian belief in Ormuzd as the mightiest god, in contradistinction to Ahriman, who was lord of the lower regions. The proclamation of Cyrus was effectively a denial of the Persian view of the gods and Ormuzd, although it seems Cyrus didn't maintain that; but Artaxerxes is more vague, leaving it open to interpretation as to whether the "God of heaven" is Yahweh or Ormuzd.

Ezra 7:13 I make a decree, that all those of the people of Israel, and their priests and the Levites, in my realm, who are minded of their own free will to go to Jerusalem, go with you- Those who left Babylon did so of their own freewill, and yet providential events stirred up their spirits to do this (Ezra 1:5); and the way was prepared in miraculous ways. The new covenant offered to the exiles a new heart and spirit from God. His Spirit was eager to work upon their spirit, but still there was required their own freewill desire to return both to their land and to their God. Otherwise they would have been reduced to mere puppets in the Divine hand.

In Ezra 4, Artaxerxes issues a decree to cease the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Here in Ezra 7 king Artaxerxes issues a decree to begin restoring and building Jerusalem. But the laws of the Medes and Persians were unchangeable (Esther 1:19; Dan. 6:14-16). So we see here how Darius could have changed the fate of Daniel- only his pride stopped him. We also reflect how amazingly strong was God's hand upon him to make him issue this second decree. However another take is that there are two different kings in view here. Even if that is the case, we are still left with the fact that the laws of Medes and Persians were changed by the influence of God's Spirit.

Ezra 7:14 Because you are sent of the king and his seven counsellors, to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of your God which is in your hand- The book of Esther (Esther 1:14) likewise mentions these seven counsellors. "To inquire" doesn't necessarily mean here 'to find out information'. The idea could be that he was sent there to pray for Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of God. For this is how prayer must be- according to God's word.

The law being in the hand of Ezra invites us to see him as a second Moses, who alone is recorded as carrying the law in his hand [on his descent from Sinai]. "At His right hand was a fiery law for them" (Dt. 33:2). Carrying through the desert to Israel gold, silver and bronze, along with great Gentile wealth donated to Israelites, all recalls what Moses did. Surely Ezra took inspiration from this; for the gold, silver and bronze were used by Moses to create the tabernacle (Ex. 25:3; 26:32; 33:5; 36:36), just as Ezra used them for the temple. Ezra was told to appoint judges to teach the

people (Ezra 7:25,26), just as Moses was told (Ex. 18:13-27; Dt. 1:13-18; 16:18; 17:8-13). See on Ezra 8:1.

Ezra 7:15 and to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered to the God of Israel whose habitation is in Jerusalem- The king clearly sees "the God of Israel" as the local god of Jerusalem, who as it were lives there. He doesn't use the term Yahweh, as Cyrus did.

Ezra 7:16 and all the silver and gold that you shall find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem- "That you shall find" doesn't mean he was to just grab whatever silver and gold he could; rather the idea is that he should take with him whatever silver and gold people were willing to give him. This is the king's way of repeating the essence of the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:4,6).

Ezra 7:17 therefore you shall with all diligence buy with this money bulls, rams, lambs, with their meal offerings and their drink offerings, and shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem- The king appears to have some detailed knowledge of the law of Moses; as an eager scribe or proclaimer, Ezra apparently had shared the details of Yahweh with the king. And he is to be commended for this; for religion is always a difficult subject with powerful employers who have their own religious views.

Ezra 7:18 Whatever shall seem good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do that after the will of your God- We note the parallel between the will of God, and what Ezra willed or thought good. The king thus accepts that the will of Ezra is that of his God; they were aligned. He perceives congruity between what he preached and what he really stood for himself.

Ezra 7:19 The vessels that are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver before the God of Jerusalem- Although the king appears to have seen Israel's God as merely a local entity, he also seems to recognize He had some real presence there in Jerusalem. The original temple vessels taken away from Jerusalem had been restored there already, but there was apparently the need for many more, which were offered voluntarily (:15; Ezra 8:25-28). Perhaps some had been stolen before they were taken into captivity; or some which had been returned had been stolen. Or again, perhaps Ezra wished to operate worship on a far grander scale than previously.

Ezra 7:20 Whatever more shall be needful for the house of your God, which you shall have occasion to grant, grant it out of the king's treasure house- The treasure house was presumably that in Jerusalem, into which the local taxes were paid.

Ezra 7:21 I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers who are beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done with all diligence- The king seems to have foreseen that the God of Ezra was alive and real enough to give Ezra more commandments which would require material to fulfill them. The inspired writer of Psalm 45 says that his tongue is like the pen of a scribe or writer (Ps. 45:1). The writer is God. God was using the inspired person's words as His pen, with which to communicate to men. Ezra likewise was a "scribe of the law of the God of heaven"

(Ezra 7:21). The God who is in Heaven wrote through a scribe here on earth. That's the idea of inspiration.

Ezra 7:22 to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred measures of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much- The taxes paid to the local treasure house in Jerusalem (:20) would have been paid partly in kind, and wheat, wine and oil were all local products of Judah (2 Kings 18:32). The king had clearly been told about the exact nature of the Jewish sacrifices, including the command to always offer with salt (Lev. 2:13).

Ezra 7:23 Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done exactly for the house of the God of heaven; for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?- It would appear that about this time, the Persians had been driven out of Egypt, and their records describe it in these terms, as "wrath against the realm of the king". But after Ezra returned, Persia recovered Memphis.

So there was a lot of politics here, and the Persian empowerment of Ezra was from mixed motives. The Persians wanted to ensure the loyalty of Yehud as it bordered the breakaway region of Egypt. Egypt revolted against Persia in 460 BC and in 458 BC the Persians had sent an army to Egypt through Yehud, in order to pacify Egypt. Ezra was willing to go along with this in order to rebuild the temple and have power to teach God's law. This explains why any disobedience to his "law" were to be so severely punished. But that "law" was Persian civil law.

Ezra 7:24 Also we inform you, that concerning any of the priests and Levites, the singers, porters, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on them- The Persians didn't exclude their own priests from taxation, so this was all the more a wonderful kindness. But the lesson from it all is that God was providing absolutely everything for His work to go ahead. And to this day, lack of resources has never been a barrier for the progress of any project which God wills to happen. He will always provide, most generously.

Ezra 7:25 You, Ezra, after the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach him who doesn't know them- This was giving a huge amount of power to Ezra. We get the impression that there were Jews still scattered through the whole area west of the Euphrates. They had not returned to the land. Ezra was empowered to preach to them, and also to those who didn't know Yahweh. This was a huge commission; but there is no evidence Ezra fulfilled it.

Let's remember that the exiles were representative of us. They failed, and so these things in essence are reapplied to ourselves. We in this life are passing through "the time of our exile" (1 Pet. 1:17 RSV). They were commanded to spread the knowledge of Israel's God to all in the dominion of Babylon (Ezra 7:25 LXX), and thus they would have fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies about the spreading of the Gospel to all peoples. Yet we have a similar commission, and God will provide for us likewise, as He did for Ezra. But we have to learn the lesson of the exiles; for the exiles who returned became so caught up with their own lives that they again failed to be a light to the nations.

It is hard to understand whether the mission Ezra was given was to literally all people "Beyond the River", or just to teach Yahweh's laws to all those who were already under them, i.e. the Jews. It could be that the king was telling Ezra to bring

literally all people "Beyond the River" under Yahweh's laws, and under the civil laws of "the King" of Persia (:26). And Ezra decided this was a good deal. The apparent massive generosity from the Persian side was surely done with an agenda in mind- the cementing of their own colonial power. There is no evidence that Ezra's mission succeeded. Had it succeeded, the prophecies would have been fulfilled about the conversion of the surrounding nations in the land promised to Abraham, up to "the River". Ezra isn't mentioned again in Scripture apart from some years later in Nehemiah. "All" we read is that he returned, taught God's law, lamented how far the people were from it (Ezra 9) and made them divorce their Gentile wives, thus breaking up many families (Ezra 10). And that is all he's recorded as achieving. Isaiah's prophecies were that repentant Jews, marvelling at the grace of the new covenant, would be such an example of God's grace that the Gentiles would come with them to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh. Ezra instead maxes out on teaching them the old covenant, divorcing their Gentile wives, and pushing obedience to the Persian empire in return for being funded in his religious mission. No wonder he apparently got nowhere, and by Nehemiah's time, the temple and walls were broken down again and Jerusalem was depopulated. And yet Ezra's prayer of Ezra 9 reflects genuine spirituality and relationship with God. He admittedly ignored a large chunk of Bible teaching, Isaiah - Daniel, and the wonderful message of grace in the new covenant that was being offered. He was a legalist and very small minded in his spiritual worldview, and his ministry was ultimately not very fruitful. But still he had relationship with God. And this is how it is with very many such believers today. If God is willing to walk with and save such legalists, ignoring large chunks of His word, then it cuts the other way too- those who may be more liberal, at the other end of the spectrum, also ignoring large parts of God's revelation, may well still be in relationship with Him. It's not for us to judge, but simply to reflect upon the implications of Ezra.

Ezra 7:26 Whoever will not do the law of your God, and the law of the king, let judgement be executed on him with all diligence, whether it be to death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment- The law of God and that of the king are paralleled, just as the decree of the king was effectively the fulfilment of God's decree and commandment. But we see here the politics behind the Persians allowing Ezra to go to Palestine and teach God's law (see on :23). If he was to be the teacher, he was to teach the secular / civil law of the Persians even if he was allowed to teach the law of Moses as religious law. He was to set up teachers and judges according to Moses' religious law, and also Persian civil law. Rather like a 19th century missionary being funded by a Government to establish Christianity, and also to establish colonial political hegemony. And it seems he agreed to this deal. The ethical issues here are left open to our reflection! For obedience to Yahweh and His vision for Israel precluded, surely, obedience to Persian civil law. If indeed Ezra 7 comes right after the Esther story, we recall that Haman in Esther 3:8, claimed that the Jews followed their own religious laws and not the civic laws of the king. But now Ezra appears to be teaching both of them. Whereas God's people were to be governed exclusively by *His* law because they were *His* Kingdom. We see in Ezra's compromise the beginnings of the idea of separation between church and state, whereby man is supposed to live under God's law but also under the law of the state. Peter of course spells it out, that man can only be obedient to secular law in so far as it doesn't contradict the Lord's law. Quite possibly we are to assume Ezra taught the same; but all the same, for a theocratic nation, who stood on the brink of the

possibility of being re-established as God's Kingdom, it seems this was a compromise too far.

In reality, Ezra didn't put to death those disobedient to God's law. Thirteen years after his coming to Jerusalem, the people had again intermarried and were breaking the Sabbath (Neh. 8,10,13). His hard line "Obey or die" approach just didn't work. His hard line on 'marriage out of the faith' likewise didn't work; the people divorced their wives as he asked, and just did it all again. Ezra's approach is the classic evidence that hard core legalism just doesn't elicit long term transformation nor personal spirituality. In those 13 years, the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down- implying some sort of judgment from God. His "back to the Bible" message on his first arrival in Jerusalem had simply not brought forth much fruit. Indeed, the returned exiles had apparently turned further away from God. Hence his memoir finishes so otherwise strangely, with the lament that many of those he made divorce their Gentile wives had children by them. He had broken families in his initial zeal, but it achieved nothing spiritually. In fact quite the opposite. The situation in Nehemiah 8, when Ezra reads the law to the people, is very similar to that in the book of Ezra. The people had married Gentile wives and were asked to repent; and they seemed ignorant of God's law. Higher critics therefore argue that Nehemiah 8 has been misplaced and is really part of the Ezra story. But that requires viewing the book of Nehemiah as having its dates totally wrong, and the rest of the book loses coherence. I suggest rather that the close, intentional similarities are to show how Ezra's ministry was a failure. It achieved nothing. He came to Judah zealous to teach the Torah, when he should have been teaching the people Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, with the great possibilities of a new covenant. Instead he teaches the Torah, the old covenant which they had already broken, and makes them divorce their Gentile wives, leading to massive family breakup. And that's all he's recorded as doing. Over the next 13 years until Nehemiah's time, the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, Jerusalem was depopulated, and the people went even further away from God's law. Ezra was clearly sincere in his own way and displays much genuine spirituality, but his zeal and ideals were misplaced. He was the first "scribe". Despite their location in the Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are at the very end of the Hebrew Biblical history, around the time of Zechariah and Malachi. Ezra was the first scribe... and we know that his spiritual descendants crucified the Lord. He himself was not of that spirit, but his legalism spawned that. All Ezra is recorded as doing is returning to Jerusalem, forcing mass divorces of Jews married to Gentiles, breaking up families... and then 13 years later reading the Torah and doing the same again. That's all. No fruit in that. And human life is judged by the fruit we bore, when all is said and done. The lesson of Ezra has gone unheeded in so many churches, denominations and families. Especially those who have insisted that divorced and remarried couples must separate in order to have communion in the Lord's body.

Ezra 7:27 Blessed be Yahweh, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of Yahweh which is in Jerusalem- See on :2. Ezra was enabled to "beautify" the temple (Ezra 7:27), the very same word used in Is. 60:7,9,13 about how God would "glorify" [s.w.] His temple with merchandise from throughout the Babylonian empire- all of which was willingly offered by Cyrus and Darius. Is. 60:7 prophesied that God would "*glorify the house of my glory*". But this was in fact a conditional prophecy, capable of fulfilment through the freewill efforts of the returning exiles. For they were empowered by Artaxerxes "*to beautify* [s.w. "*glorify*"] the house of the Lord" (Ezra 7:27). All their efforts to glorify / beautify the

house, therefore, would have had God's special and powerful blessing behind them. But was the house ultimately glorified? No- for Israel would not. They got sidetracked by beautifying their own homes, building "cieled houses" for themselves (Hag. 1:4). The word for "cieled" occurs in 1 Kings 6:9; 7:3,7 to describe the roofing of the first temple- which they were to be rebuilding, rather than building their own houses. The glory would have entered the house of God's glory as it did at the inauguration of the first temple (2 Chron. 7:1-3). Ezekiel prophesied that ultimately the glory would fill the temple as it had done then (Ez. 43:4,5). But God's prophesy of this in Is. 60:7, that He would glorify His house, meant that He was prepared to work through men to glorify it. The fulfilment of Ezekiel's vision of the cloud of glory entering the temple again could have been fulfilled if the exiles had done what Artaxerxes empowered them to do- to glorify the house of glory. And so the fulfilment was delayed. The glory of the temple the exiles built was tragically less than the glory of the first temple; and so it would only be in the last day of Messiah's second coming that the house shall truly be filled with glory (Hag. 2:3,7,9). And the lesson ought to be clear for us, in the various projects and callings of our lives: it becomes crucial for us to discern God's specific purposes for us, and insofar as we follow His leading, we will feel a blessing and power which is clearly Divine.

Ezra 7:28 and has extended grace to me before the king, his counsellors and before all the king's mighty princes. I was strengthened according to the hand of Yahweh my God upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me- The extension of grace, or 'gift', was in terms of God working directly upon the king's heart (:27- see too Neh. 2:12; 7:5; 1 Kings 10:24). And this too is how God's grace can work today- the insertion of ideas into the human heart, intended to bring us to obedience to Him and the advancement of His glory. We note Ezra's repeated awareness of the hand of God upon him (Ezra 7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31); another way of saying that the Spirit was upon him. His contemporary Ezekiel had felt that hand even lifting him up and transporting him to and from Jerusalem from Babylon.

EZRA CHAPTER 8

Ezra 8:1 Now these are the heads of their fathers' households, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king- Those who truly waited upon Yahweh would renew their strength; they would "mount up as eagles" (Isaiah 40:31), the s.w. used throughout Ezra and Nehemiah for the 'going up' ["went up with me"] to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3,5,11; 2:1,59; 7:6,7,28; 8:1; Neh. 7:5,6,61; 12:1). The idea of mounting up with wings as eagles also connects with Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim, mounting up from the captives by the rivers of Babylon, and returning to the land. But the reality was as in Neh. 4:10: "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall". Examination of the context shows that they had just had plenty of strength; they lost physical stamina because of their spiritual weakness.

The "genealogy" is strictly "those enrolled by genealogy". This is parallel to Moses doing this before the people began their wilderness journey to the land: "They registered themselves in their clans, by their ancestral houses" (Num. 1:18). The list of returnees in :3-14 follows the style of Num. 1, "from the clan of A, B ben C, and with him D males". I have discussed the parallels between Ezra and Moses on Ezra

7:14. Faced with the task of making an exodus from Babylon to Zion carrying precious materials for the sanctuary, Ezra is rightly careful to model himself upon a Biblical precedent. Just as we should be. Possibly the three days waiting by the Ahava (:15) was to recall the three days of preparation by Sinai (Ex. 19:10-12). See on :15. And yet he was majoring on the minors, forgetting the entire thrust of Isaiah-Daniel about the new covenant. But he was stressing the genealogies because of his misplaced idea that the Jews who had returned from exile were the true Israel, the "holy seed", and anyone who couldn't prove their genealogy was at best second class or not of "Israel". And this led to the division between Jews and Samaritans, which the Lord Jesus definitely didn't approve of.

Ezra 8:2 Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush- We wonder of course why these priests hadn't returned with Zerubbabel. We noted on Ezra 2 that there were so few priests who returned then. It would appear that Ezra had been a good scribe or teacher / proclaimer of the law, and now more priests were willing to return. We also note that the names used here have more reference in them to the name of Yahweh, either as suffix or prefix. It's amazing what one man can do in reviving a community, and Ezra seems to have been an example. But whilst this return of the Aaronic priests may seem commendable, it was a tacit act of disobedience to the commandment that only the Zadokites should serve in the new temple (Ez. 43:19; 45:15). And thereby the possibility of the Kingdom being reestablished as planned was precluded. It seems Ezra had not paid attention to the prophecies of the restoration and was fixated upon obedience to the letter of the old covenant, which was now intended to be obsolete.

Ezra 8:3 Of the sons of Shecaniah, of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah; and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males one hundred and fifty- According to 1 Chron. 3:22, we should read this as meaning "Hattush the son of Shecaniah". This would make him the great-great-grandson of Zerubbabel.

Ezra 8:4 Of the sons of Pahathmoab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerariah; and with him two hundred males- The family of Pahathmoab also features in those who returned under Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:6) and were later noted for their work in rebuilding the walls (Neh. 3:11). And yet the founder of this family apparently had Gentile connections- "the pit of Moab". It is tempting to see a connection with the incident in 1 Chron. 11:22, when one of David's mighty men slew two lionlike men of Moab along with a lion- in a pit. Perhaps this was name arose from a desire to imitate that great act of faith.

Ezra 8:5 Of the sons of Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel; and with him three hundred males- LXX "Of the sons of Zattu, Shechaniah, the son of Jahaziel"; this may be the Zattu of Ezra 2:8.

Ezra 8:6 Of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan; and with him fifty males- The numbers are embarrassingly small, given the presence of around 1 million Jews in the empire (see on Ezra 1:1); and therefore the uninspired, apocryphal record tends to always exaggerate the numbers. In this case, 50 is exaggerated to 250 in 1 Esdras.

Ezra 8:7 Of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah; and with him seventy

males- Athaliah may be a female name. This unusual mention of a woman in the genealogies could be because she had a particular spiritual influence upon her family.

Ezra 8:8 Of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael; and with him eighty males- Shephatiah was also a family who had partially returned under Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:4). Out of the 1 million or so Jews in Babylon (see on Ezra 1:1), it seems that the interest in the things of the restored Kingdom was confined to only a few families; for instead of as it were fresh blood being converted to the cause by Ezra, those he persuaded to accompany him were largely from families who had already partially returned to the land.

Ezra 8:9 Of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel; and with him two hundred and eighteen males- This is the Joab of Ezra 2:6, some of whose family members had already returned under Zerubbabel. As noted on :8, those who returned with Ezra were generally not 'fresh blood' but relatives of those already in Judah; their motives may therefore have been mixed, between a desire for family reunification and yet also a wish to serve God in response to His word.

Ezra 8:10 Of the sons of Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah; and with him one hundred and sixty male- LXX "Of the sons of Bani, Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah." Bani appears as the head of a family in Ezra 2:10. See on :8.

Ezra 8:11 Of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai; and with him twenty-eight males- Again, this was a family which had already partially emigrated to Judah (Ezra 2:11); see on :8,9.

Ezra 8:12 Of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan; and with him one hundred and ten males- Again, this was a family which had already partially emigrated to Judah (Ezra 2:12); see on :8,9.

Ezra 8:13 Of the sons of Adonikam, who were the last; and these are their names: Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah; and with them sixty males- "The last" may refer to how the other family members had returned with Zerubbabel at the 'first' return.

Ezra 8:14 Of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud; and with them seventy males- The total comes to 1496 males; even if we multiply this several times over to get the total number of Jews who returned with Ezra, the number still isn't that great. The response to the call to flee Babylon and reestablish God's Kingdom in Israel was still pathetically small, considering there were around 1 million Jews in the Babylonian empire (see on Ezra 1:1).

Ezra 8:15 I gathered them together to the river that runs to Ahava; and there we encamped three days: and I viewed the people and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi-

Ezra gathering the people and then leading them to Zion along the riverside route to Judah could be seen as him consciously trying to fulfil the restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:10 "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd does his flock". His confidence that God will be with them on the journey by the rivers of waters (Ezra 8:15,22,31) was perhaps because of his sense that he was fulfilling Jer. 31. And yet the new covenant offered in Jer. 31 and the salvation through Messiah all

means that in the end, Ezra's return failed to fulfil the prophecy. It was deferred and reinterpreted in the Lord Jesus. For Jer. 31:18,19 required repentance and acceptance of the new covenant, and the exiles are never recorded as being generally repentant. Ezra tried to do it for them in his prayer of Ezra 9 but those who 'returned' were all intended to have 'returned' to God individually. This explains Ezra's deep sadness at the revelation of sin and intermarriage within the community who returned. They were precluding the fulfilment of Jer. 31 and other restoration prophecies. And Ezra precluded the fulfilment of Jer. 31 by insisting on teaching the old covenant, and rejecting the new covenant. Likewise Is. 59:9-11 laments that the peoples' sin resulted in darkness rather than the light that could potentially have come for Zion.

It is clear from :29-31 that there were Levites already in Jerusalem, to whom the gold, silver and temple vessels were delivered. They had presumably returned under Zerubbabel. But we can assume that many more were needed. Possibly Ezra was so committed to emulating the exodus from Egypt with the materials for the tabernacle that he wanted there to be Levites forming a barrier as it were between God's holy things and the ordinary Israelites, just as there had been on the wilderness journey. See on :1. However, again we see Ezra resigning from the ideal (as discussed on Ezra 7:26). For in the restored temple, the Levites were not to come near the holy things. That was the work of the sons of Zadok: "They are not to serve me as priests or to go near anything that is holy to me or to enter the Most Holy Place. This is the punishment for the disgusting things they have done. I am assigning to them the menial work that is to be done in the Temple" (Ez. 44:13,14 GNB). Ezra came to teach Torah, but he should've been teaching Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel- the things of the new covenant. Not the old covenant.

Ezra 2:42 records a very small number for the families of the gate keepers. The number of ordinary Levites compared to priests is very low in Ezra 2 (4289 priests, and 341 priestly workers and 74 Levites). There were far more Levites than there were priests, but it seems the Levites didn't want to return and do the dirty work; everyone wanted to be religious leaders. Hence Ezra's problem in finding Levites to return (Ezra 8:15). We can note that it was this tension between Levites and priests which resulted in Korah's rebellion (Num. 16:1-10). See on :24.

Ezra 8:16 Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Elnathan, who were teachers- The Hebrew confusion of understanding and teaching is brought out by comparing the AV and RV of Ezra 8:16: "Men of understanding" (AV), "which were teachers" (RV). To have true understanding is axiomatically to teach it. We can't hold it passively within ourselves.

Ezra 8:17 I sent them forth to Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia; and I told them what they should tell Iddo, and his brothers the Nethinim, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring to us ministers for the house of our God- The LXX implies Ezra was so desperate that he used a financial incentive to get some Levites to respond: "And I forwarded them to the rulers with the money of the place, and I put words in their mouth to speak to their brethren the Athinim with the money of the place". But for all that, only 38 Levite men responded (:18,19).

Ezra 8:18 According to the good hand of our God on us they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brothers, eighteen- Those who returned did so because of God's hand

upon them; even if only 18 Levites and then 20 (:19) responded, this was the result of God's hand working as it were at the very last minute. And yet according to the LXX of :17 (see note there), their motives must have been very mixed; they had not intended to return, and were only persuaded by a last minute offer of money.

Ezra 8:19 and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty- The numbers of Levites are again pathetically small. Far more priests than Levites wanted to return. The idea of doing humble service wasn't attractive; see on :15,24. And so it has always been; to find real 'workers' for the Kingdom has always been difficult. And yet no matter how small the numbers, God works through them.

Ezra 8:20 and of the Nethinim, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinim: all of them were mentioned by name- The Nethinim were grouped beneath the Levites but above "the servants of Solomon" (Ezra 2:43,55). "Nethinim" is literally 'those who are given' and many presume they were originally the Gibeonites, who were 'given' by Joshua to the Levites to do their more menial work (Josh. 9:3-27). Whenever Gentiles were captured in war, some of them would have been devoted to Yahweh in that they were given to His service through joining the Nethinim (Num. 31:28). Thus here in Ezra 8:20 we find mention of some "whom David and the princes had *given* for the service of the Levites".

Ezra 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a straight way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance- Jer. 31:9 had prophesied of the restoration: "They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble". A straight way back to Zion had been prepared potentially for them to walk in (Is. 40:3). Likewise Is. 63:13 reminded the returnees that when they had been led through the wilderness to Canaan under Moses, they did not stumble [s.w.]. But both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to have a Babylonian military escort on the journey back; they weren't sure that they would be given "a straight way" with Yahweh's protection. Neh. 4:10 records that "Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is *decayed* [s.w. "stumble", Jer. 31:9], and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall". They were easily discouraged by the words of the surrounding world, by the apparent hopelessness of their task; and thus they stumbled. Ezra 8:21 describes how Ezra fasted for them to be given a "straight way", as Jeremiah had foretold they could have. He saw the need for them to make the effort to fulfill the prophecy. Note how Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim featured "straight" progress; the wheels on earth surely connect with how Israel should have been, moving in a straight way back to the land, in harmony with the Angel-cherubim above them likewise moving in a straight way. But they failed to "keep in step with the Spirit"... They were to walk "each one straight before him" (Is. 57:2 RVmg.), as each of the cherubim went straight ahead (Ez. 1:12). Ps. 107:2,7 RV speak of Israel being gathered out of the nations and being led in a "straight way" to Zion ["He led them also by a straight way"], as they had [potentially] been enabled to do on their departure from Egypt. Yet then they spent 38 years walking a distance coverable in just 11 days- because they did not walk in the "straight way".

The return of the exiles led by Ezra made the journey by a "right way" from Babylon to Zion (Ezra 8:21). Yet this is the very word used about the "straight" feet of the Cherubim Angels in Ez. 1:7,23. The return from Babylon involved following in the path of the Angels, walking in step with them. The restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:9 spoke of how the returnees would walk "in a straight way" (s.w.) "by the rivers of waters"- and surely Ezra consciously alluded to this when by the river Ahava he fasted for the exiles to return in a "right / straight way". He knew that these prophecies of restoration would not just automatically come true- they had to be fulfilled by much prayer, fasting and stepping out in faith. But so very few perceived that. And the challenge remains for us today- to walk in the way which God's Angels have potentially prepared for us, with prayer and boldness. I feel this is especially true in the matter of latter day witnessing. See on Is. 52:8.

Ezra 8:22 For I was ashamed to ask of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way, because we had spoken to the king saying, The hand of our God is on all those who seek Him for good; but His power and His wrath is against all those who forsake Him-

The prophecies of the restoration had spoken specifically of God's protection for those returning from Babylon with the temple vessels: "Depart, go out from there, touch no unclean thing! Go out of the midst of her! Cleanse yourselves, you who bear the temple vessels of Yahweh. For you shall not go out in haste, neither shall you go by flight: for Yahweh will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your vanguard" (Is. 52:11,12). A way was to be prepared through the desert by God Himself (Is. 40:3). "With petitions will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by rivers of waters, in a straight way in which they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel" (Jer 31:9). It is one thing to read comforting words in Scripture; quite another in reality to practice them. And Ezra surely is to be commended for taking God at His word. But Ezra was "ashamed to ask" for human help, and again we are drawn into his internal struggles. It is the same word used in Ezra 9:6 for his being "ashamed" before God on account of the peoples' sins. He knew he was supposed to trust in Divine help. But his 'shame' in asking for human help rather suggests he wanted to ask for human help, but was ashamed to, because he was supposed to trust in God's help. Again we recall that this book is his memoir, looking back on life, the surrounding history that went on... and pondering his motives. Reflecting as he does so often that it was the higher hand of God that had been upon him for good. All of grace. We may externally do the thing of faith, in generosity, forgiveness, theological debate, evangelistic work, attending church meetings... but that may conceal mixed motives. It is self-examination before the cross of Christ which illuminates our motives.

And yet Ezra is also, in another part of his brain, firmly rooted in God's word. He had taught that "the hand of our God is on all those who seek Him for good". And he uses the same word as in Dt. 4:29 concerning a repentant Israel returning to their God from exile: "But from there you shall *seek* Yahweh your God and you will find Him, when you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul". He figured that if they were acting in repentance and returning to their God in Zion, then surely His hand would protect them. Just as all expressions of repentance will somehow have God's protecting hand, always enabling it to happen. We think of the person with a phobia of water, being somehow empowered to get baptized as a token of their repentance. Ezra was sure that God's wrath would only be upon those who "forsake" Him. But he himself later lamented that Judah had "forsaken" their God ("We have

forsaken Your commandments", Ezra 9:10, and the word is likewise used in Neh. 13:11 for how the exiles had "forsaken" the house of their God). Yahweh forsakes those who forsake Him (2 Chron. 24:20). Possibly this was the cause of his dilemma- he knew that the exiles didn't need protection if they had not forsaken their God. But there was likely plenty of evidence that many of them still had forsaken their God. Ezra had not, so possibly they were not attacked on the way because of his faithfulness.

Josephus claims that the treasure annually remitted to Jerusalem from Babylon in Roman times was escorted by an army of 20,000 men. So to travel without any soldiers for defence was a truly brave and faithful undertaking. Indeed, Ezra seems to reason that to accept such human strength would be to "forsake Him". To not trust in God, to hedge our bets, as it were, is portrayed here as forsaking Him.

Ezra was ashamed to ask for *help* against Judah's enemies, the implication being that he wanted that human help but was ashamed to ask for it from the King. He had initially believed those words of Isaiah, but found it hard to maintain that level of faith. But they should have had faith in the restoration prophecy's promise: "Fear not ... I will *help* you" (Is. 41:10). Yahweh had promised support for them if they returned to the land; He would preserve them on the way. Consider Is. 50:10: "Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice [s.w. Ezra 1:1 re the proclamation of Cyrus] of his servant [i.e. Cyrus, Is. 45:1], that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God". Yet Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers to guard them on the journey only because he had earlier told the king that Yahweh would be with them (Ezra 8:22), as if he really did want the support but was ashamed to ask for it. He disallowed Isaiah's prophesy that the restored Israel would never be ashamed [s.w. Ezra 8:22; 9:6] nor confounded (Is. 45:17; 49:23; 54:4). Nehemiah accepted such support when he came up from Babylon (Neh. 2:9).

Ezra 8:23 So we fasted and begged our God for this: and He was entreated of us- This is Ezra writing up the incident after having reached Judah safely. "For this" may refer to the fact that as discussed on :22, they had forsaken their God and so had no right to presume upon His protection. So Ezra the legalist is forced by circumstance to throw himself upon God's grace. Just as so many have experienced. "He was intreated" is the phrase used of God responding to the prayers of repentant sinners in 2 Sam. 21:14; 24:25; 2 Chron. 33:13.

Ezra 8:24 Then I set apart twelve of the chiefs of the priests, even Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brothers with them-

But Sherebiah and Hashabiah were Levites (:19). The priests are elsewhere repeatedly distinguished from the Levites in the phrase "the priests and the Levites" e.g. in :33. As elsewhere (see on :28), Ezra the legalist seems forced by circumstance to not be strictly obedient to God's law. This was all part of God's attempt to bring him to grace. Just as He does with so many.

LXX "And I assigned of the chiefs of the priests twelve unto Sherebiah". This would place the priests in a subordinate position to the Levites. Perhaps this was intentional, because Ezra had been disturbed at the lack of Levites amongst them, as likewise was the case in Ezra 2. There were many who wanted the glory of priesthood, but very few prepared to do the humble work of service. And he therefore exalts those humble workers. See on :15.

Ezra 8:25 and weighed to them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering for the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his princes, and all Israel there present, had offered- As discussed on :35, Ezra considers the present, returned exiles as the one true "all Israel", refusing to accept the Jews who had remained in the land as the true Israel. The idea was that the exiles would be purged in captivity. But they weren't, and God returned them by grace alone, even though they had not repented. "There present" is literally "that were found", as if out of the huge Jewish population in Babylon, these were the only ones found present. Ez. 40:42 speaks of the vessels to be used in the temple [AV "instruments"] with the same word used for the temple vessels which were brought up out of Babylon back to Judah, in fulfilment of several of Isaiah's 'Kingdom' passages (Ezra 1:6-11; 8:25-33 cp. Is. 52:11; 66:20). The restoration of the kingdom could potentially have happened at the time of Ezra. But Ezra didn't take this potential forward, for he neglected the commands in Ezekiel to only use Zadokite priests, and he was obsessed with keeping the law of Moses, the old covenant, rather than accepting the new covenant and the new, non-Mosaic worship system of Ez. 40-48.

Ezra 8:26 I weighed into their hand six hundred fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels one hundred talents; of gold one hundred talents- The total value of all this is huge. I don't believe the figures are exaggerated; it is simply so psychologically credible and true to experience that when a majority refuse to respond to God's call as required, they are eager to donate wealth, as if to as it were buy themselves out of their personal responsibilities.

Ezra 8:27 and twenty bowls of gold, of one thousand darics; and two vessels of fine bright brass, precious as gold- The total value of all this would probably have worked out at something like 130 million British pounds as of 2018. To carry all this in cash without military escort, and to arrive with it all safely after a four month journey through Bedouin and robber infested territory, was an amazing miracle.

Ezra 8:28 I said to them, You are holy to Yahweh, and the vessels are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to Yahweh, the God of your fathers-

"You are holy to Yahweh" is declaring those priests holy and able to handle the holy vessels. But in the restored temple, the Levites were not to come near the holy things- only the sons of Zadok could. Ez. 44:13,14 was clear on this (see on :15). Did Ezra have some Divine mandate to now declare them holy and able to deal with the holy vessels? There is no evidence he did. It is not recorded. We wonder whether he was driven by a lack of alternatives to just do the best he could in the situation. But we would rather read of some attempt to find the required "Sons of Zadok" and some apology for being unable to follow Ez. 44:13,14. Again and again, Ezra invites us to ponder his motives, and the degree to which we can break one Divine principle in order to attempt to keep another. This in fact is the spirit in which the book ends, with the otherwise strange comment after Ezra had made the Jews divorce their Gentile wives: "some of them had wives by whom they had children" (Ezra 10:44). Ezra is looking back and reflecting on the long term impact of his decisions. For there was no Mosaic command to separate from Gentile wives. We could say that what he did haunted him, even though there were strands of sincerity in his motivation. Just as those who disfellowship individuals from churches in their zeal for "God's truth" end

up wrecking families... and at the end of their days must look back and wonder about what they did...

Ezra perceived a parallel between the vessels and those who carried them. Paul uses this same idea, describing all believers as a vessel made holy to the Lord (1 Thess. 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:21). Perhaps his allusion recognizes that the situation at the restoration didn't come about as was prophetically possible, and has now been reinterpreted with reference to God's new people and their spiritual work in the spiritual house of God today.

Ezra 8:29 Guard and keep them, until you weigh them before the chiefs of the priests and the Levites, and the princes of the fathers' households of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the rooms of the house of Yahweh- "Guard" is Heb. 'keep awake'. To remain awake and keep that committed unto us is very much New Testament language (e.g. 1 Tim. 6:20; Rev. 16:15) for our keeping of that which is committed to our trust until we arrive at Zion, the future Kingdom of God, when there will be the day of judgment, cp. the weighing of the vessels to ensure those carrying them had preserved them. Again, these allusions recognize that the situation at the restoration didn't come about as was prophetically possible, and has now been reinterpreted with reference to God's new people and their spiritual work in the spiritual house of God today.

Ezra 8:30 So the priests and the Levites received the weight of the silver and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God- We note how the priests and Levites were given equal responsibility in transporting this vast wealth. Ezra had been disturbed at the lack of Levites amongst them, as likewise was the case in Ezra 2. There were many who wanted the glory of priesthood, but very few prepared to do the humble work of service. And he therefore exalts those humble workers. See on :15,24,33.

Ezra 8:31 Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the bandit by the way- This was no small miracle, carrying such a huge amount of wealth in cash with no military escort. See on :32. The text implies there were indeed enemies and bandits by the way, but the hand of God was greater than "the hand of the enemy". This was to encourage them upon settling in Judah that the hand of their enemies would never be greater than God's hand- if they allowed Him to act and humbled themselves beneath that hand.

Passover was to be kept on the 14th day of the first month, with the feast of unleavened bread for some days afterwards. Ezra is noted as a student and teacher of the Torah, with a self proclaimed mission of bringing the Jews back to God's law. But apparently he skips keeping the Passover. He could have argued that he was leading a second exodus, and indeed he was (see on Ezra 7:14). But even so... with such careful attention to imitating the exodus (see on Ezra 8:1), he appears to have omitted the most obvious: To keep Passover as requested. He is recorded as offering thanksgiving offerings on arrival in Jerusalem, even though there was no feast of Yahweh at that time. But he couldn't offer the Passover sacrifice? Nor make use of the command to keep the Passover in the second month if he was travelling (Num. 9:9-13). But it is too much like coincidence that Ezra consciously sought to emulate the exodus. Surely he planned to leave Babylon on the same date as Israel left Egypt. So he was surely aware of the need to keep Passover; but he didn't. Quite possibly because he didn't want to "waste" seven days keeping the related feast of unleavened bread, he

impatiently wanted to start the journey. And now in his memoir he is looking back on that choice and drawing us in to his internal reflections... For we too can zealously strive to be so Biblical, but miss the essential points. So often our much vaunted Biblicism is revealed as lacking and empty when it comes to the critical issues of the Christian life. Contra all this, we could consider that his decision was based upon Dt. 16:5,6: "You may not sacrifice the Passover within any of your gates which Yahweh your God gives you, but at the place which Yahweh your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell in, there you must sacrifice the Passover at evening, at the going down of the sun, at the time that you came forth out of Egypt". But surely the spirit was important, not the place. Thus "They kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho" (Josh. 5:10); and Passover was celebrated in the Desert of Sinai in the second year after leaving Egypt. Like all of us, Ezra was negotiating between various principles, precedents and scriptures... and musing about having done so in his Divinely inspired memoir. However we note from Neh. 8:14-17 that about 13 years after Ezra had come to Jerusalem to teach the law, the people only then understood they were intended to keep the feast of Tabernacles: "They found written in the law, how that Yahweh had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month... So the people went out, and brought them, and made themselves booths... for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day the children of Israel had not done so". Ezra had not exactly been very effective in teaching the law of God about the feasts during those 13 years [unless we take Neh. 8 as being misplaced and referring to Ezra's return].

Ezra 8:32 We came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days- This was the result of God's "hand" upon them (:31). When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (Neh. 1:10). he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come to Zion and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7).

Perhaps they remained stationary for three days to praise and thank God; for they had likewise begun their journey with three days of fasting and prayer (:15). So often we forget to thank God with the same intensity with which we asked Him for help. It was this three days of praise which may have inspired Nehemiah to do likewise on arrival in Jerusalem (Neh. 2:11). The Godly examples and prayer patterns of others really should affect us, and our examples likewise influence others.

Ezra 8:33 On the fourth day the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them was Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, the Levite- Transparency is clearly the order of the day- for I have suggested that there was over 130 million British pounds [2018] worth of gold and silver being dealt with. We note that the money was counted by two priests and two Levites. Again we see the Levites paralleled with the priests. This was a particular theme with Ezra; see on :15,24,31.

Ezra 8:34 Everything was counted and weighed: and all the weight was written at

that time- I suggested above that the total value of all this would probably have worked out at something like 130 million British pounds as of 2018. To carry all this in cash without military escort, and to arrive with it all safely after a four month journey through Bedouin and robber infested territory, was an amazing miracle. It would have made the temple storerooms a place of great value.

Ezra 8:35 The children of the captivity, who had come out of exile, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs and twelve male goats for a sin offering: all this was a burnt offering to Yahweh- The exiles who returned are presented as "all Israel". "Israel" is used by Ezra to refer to the exiles (Ezra 8:25). It could be argued that Ezra was seeking to redefine "Israel" as the exiles who had returned. The ten tribes and the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile, he considers as not Israel. It is mythical to think that the land was emptied of all Jews at the time of the exile. Archeological and Biblical evidence is quite the opposite. Archaeological evidence is that there were around 350,000 Jews in the land before the exile, and 200,000 remained, although all outside Jerusalem. Persian records speak of the province of Yehud [Judah] as having a significant Jewish population especially in the towns not destroyed by the Babylonian invasions. The Biblical numbers of exiles don't come to more than 20,000. We recall in Ezra 4:1-4 that the exiles insisted that they alone would rebuild the temple, and refused assistance from anyone else. There is no record of them mixing with the existing Jewish community in the land. That existing Jewish community became known as the Samaritans- whom the Lord clearly had a lot of time for. So Ezra's zeal had an undercurrent of exclusiveness and divisiveness, mistakenly reasoning that ethnic purity was critical for definition as "Israel". Even though the returned exiles were not ethnically pure anyway. Or we could reason that his thinking was that the twelve goats implied that Israel and Judah were to be united as one at this time. This was the potential implicit in the restoration prophecies. See on Ezra 6:17. Despite all the great offering of such huge wealth, they offered sin offerings, ever aware that donation of wealth alone cannot reconcile us to God. And Ezra clearly had in mind that the community had not repented as they had been intended to. Many had returned to their land but not to their God. The way these sacrifices match those offered by Zerubbabel's group (Ezra 6:17) may have hinted that they had not devoted themselves to the work as they ought to have done.

Ezra 8:36 They delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps, and to the governors beyond the River: and they furthered the people and God's house-

Here we have the strongest hint that the Persian support for Ezra was done for political reasons. Ezra's mission was indeed to further God's people and His temple, but the deal was that he reinforced Persian power and civil law in their empire. Clearly, Yehud [Judah] was to remain under strong Persian control, and Ezra went along with that. We note that Nehemiah after him was likewise the Persian appointed colonial governor of Yehud. In his memoir known as the book of Ezra, Ezra is asking us to join him in pondering whether he had been right to accept material help from Persia in order to teach God's law to the people in Judah, whilst at the same time reinforcing Persian control over Judah. Haggai a generation earlier had rebuked Zerubbabel: "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, 'I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations. I will overthrow the chariots, and those who ride in them. The horses and their riders will come down, everyone by the sword of

his brother" (Hag. 2:21,22). I take this as a rebuke, because Zerubbabel was being told that Yahweh would bring down the Persian empire, whose puppet and "governor" he was. The focus of God's people should have been upon the total freedom and glory of Zion, inhabited by the returned exiles, as spoken of in Isaiah.

This support of the temple and kingdom work by leaders of the Gentiles was a small fulfilment of the restoration prophecies about this. But those prophecies featured the full reestablishment of God's Kingdom, with these leaders themselves becoming proselytes and carrying the Jews back to their land. They were to lift up the people (s.w. "furthered") and bring them back (Is. 49:22). This just didn't happen, because the Jews and Gentiles were not repentant, and Ezra in any case was seeking to only reestablish the old covenant and had little interest in accepting the new covenant, or obeying the laws of the temple system as given in Ez. 40-48.

EZRA CHAPTER 9

Ezra 9:1 Now when these things were done- There is an intended anticlimax here, a juxtaposition of God's amazing grace to the exiles in Ezra 8 now contrasted with their fall into sin. The same thing happens at Acts 5:1, and often in the Biblical record. The "things" may refer to Ezra 8:36, where Ezra has to deliver Persian civil law to the local satraps. I have discussed earlier how this was part of the deal Ezra cut with the emperor- to be supported in teaching Jewish religious law to the Jews, whilst enforcing Persian civil law. He came to Jerusalem on the 4th day of the fifth month (Ezra 7:8; 8:33); but called an assembly of the Jews on the 20th day of the ninth month (Ezra 10:9). We note that he gave priority to establishing Persian civil law before moving on to teach God's law. And the first thing he did was to attack the issue of Jewish intermarriage; it's as if he had an agenda and this was at the top of it.

The princes drew near to me saying, The people of Israel, and the priests and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands and are following their abominations, even those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites-

The majority of Ezra's memoir is in Ezra 9,10 and concerns how he dealt with intermarriage. I think he was haunted by it. The most significant thing he did was to break up 112 families, and he realizes he was likely wrong to have done it. And the problem reappeared 13 years later in Nehemiah's time- so he achieved nothing. The drawing near of the princes was surely not to inform Ezra of something of which he wasn't aware. Rather it was to pressure Ezra. For Ezra surely knew of the intermarriages- if he was indeed teaching the torah to the Jews, he must have realized that some of them were married to "foreign women". Therefore his casting of himself down in shock horror surely has an element of the theatrical to it. He will record in Ezra 10 how it was Shecaniah who suggested the idea of divorce- and again, Ezra goes along with him. Likewise here, it seems his response is due to the pressure from "the princes", rather than from his own conscience.

See on :14; Ezra 6:21. Ez. 42:20 commands for the restored Kingdom: "He measured it by the four sides: it had a wall round about, five hundred reeds long, and five hundred broad, to make a *separation* between the sanctuary and the profane place". This reflected the difference between God's people, His "sanctuary" (Ps. 114:2), and the surrounding world. But Judah did not 'separate' themselves from the surrounding tribes but instead married them and worshipped their idols (s.w. Ezra 9:1

“The people of Israel... have not separated themselves from the people of the land, doing according to their *abominations*... for they have taken of their daughters for themselves”). The same word for “abominations” occurs in the same context in Mal. 2:11: “Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god”. Yet it had been emphasized that the temple system Ezekiel described was to be free of all the “abominations” [s.w.] previously committed by Israel (Ez. 43:8; 44:6,7,13).

The “people of the land” [“lands” is not a helpful rendering] are not the same as the Canaanites, etc. They are accused of doing “like” what those people did. Many of those nations listed didn't exist in Ezra's time. In Ezra 9:1, the people of the land were doing the abominations of the original inhabitants of the land- that's the point. The term “people[s] of the land”, *am ha'eret*, is used of the large community of Jews who had remained in the land after the exile (s.w. “none remained, except the poorest sort of the people of the land”, 2 Kings 24:14; “the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to work the vineyards and fields”, 2 Kings 25:12). They were “the people that remained in the land” over whom Gedaliah was made ruler (2 Kings 25:22). “The people of the land” is a term specifically used of Judah (2 Chron. 23:13,20,21; 26:21;33:25; 36:1). Only a few chapters after those usages, we find “the people of the land” opposing the Judean exiles in rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4:4), although they were worshipping the same God of Israel since the king of Assyria had brought them “up” to live in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:2). We note that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were bound up with Chronicles in the original scrolls; and there are so many similarities of language and style between Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah that it would seem they are from the same author (possibly Ezra). So the term “people of the land” is likely to have the same meaning in Ezra as it does in Chronicles- where it means “the people of Judah living in their land”. Admittedly, the term “peoples of the land” can elsewhere refer to the tribes who lived in Israel before the Hebrews arrived- as well as the Jews who lived in the land. But the context surely requires us to read it in the latter sense. Modern ultra Orthodox Jews use the Ezra 9,10 precedent to argue against marriage to other Jews who aren't also ultra Orthodox.

Ezra was trying to resolve this problem by redefining God's people to exclude those Jews who had remained in the land. His concern was because the Jewish exiles who had returned under Zerubbabel had married the Jews who were already in the land. And so he creates a situation whereby if they didn't separate themselves from the peoples of the land, then they would be separated from the congregation of God's people (:8 s.w.). It is of course so that we cannot be both with the world and with God. But Ezra is legalistically playing with definitions, and trying to label the spiritually second class people of God as in fact not being His people at all. Indeed God had separated His people from the other peoples (1 Kings 8:53; Lev. 20:24), but they had to make the freewill choice to separate themselves (Ezra 10:11). If they did, then God was working with them to separate them from the world and unto Himself. By not doing so, they were precluding His help and denying fellowship with Him. But Ezra is making a fundamental error in defining who is “in” and “out” of God's people. And ignoring the huge sins and impurity of the Jews whilst in exile, as documented by Ezekiel and Isaiah.

A case can be made that “the peoples of the lands” refers to the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile, and had assimilated with the practices of the Gentiles living there. This group later became the Samaritans. There was tension between those who had returned from exile, and those Jews who had remained in the

land at the time of the exile. Those who remained had been given "fields and vineyards" by the Babylonians, and those properties had belonged to the wealthy who had gone into exile. Surely at their return, the exiles were interested in getting back their ancestral lands- which had been given to the poor Jews who remained in the land (Jer. 39:10). Ezra is now effectively driving them out from the community of what he thought was the true Israel. He threatens them with huge punishments if they didn't divorce their wives; "all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the assembly " (Ezra 10:8). This was effectively railroading them into conformity, and dividing the community. In this case, Ezra was arguing for a hyper strict interpretation of God's law, far beyond what Moses had actually taught. Moses himself had married a Gentile then divorced and remarried another Gentile. Israelite soldiers could marry Gentile virgins they captured. There was no Mosaic consequence for marriage to a Gentile, nor do we see it ever punished in this way. Ezra in this case considered that there was a true, pure Israel and a corrupted Israel. The truth is that the returned exiles were not very pure at all. In Ezekiel 16, Ezekiel had rebuked the exiles in Babylon for being themselves impure and acting like their Gentile ancestors: "Thus says the Lord Yahweh to Jerusalem: Your birthplace is in the land of the Canaanite; the Amorite was your father, and your mother was a Hittite" (Ez. 16:3). The exiles were spiritually Canaanite, so their demand that the other Jews divorce their "Canaanite" wives was hypocritical. And the hypocrisy is crowned by the fact that 13 years later, Neh. 9:2 records how again the Jews had intermarried with local Gentiles: "The seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers". They lament that their fathers had sinned in this way too. Isaiah laments the deep hypocrisy amongst the exiles, casting out their brethren and refusing to worship with them because they were impure: "Your brothers who hate you, who cast you out for My name's sake... who say, 'Stand by yourself, don't come near to me, for I am holier than you'" (Is. 66:5; 65:5). In that context, God had said that He dwelt in the hearts of those who trembled at His word (Is. 66:2), and that term is only used about those who trembled at God's word and divorced their wives (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). They didn't need to do this. They should have repented of their marriages, quit idolatry, and taught their wives and children Yahweh's way. But they were given false guilt by Ezra, and accepted it. But their trembling at the principles of God's word was such that God decided to dwell in them, not in the rebuilt temple. He so respected their humility, even though they had been spiritually abused by Ezra, and were pawns in the game of church politics- i.e. Ezra's desire to build a 'pure Israel' and excommunicate the rest. The tensions between the returned exiles, and the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile. So it is with the church of today. It is the spiritually abused little ones who are the ones God dwells in. Whilst according to Isaiah, the elders who abuse them have only condemnation to look forward to. We think of the widow who gave her last pennies to a corrupt priesthood in the Lord's time, and those today who are spiritually abused into giving their homes to corrupt church leaderships.

We note that Nehemiah thought that divorcing a Gentile wife meant being cleansed from foreigners (Neh. 13:30 "Thus I cleansed them from all foreigners", a comment made with no reference as to whether they were idolaters or not). This implies he thought interracial marriage was a defilement of itself. He considered that the Levites and priests who had done this had thus defiled the priesthood. But the law of Moses doesn't actually stipulate what should happen to a Levite who married a Gentile. All we know is that priests were prohibited from marrying prostitutes or divorced women (Lev. 21:7). In the restored temple, the sons of Zadok were to marry

Israelites: "Neither shall they take for their wives a widow, nor her who is divorced; but they shall take virgins of the seed of the house of Israel" (Ez. 44:22). But Nehemiah applies this to all Priests and Levites, not just Zadokites, and simply ignores the fact that in no way had the Jews rebuilt the temple according to the scenario in Ezekiel 40-48. He was twisting scripture, seeking to extract a principle from a highly specific ruling. He wrongly assumed that the Jewish blood line was pure- when it never was. For intermarriage had been so common. The Jews came to teach that intermarriage was wrong because the blood line to Messiah must be kept pure. Quite ignoring all the previous Gentile intermarriage in the Jewish gene pool. The Lord's genealogy includes Gentiles and whores... how wrong they were.

Ezra 9:2 For they have taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed have mixed themselves with the peoples of the lands. Yes, the hand of the princes and rulers has been chief in this trespass-

Ezra appears to present the returning exiles as somewhat more holy than they were: "the holy seed". They had been idolaters in Babylon, for part of their condemnation had been to serve foreign gods in the land of their captivity, and Ezekiel had lamented the exiles' idolatry. Whilst on one hand Ezra presents as sincere, his argument appears to be that the Jews were somehow "holy seed" and intermarriage made them unholy. Israel's history was full of intermarriage, as can be seen from the Lord's genealogy. The seed [s.w.] of Abraham was to include many nations. The question was whether they were spiritually corrupted. But the language of "holy seed" veers towards wrongly condemning interracial marriage for the sake of it. Earlier, some had been told they were not of Israel because they couldn't prove their genealogy, their "seed": "They could not shew their father's house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel" (Ezra 2:59 AV). But the Israelite community was open to Egyptians joining them when they left Egypt and became a nation, indeed they are described as a "mixed multitude" in Ex. 12:38; and Paul's argument from Melchizedek is that lack of genealogy doesn't preclude from relationship with Yahweh. It seems Ezra is alluding to the prohibition for the High Priest to marry a Gentile: "a virgin of his own people shall he take as a wife. He shall not profane his seed [cp. "the holy seed"] among his people" (Lev. 21:14,15). But he is expanding this to apply to all the people. He certainly appears to be looking for an excuse to condemn a certain group of Jews to exclusion from the community. This is not how to use scripture... as the "scribe", he knew scripture better than the rest of the probably illiterate community, especially the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile. And he was abusing that, taking half a verse about the High Priest and applying it to them all, and then adding the sanction of losing all their possessions and being expelled from the community of God's people. That is quite without any Mosaic support. Ezra's mishandling of scripture clearly had an agenda, and it makes his subsequent 'grief' at the intermarriages appear as possibly theatrics. He appears to be shocked and surprised- when surely he was fully aware of the situation ahead of time. The idea of mixing seed is that the fruit resultant from it will not be legitimate. Hence the demand they abandon their children as well as the wives. But the Lord's genealogy shows how wrong is that thinking. He was the purest seed, but His genealogy involved prostitutes and Gentiles like Ruth and Rahab. This hatred of intermarriage was likely picked up from the Persians; for the Bible doesn't teach this idea of racial corruption or purity. "Israel" began as an ethnically mongrel race, with Ephraim and Manasseh the descendants of an Egyptian woman and plenty of other intermarriage.

The Zoroastrian community and religion taught against any ethnic intermarriage, and that was perhaps one reason why the Jewish exile community didn't much intermarry with the Persians- because the Persians were against ethnic intermarriage.

It could even be argued from Is. 6:11-13 that the "Holy seed" were to be the remnant of Jews who remained in the land, after the others had been taken into exile or killed: "Until the cities are waste without inhabitant and houses without man and the land becomes utterly waste, and Yahweh has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. If there is a tenth left in it, that also will in turn be consumed: as a terebinth, and as an oak, whose stump remains when they are felled; so the holy seed is its stump". But Ezra was arguing that the returned exiles were the holy seed, and the Jews who had remained in the land were not to be married nor accepted into "Israel" lest the holy seed of *the exiles* be contaminated. He has it all the wrong way around. Likewise Mal. 2:14 says that Yahweh was seeking to develop a holy seed, and the sexual behaviour of the exiles was hindering His efforts. The holiness of the seed was not automatic nor ethnic, as Ezra is supposing. Judah once were holy to Yahweh (Jer. 2:3), but not any more.

The priests and rulers were guilty of the idol abominations mentioned in :1. This is the picture we have in Isaiah, of the exiles committing idolatry in their rebuilt temple and yet condemning their brothers.

These relationships and children are defined as being part of mixing with the abominations of the peoples (:1). And "abominations" always refers to idol worship. So it could be that the relationships with "their daughters" were a result of sleeping with cult prostitutes and having children thereby. There was therefore far more to what happened than simply marrying out of the faith. To 'take daughters for themselves' may not mean marriage itself, but could refer to the kind of cultic relationships which went along with idol worship at the shrines. This is why the separation from these women with whom they had had children (Ezra 10:3) would not then be quite the same as breaking up marriage and full blown family life. Israel are only specifically called "the holy seed" in Is. 6:13, where the idea was that after their experience of judgment, those who survived would be a "holy seed" who would shoot forth the Messianic "Branch" from the decaying stump of the house of David. But now the "holy seed" had corrupted themselves; for they were the minority preserved from judgment, and now they had corrupted their holiness. So the possibilities of the reestablishment of the Kingdom of God in Israel which the prophets were full of... was now precluded. They failed to see themselves and their offspring as anything so "holy" to Yahweh. This is the root of all sin- a failure to appreciate our holy standing in His eyes, our sanctification in Christ.

Ezra 9:3 When I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down confounded-

Ezra's actions betray genuinely deep surprise and personal grief. Surprise and grief are the themes of other incidents when a man tears his robes: Reuben rent his clothes on not finding Joseph (Gen. 37:29); Jacob rent his 'garments' on seeing Joseph's coat (Gen. 37:34); Joseph's brethren rent their clothes when the cup was found in Benjamin's sack (Gen. 44:13); Joshua rent his clothes after the defeat at Ai (Josh. 7:6); Job rent his mantle on hearing of his children's death (Job 1:20), and his friends rent each one his mantle when they saw his shocking state (Job 2:12). These were all signs of deep grief and surprise. We of course wonder whether the surprise element was somehow 'put on' by Ezra. For he surely knew the idolatrous state of things amongst the exiles. "Confounded" is the same word translated 'destroyed /

desolated' (Dan. 9:27; 11:31). His heart was truly broken by others' failures. And that surely must be read positively, for it reflects his passion for God's glory in His people. Otherwise he would have just focused on his own personal spirituality. Here we have a challenge to 'out of church' believers, who say they focus on their own faith, and lament the apostasy of others by simply keeping away from others. To have no heart for people, not shedding a tear for others' spiritual state... is not the spirit of our Lord.

The temple still lay "waste" (Hag. 1:4,9) just as it had lain "desolate" [s.w. Jer. 33:10,12] after the Babylonian destruction. The 'restoration' was in fact not really a restoration at all, in God's eyes. Thus Ezra sat down desolate [s.w. "confounded"] at the news of Judah's apostasy in having children by the surrounding women; using the very same word as frequently used to describe the 'desolate' / 'confounded' Jerusalem that was to be rebuilt (Ezra 9:3 cp. Is. 49:8,19; 54:3; 61:4). He tore his priestly garment (Ezra 9:3), as if he realized that all Ezekiel's prophecies about those priestly garments now couldn't come true (s.w. Ez. 42:14; 44:17,19). Is. 58:12,13 prophesied that the acceptable rebuilding of Zion was dependent upon Judah keeping the Sabbath acceptably; and yet Nehemiah's record makes clear their tragic abuse of the Sabbath at the time of the restoration; and this therefore meant that the rebuilding of the temple and city were not going to fulfill the Messianic prophecies about them which existed.

The Lord would have meditated upon the way righteous men had taken upon themselves the sins of their people. Thus Jeremiah speaks as if he has committed Israel's sins; Ezra rends his clothes and plucks off his hair, as if he has married out of the Faith (Ezra 9:3 cp. Neh. 13:25; the Lord received the same sinner's treatment, Is. 50:6). Moses' prayer for God to relent and let him enter the land was only rejected for the sake of his association with Israel's sins (Dt. 3:26).

Ezra 9:4 Then were assembled to me all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat confounded until the evening offering- See on :7. The double reference in Is. 66:1-5 to trembling at Yahweh's word is a definite prediction of the situation in Ezra 9:4; 10:3, where the same rare Hebrew word is used regarding how those of the exiles who repented for their marriage out of the Faith trembled before the word in repentance. Then, at that point, the Kingdom blessings could have been brought about, as described in the rest of Is. 66. But again, there was no staying power in their repentance. By Nehemiah's time, and by Malachi's time even after his, marriage out of the Faith was still their weakness.

I have argued on Is. 56:4 that actually the better response would have been not to divorce those women, but to lead them into covenant with Israel's God. For Isaiah 56 offers a place amongst God's people to Gentiles and eunuchs, those previously excluded. So these who trembled at God's word responded to the word, but in a less than ideal way. Still God was thrilled with them.

As discussed on Ezra 10:3, the trembling at God's words was largely from false guilt. But these who had been spiritually abused are those in whom Yahweh would dwell, even if they had been given a very distorted picture of God's word; and their hypocritical leaders would be condemned (Is. 66:1-5).

Ezra 9:5 At the evening offering I arose up from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn; and I fell on my knees, and spread out my hands to Yahweh my God- The "humiliation" may refer to fasting. He felt so identified with his sinful people. But I discussed on :2 and elsewhere how Ezra may have had an agenda-

to excommunicate the Jews who were in the land, along with the exiles he thought were spiritually substandard, and present his group of returned exiles as the one true Israel. In this case, it's possible that his behaviour here was at least partly theatrics. Making a big expression of shock and horror at something he surely knew was happening before he encountered it. Unfortunately, the language of praying with spread out hands and on the knees is exactly that of Solomon at the dedication of the temple God never wanted and later cursed (1 Kings 8:54); and Solomon was not sincere, and was also guilty of theatrics. But this is Ezra's memoir, he is the author, and he draws us in to this question of to what degree was he sincere. He was, to an extent. But then there was theatricism. We likewise have to look back and search our motives, for human motivation is so often mixed.

"Rose up / arose" is a word used often of the 'rising up' of the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 9:5; Neh. 2:18; 3:1). This was a fulfilment of the command to "Arise... Jerusalem!" (Is. 51:17; 52:2; 61:4). Perhaps Ezra was motivated by these prophecies to now "arise", hoping that somehow his people would still be raised up. But this 'arising' was to be associated with the dawning of Zion's light in the form of Yahweh's glory literally dwelling over Zion (Is. 60:1). This didn't happen at the time, because the appearance of 'arising' by the exiles was only external and wasn't matched by a spiritual revival. Ezra was driven to appeal to God directly and solely from himself with his priestly garments now in ruins. I have noted earlier that his focus upon teaching the law of Moses was rather missing the point- that the old covenant had been broken by Judah, and they could only throw themselves upon the grace of the new covenant.

Ezra 9:6 and I said, My God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have increased over our head, and our guiltiness has grown up to the heavens- The description of Ezekiel's Temple was to be given to the captives in Babylon by Ezekiel, to lead them to repentance and to assure them of what could be if they repented. Then when the invitation to leave Babylon and return came in the time of Ezra, they ought to have been motivated to return to the land and build the temple which Ezekiel had explained to them. But sadly most of them weren't very deeply motivated at all; they wanted to build a temple, but not to the extent Ezekiel had outlined. Consider in this light Ez. 43:10,11: "Thou son of man, shew the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them measure the pattern. And if they be ashamed of all that they have done, shew them the form of the house, and the fashion thereof, and the goings out thereof, and the comings in thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the laws thereof: and write it in their sight, that they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them". Then, when the temple was built, they were to be obedient in all the ways in which they hadn't been obedient in the past, with the result that they were now sitting in captivity (Ez. 44:24). This was the tragedy felt by Ezra, when he realized the exiles were not living as they should be: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God; for our iniquities are increased" (Ezra 9:6). Israel would only be able to build the temple properly if they were "ashamed of their iniquities" (Ez. 43:10). And Ezra knew they weren't. And thus he sought to take upon himself that shame, believing that God would accept *his* shame on behalf of the people. Note in passing how he speaks of blushing before God. You only blush in someone's presence. And this was how close and real Ezra felt his God to be. Perhaps this repentance of a remnant explains why in fact the record of Ezekiel's temple was written down at all-

for Ez. 43:11 seems to say that it would be written down *if* Judah were ashamed of their sins. Ezekiel's opening chapters record him being forewarned by God that they would not generally be responsive to his ministry; and yet some were, like Ezra, and maybe this was eagerly seized upon by God as the basis for allowing the writing down and preservation of the specifications we have in Ez. 40-48.

Isaiah 45 is as clear a prophecy as any could wish. God categorically stated that Cyrus would be raised up by Him in order to release the captives in Babylon, and to enable the building of Jerusalem (Is. 45:12); all because God had formed the land [AV "earth"] of Israel to be inhabited and not to be left without His people dwelling upon it. And this happened; the captives were released (although most preferred to stay put in Babylon), and the building of Jerusalem was enabled (although the work was not done very enthusiastically by Judah, and they preferred to build their own houses rather than Yahweh's). But the prophecy goes on in Is. 45:13-17: "I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts. Thus saith the LORD, The labour of Egypt, and merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine: they shall come after thee; in chains they shall come over, and they shall fall down unto thee, they shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee; and there is none else, there is no God... They shall be *ashamed*, and also *confounded*, all of them: they shall go to confusion together that are makers of idols. But Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be *ashamed* nor *confounded* world without end". But the Egyptians and Ethiopians didn't come and fall down before Judah, as the Queen of Sheba had before Solomon. Nor did they accept Yahweh as the only God, and ditch their idols. Instead, the returned Jews worshipped the idols of Egypt, and married their women (Ezra 9:1). And thus Israel *were* ashamed and confounded in the future. The same Hebrew words for "ashamed [and] confounded" occur in Ezra 9:6, where as a result of Ezra realizing that Judah had married the local women and broken covenant with Yahweh, he admits: "I am *ashamed* and *blush* [s.w. 'confounded'] to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased...". The words of Is. 45 could have had their fulfilment in the time of Cyrus; the surrounding nations could have come and worshipped before Judah, and the whole earth quit their idols and look unto Yahweh as a just God and a saviour. But Judah would not. Judah in the new temple would not "defile" Yahweh's Name any more (Ez. 43:7,8); but they were lazy to keep the uncleanness laws, they *did* defile Yahweh by touching dead bodies and then offering the sacrifices (Hag. 2:13,14 s.w.), just as Israel previously had been defiled by touching the dead bodies of their kings and then offering sacrifices (Ez. 43:7); but now, Judah thought they were above God's law, and therefore did exactly the same things which had caused the temple to be destroyed in the first place. The promise that Yahweh would dwell in the new temple was conditional on them not touching dead bodies (Ez. 43:9); but Hag. 2:13 makes it apparent that they did this very thing at the time of the restoration.

The same phrase translated "ashamed and blush / be confounded" is used of condemnation (Is. 45:16; Ps. 35:4). Ezra felt condemned with the sinners, even though marriage to a Gentile is not necessarily going to bring condemnation. But he felt it did, and wrong as he was, he lived what he believed and believed what he lived. He had integrity, despite ignoring much of God's word. Ezra's expression of shame and confusion is that of Ez. 36:32: "Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel". The Jews, by contrast, "were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush" (Jer. 6:15; 8:12).

The word "trespass" is that used in Lev. 4:3 concerning the case where a priest trespassed and brought guilt on the people. The path forward in that case was for sacrifice to be offered. No talk of excommunication or confiscation of his property. But Ezra never asks the repentant Jews to offer sacrifice to cover their sins... if a leader of the people sinned, and there were leaders who had married Gentiles, the law required a special offering. But there are no such offerings, just the "works" of divorce. Quite possibly because Ezra failed to see in the blood of the sacrifices any prophecy of the Lord's blood.

Ezra 9:7 Since the days of our fathers we have been exceeding guilty to this day; and for our iniquities we, our kings and our priests, have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder and to confusion of face, as it is this day- The sins of those who returned are styled "the transgression of those that had been carried away" (Ezra 9:4). Yet those who returned to the land weren't mainly the generation who had been carried away. The intended confusion is surely to suggest that those who returned committed the same sins as had led Judah into captivity a generation earlier. And Ezra comments on this fact here in his subsequent prayer. He feels shame of face just as his people did.

Ezra 9:8 Now for a little moment grace has been shown from Yahweh our God, to leave us a remnant to escape- Perhaps he saw the "little moment" as the time between the exiles leaving Babylon and Babylon's much threatened judgment and obliteration. See on :13. Ezra saw that "little moment" or "space" as a time when they received *grace*; he understood the prophecy of the figs in Jer. 24, that it was only through the captivity and the fact God had graciously not destroyed them but rather preserved them there, that there was the opportunity for a remnant to re-establish the Kingdom. What may appear to some as forsaking is in fact God's grace to us, when spiritually discerned- whether it be deep within our own lives, or in the state of affairs upon this planet. Yet it should be noted that the prophecy of Jer. 24:6,7 about the good figs seems not to have come true at the restoration- although it could potentially have done so.

And to give us a nail in His holy place- I submit that the Messianic prophecies of the restoration prophets *could* have had their fulfilment in Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel, or some other Messianic figure at that time. Everything was made possible to enable this- Joshua, who couldn't prove his Levitical genealogy, was given "a place of access" amongst the priesthood, those who "stood" before the Lord (Zech. 3:7 RV). Ezra thanked God that they had returned and that they had "a nail in his holy place" (Ezra 9:8), a reference surely to a Messiah figure whom he felt to be among them, the "nail in a sure place" of Is. 22:23. According to Mt. 1:12 and Lk. 3:27, Zerubbabel was the Prince of Judah, and the rightful heir to David's throne. But due to his weakness, the fulfilment was deferred to Jesus.

The sense of the Hebrew seems to be as GNB "you have been gracious to us and have let some of us escape from slavery and live in safety in this holy place". LXX "to give us an establishment in the place of his sanctuary". Ezra's focus was on the return of the people to the temple, to the holy place; whereas clearly enough, the desire of the majority was to get land for their own farms and houses outside of Jerusalem.

That our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage- Blindness had been their punishment for not wanting to see; and despite little evidence that they did want to see, God was trying to open their eyes all the same, and to give them revival, new life, in bondage. For they were still in bondage to the Persians and were not independent of them. But they had spurned all that huge grace.

Ezra feels that the exiles have been given a revival in their bondage. Perhaps he felt the spirit of life had been breathed into the dead bones of the exiles (Ez. 37:5-10); the prayer of the exiles "Will You not revive us again?" (Ps. 85:16) had been heard. God had been willing to "revive the spirit of the humble" amongst the exiles (Is. 57:15). Man can be given the life of the Spirit, but then preclude the working of the Spirit and quench that life. The Galatians began in the Spirit, but turned to the flesh.

The gift of light from God meant His face shining, which was exactly what the Psalms of exile continually beg for- for God to make His face to shine upon His people and restore them. Ezra clearly felt that these prayers had been answered, but intermarriage had as it were wasted the answer. Just as we can waste the gifts of spiritual strength. "Arise, shine, for your light is come" (Is. 60:1) had had a potential fulfilment. But their worldliness had stopped it. Daniel had prayed for God's face to shine (Dan. 9:17), and it had done.

Ezra repeatedly speaks of the returned exiles as "the remnant" (:8,13,14,15). This is the classic language of the religious cult- we are the remnant, those alone who are faithful, with the majority of God's people unfaithful. But the remnant were to be those who repented and accepted the new covenant (Am. 5:15; Mic. 7:18; Jer. 23:3; 31:7)- and the returned exile community, didn't do this. Indeed, "the remnant of Judah" is a term multiple times used in Jeremiah of the community of Jews who remained in the land after the exile. But Jeremiah is at pains to reapply this term to the returned exiles. He was seeking to redefine "the remnant" as the returned exiles. And he uses his public prayer as an opportunity to do this. This is not to say that Ezra's prayer was totally insincere. This is his memoir, and he is drawing us in to the consideration of how sincere his prayer had been. Parts of it were, but there were unspiritual elements within it.

Ezra 9:9 For we are bondservants; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage- Although the Apocryphal book of Baruch isn't inspired, it gives a significant window into the mindset of the exiles in Babylon. Baruch 1:10 mentions how the attitude was that the majority wanted to send funds to support the 'good work' going on in Judah- but didn't want to return there themselves. Like the book of Esther, this indicates that the exiles had soon quit languishing by the rivers of Babylon, and had quickly acquired wealth and some degree of prosperity. Inspired prophecies had warned them of the fall of Babylon, and their need to flee out of it and return to Judah. And yet Baruch 1:12 records the exiles praying "that we may live long under the protective shadow of [the] king of Babylon". This is in sad contrast to Daniel's prophecies that the sheltering tree of Babylon was to be cut down! There ought to have been an urgency about the need to flee from Babylon. Zech. 2:10 speaks of the need to "flee" and "escape"- the language of crisis. And the call "Ho!" means quite literally "Hey!!". The urgency to flee was spiritual rather than physical- for there's no evidence that when Babylon fell to the Persians, the Jews were punished. Indeed they appear [from Esther] to have prospered even more. Hence the urgent appeal was to flee from the spiritual crisis which they faced in Babylon. And yet they didn't perceive the danger, just as so many today don't. For the call to leave Babylon is applied in New Testament passages like 2 Cor. 6 to our call to leave the world in which we live. The urgency of 'fleeing' from Babylon was understood by Nehemiah, when he referred to those who had returned to the land as those who has "escaped" from Babylon (Neh. 1:2)- even though they had returned with every blessing from the authorities. He perceived as few did the vital danger of remaining in the soft life of Babylon. Ezra likewise had

referred to the Jews in Babylon as those "in bondage... bondmen" (Ezra 9:9)- when historical records, as well as the book of Esther and the fact Nehemiah the Jew was the king's cupbearer, show that the Jews were very far from being servants in Babylonian society. Yet Ezra perceived the spiritual poverty and servanthood of remaining in that affluent society.

But has extended loving kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins- "To give us a reviving" uses the same word for "put" when we read of God putting a new heart and spirit in His revived people if they entered the new covenant at the restoration: "And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you" (Ez. 36:27-29). They revived the stones out of the heaps (Neh. 4:2). A new spirit was potentially given to them, God put in the heart of men like Nehemiah to revive the work (Neh. 2:12 s.w.). But this didn't force them to be obedient. They chose not to be.

Ezekiel 37 had its primary fulfilment in the return under Ezra. Then, Israel was given "a quickening" (Ezra 9:9 LXX), in fulfilment of how the dry bones in captivity were revived. At that time, Judah *could* have fully revived. But most of them chose to stay in Babylon. If there had been a full revival, then the events of Ezekiel 38 and 39 would have taken place. It has been suggested that there was a primary fulfilment of Ezekiel 38/9 in an unrecorded invasion of the land at the time of the restoration. However, historical evidence for this is severely lacking. And yet the Scythian tribes such as Magog, Gomer, Meshech, Tubal etc. are all recorded as being the scourge of the Middle East at that time. They were marauding into more prosperous areas "to take a spoil", especially "cattle and goods", at around Ezekiel's time. They could so easily have turned their attentions toward Israel. That invasion *could* have happened; but it didn't. But because Israel were not faithful the temple was not built properly, and therefore the Ezekiel 38 invasion didn't happen, and therefore Yahweh's intervention and establishment of His Kingdom as described in Ezekiel 39 didn't occur.

And to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem- Zech. 2:4 had foretold that "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein", seeing that Yahweh Himself would be as a wall of fire around her to protect her from her adversaries (Ezra had recognized this promise, that God would be a wall to them- Ezra 9:9). Note how this prophecy is introduced by an Angel with a measuring reed measuring out the rebuilt Zion (Zech. 2:1), just as we have in Ezekiel 40. But Judah disbelieved the promise of a Divine wall of fire, and insisted on building a physical wall to protect them; and the record in Nehemiah has plenty of reference to their setting up of bars and gates in their fear (Neh. 3:3,6,13-15). By doing so they disallowed the fulfilment of Ezekiel 38:11, and thereby precluded what was prophesied as subsequently following. If they had trusted Him and paid their tithes, their cattle would have multiplied, and the Scythian tribes would have come down to seek to take them, as Ezekiel 38:12,13 foretold. But as it happened, their cattle were diseased and their agriculture not blessed because of their dilatory attention to Yahweh's house that lay waste (Haggai 1:11). So therefore there was no invasion, and no victory against the nations, and no Kingdom established at that time.

The wall may refer to the protection of the Persian empire whilst the temple was rebuilt. The constant mention of being still in servitude to Babylon / Persia may have

been politically motivated. Ezra, after all, was funded by Persia and was also tasked with extending Persian civil law in Judah. He knew his prayer was going to be reported back to his Persian superiors. I have earlier discussed whether Ezra was in fact right to accept Persian support for his spiritual ministry in return for enforcing their political control over Judah. His description [in a prayer to God!] of the Persians as the "wall" of Jerusalem seems politically motivated. Had they broken free of Persian control, Yahweh would have been a wall of fire to Jerusalem.

Ezra 9:10 Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments- Again we note Ezra's total identity with his sinful people. This is proof enough that there is no "guilt by association" as believed by so many groups. Rather there is to be the very opposite- freewill association of ourselves with the guilt of sinners, that we might thereby appeal to them and intercede for them. And this was in fact the very basis of our redemption through the work of the Lord Jesus.

Ezra 9:11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets saying, 'The land, to which you go to possess it, is an unclean land through the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, through their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their filthiness-

Ezra appears to make a quotation ["Saying..."]. But actually he is conflating various words from various parts of the law of Moses. This kind of approach gets dangerously close to making our interpretation equal to God's word and law.

The people were warned that the temple had been destroyed because of their previous "abominations", and that the rebuilt temple was not to feature any such abominations (Ez. 43:8; 44:6,7,13). "let it suffice you of your abominations" they were told- and were then told not to allow the uncircumcised into the temple, as they had been doing (Ez. 44:6,9). This sounds as if the prophecy of Ezekiel was more command than prediction- to those of his own day. But they returned, and committed the abominations [s.w.] of the Gentiles (Ezra 9:1,11,14) and married their daughters; to the extent that Malachi commented upon this: "Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination [s.w.] is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god" (Mal. 2:11).

Ezra 9:12 Now therefore don't give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters to your sons, nor seek their peace or their prosperity forever; that you may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever'- This command directly addressed the human tendency to think that 'it won't happen to me / my family'. The "abominations" of the land (:11) were idolatry. Intermarriage was seen as inevitably involving the people in idolatry, as we saw in :2,3. The implication is that marriage is the most intimate of human relationships, and the spiritually weaker party will almost inevitably bring down the spiritually stronger party to their level. Solomon is the parade example. But it seems the lesson is never learnt- because there is an inbuilt tendency in human nature to take the easiest way. The argument was that they should not "seek their peace or their prosperity forever" because that phrase is found in Dt. 23:7 about Moabite and Ammonite *males*. But the case of Ruth the Moabite shows this was not to be applied to all Moabites. Ezra seems hyper eager to find a justification for making the Jews divorce local *women* whom they had married (:2). And to then threaten those who

didn't do so with exclusion from the Jewish community and total confiscation of all their property. This was extreme railroading. And it didn't work because 13 years later in Nehemiah there was still the problem of alien marriage.

Ezra 9:13 After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You, our God, has punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and has given us such a remnant-

Ezra's argument is that Judah had previously sinned in the matter of marriage; he calls it their "evil deeds" and "great guilt". But the extensive prophetic material which is so critical of Judah never mentions intermarriage as Judah's sin; rather was it the sin of idolatry. Ezra is conflating idolatry with intermarriage. Whilst the two are related, as Deuteronomy warned, intermarriage of itself is not the sin. And the reference to related "abominations" or idolatry is made only in :1. The reasoning throughout Ezra 9,10 and later in Nehemiah only mentions intermarriage as the great sin. We note Ezra is using his prayer to God as an opportunity to make these 'political' points. Perhaps in his memoir he is reflecting how sincere were the words of his recorded prayer of long ago...

Ezra said that God had punished them less than their iniquities deserved, somehow alluding to the prophecy of Is. 40:2, which said that at the time of Zion's restoration, God would admit to having punished her "double for all her sins". Yahweh in His love and pity felt that He had punished them twice as much as they deserved; but Ezra realized that in reality it was less than what they deserved. See on :8.

There are evident similarities between the vocabulary and style of Zechariah, Job and the prophets of the restoration. Thus both Job and Zechariah refer to the ideas of the court of Heaven, "the satan" etc. My suggestion is that Job was rewritten during the exile, hence the many points of contact between Job and Isaiah's prophecies about the restoration. When we read that Job has suffered less than his iniquities deserve (Job 11:6), this is the very term used to describe Israel's sufferings in Babylon (Ezra 9:13). Job, "the servant of the Lord", is being set up as Israel, just as that same term is used about Israel in Babylon throughout the latter part of Isaiah. Job's mockery by the Arabian friends perhaps parallels the Samaritan and Babylonian mockery of Judah; his loss of children is very much the tragedy of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians which Lamentations focuses upon. And Job's final revival and restoration after repentance would therefore speak of the blessed situation which Judah could have had at their return to the land. Job's response to the words of God and Elihu would then speak of Judah's intended repentance as a result of God's word spoken to them by prophets like Haggai and Zechariah. There are many connections between Job and the latter parts of Isaiah which speak about the restoration.

Ezra 9:14 shall we again break Your commandments, and join in affinity with the peoples that do these abominations? Wouldn't You be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape?- The covenant was not to be broken; the temple had been destroyed before because of breaking covenant with Yahweh (Ez. 44:7). But Judah broke covenant [s.w.] with Yahweh at the time of the restoration by marrying Gentiles and worshipping their gods (Ezra 9:1,14). They were themselves the remnant, and Ezra recognizes that now they too deserved to be destroyed, leaving God as it were with no Israel (:15). His spiritual mind however might have been driven to reason further, and perceive that indeed

Israel would no longer be Yahweh's people- and therefore He would seek another people, on a different covenant basis. And that in fact was what the restoration prophets had been saying, although Ezra's obsession with the old covenant and teaching it had rather blinded him to that.

The anger of God would be with the idolatry which could well arise from intermarriage, not with the intermarriage itself: "Your daughter you shall not give to his son, nor shall you take his daughter for your son. For he will turn away your son from following me to serve other gods; so the anger of Yahweh would be kindled against you and He would destroy you quickly" (Dt. 7:3,4). "Wouldn't You be angry...?" is Ezra's imagination of God's response. I have argued elsewhere that the intermarriage itself wouldn't have caused God's wrath. This is Ezra putting words in God's mouth. And as discussed on Ezra 10:1, although his intercession was modelled upon the prayers of Moses and Daniel before him, there was zero Divine response to him. Unlike with Moses and Daniel. He here supplies what he thinks God's response would be. And he had it wrong. Yahweh would not fry people alive for ethnic intermarriage of itself.

Ezra 9:15 Yahweh, the God of Israel, You are righteous- The repeated emphasis on "Israel" (:6) may be because Ezra was redefining "Israel" as those faithful to his particular strict interpretation of God's law. True confession of sin always involves this recognition that God is right.

For we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is this day. Behold, we are before You in our guiltiness-

"Before You" may mean he felt that they were standing already at God's judgment seat. But he may also simply refer to the fact he was praying "before the house of God"(Ezra 10:2). In which case, he is assuming God was present and dwelling there. Despite Isaiah's clear statement that Yahweh did not dwell in the house built by the exiles, but rather in the hearts of humble individuals. The argument is that despite their sin, they were "before You", but he goes on to immediately say that "we cannot remain before You because of this". That is, Ezra argues that Yahweh was imminently going to destroy His people because some had married "out". But that is an unreasonable position. God would not destroy His people for that reason, when He has tolerated marriage to Gentiles throughout the history of His people. Ezra seems to be setting up a straw man, and then demanding radical and immediate measures to correct it lest all Israel be destroyed permanently from "before" God. This is a classic case of creating a crisis and then using it to justify quick and decisive action- when in fact the crisis has been created and such actions are politically motivated. God has protested that Israel shall always be "before" Him because of His huge love and grace for them: "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually *before Me*" (Is. 49:16). Jer. 31:36 is clearest: "If these ordinances [of sun and moon] depart from *before Me*, says Yahweh, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation *before Me* forever". Ezra's [false] argument was that Israel were about to be destroyed, and his intercession and their immediate repentance through forced divorce were the only factors that would save the situation. I suggest that he was looking for an excuse to get exclude some from the community of "Israel". He was overlooking the repeated comfort in the recent prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, that God's love for His people was eternal: "The mountains may depart, and the hills be removed; but My loving kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall My covenant of peace be removed, says Yahweh who has mercy on you" (Is. 54:10). "Don't you be afraid, O Jacob My servant, says

Yahweh; for I am with you: for although I will make a full end of all the nations where I have driven you, I will not make a full end of you" (Jer. 46:28).

We must soberly 'think of ourselves' as someone who has something to contribute to the rest of the body, even if first of all we are not sure what it is (Rom. 15:3-8). We feel their weaknesses as if they are our own. Self interest must die; their wellbeing becomes all consuming. This is why men like Daniel and Nehemiah could feel that "*we* have sinned..."- not '*they* have sinned'. Ezra said that because *we* have sinned, *we* cannot lift up ourselves before Yahweh. And he cast himself down before Yahweh in demonstration of how much he was with his people in this (Ezra 9:15; 10:1)!

For we cannot remain before You because of this- Is. 66:22 and Ez. 44:15 use the same word: "But the priests the Levites, the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me, they shall come near to me to minister unto me, and they shall *stand before me* [s.w. "remain before You"] to offer unto me the fat and the blood, saith the Lord GOD". But Ezra had to confess, using these very words of Isaiah and Ezekiel which he would have been familiar with, that they could not remain before Yahweh. They hadn't lived the Kingdom life, and therefore the Kingdom prophecies could not come true in them. It makes a profitable exercise to consider all the times that Ezra and Nehemiah allude to the words of Isaiah and Ezekiel. It must have been heartbreaking for them to see the possibility of fulfilment within their grasp, and yet to know that their people didn't see the wonder of it all.

"Remain before You" effectively means 'we cannot any longer be your people'. As discussed on :14, Ezra recognizes that now they too deserved to be destroyed, leaving God as it were with no Israel. His spiritual mind however might have been driven to reason further, and perceive that indeed Israel would no longer be Yahweh's people- and therefore He would seek another people, on a different covenant basis. And that in fact was what the restoration prophets had been saying, although Ezra's obsession with the old covenant and teaching it had rather blinded him to that.

"Remain" is 'stand'. But the truth is that all men sin, including Ezra, and we only stand before God by grace: "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Ps. 130:3). Ezra should have sought forgiveness by grace through faith, rather than thinking that divorce would resolve things with God.

EZRA CHAPTER 10

Ezra 10:1 Now while Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before God's house, there was gathered together to him out of Israel a very great assembly of men and women and children; for the people wept very bitterly-

The words for pleading and casting oneself down in prostration are those used of Moses in his intercession for Israel after the golden calf incident (Dt. 9:18,20,25,26). The people wept at the same time on both occasions. Ezra refusing bread and water (:6) is in imitation of Moses in his great intercession (Ex. 34:28). Ezra was clearly inspired by a Biblical example of prayer. He felt God was about to reject Israel again, and that the sin of intermarriage was of the same nature as that of the golden calf. But was it? Indeed there were idolatrous connections due to the intermarriages, but as discussed earlier, intermarriage of itself was not to be rectified by divorce. Ezra was eager to imitate Moses on a surface level, but he seems to have rather ignored the

precise context. For all his much vaunted teaching of Moses' law. God responded to Moses' intercession. There is a pointed silence from God to Ezra's intercession. Ezra just gets up from his knees and orders mass forced divorces and family breakups for marrying Gentiles. Ignoring the fact that the Moses whom he was so keen to emulate had divorced his Midianite wife and married an Ethiopian- with no Divine criticism nor sanction recorded. There are also many connections between Ezra's prayer of confession and intercession, and that of Daniel in Dan. 9. Again we note that there was a Divine response to Daniel's prayer- Gabriel appeared with a message in response. But no response to Ezra's. Ezra surely was aware of Daniel's prayer, a generation before him.

The bleeding hearts of Jeremiah and Moses were actually for the ecclesia. David's eyes wept "streams of tears" because Israel didn't keep the Law (Ps. 119:136); the faithful in Ezekiel's time sighed and groaned over all the abominations committed in Jerusalem (Ez. 9:4); Paul spoke "even with tears" about those in the ecclesia who lived as enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18), exhorting the Corinthians to mourn for those they had to disfellowship (1 Cor. 5:2; 2 Cor. 12:21); Ezra wept for the sins of his people (Ezra 10:1). Is this attitude seen amongst us? We lament in a gossipy way the weaknesses of the brotherhood; but is there this bleeding heart for the cases we mention? Perhaps we should never think of separating from anybody unless the decision has been come to through a process of such prayerful mourning for them first. 'Casting... down' is the common Hebrew word for "fall", often used of the condemned 'falling'. Ezra felt condemned on account of his total identity with his sinful people, and yet begs for mercy and makes intercession for them. This looked forward to how the Lord Jesus felt our condemnation, even feeling forsaken by the Father (Mt. 27:46), when in fact He Himself was personally sinless. It was this extreme identification with his sinful people which resulted in Ezra eliciting repentance in his people; for they too came forth and wept as he wept, in repentance. The result of the Lord's identification with us should be likewise.

Ezra 10:2 Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have married foreign women of the peoples of the land-

Shecaniah wasn't a Levite. He claims here intermarriage mean "trespass", or 'breaking faith' [GNB "We have broken faith with God", LXX "We have broken covenant with our God"], and so in :3 he proposes renewing the covenant with God [which is never recorded as happening]. The new covenant on offer was that of Jer. 31, and Ezra didn't seem interested in that- only in teaching the old covenant laws again. But intermarriage didn't in fact break covenant with Yahweh. There are many examples of it, not least Moses, and the law allowed Israelites to marry Gentile captives. Covenant with Yahweh wasn't broken by it of itself. Idolatry did- but he doesn't mention that.

In Ezra 9, Ezra showed a fine example of feeling that the failures of the community are our personal failures- so identified was he with his brethren. But then in Ezra 10:2 we read of Shecaniah saying that "we" have married unbelievers, even though Ezra 10:26 makes it clear that he himself wasn't guilty [even though his brothers, five uncles and father had been, :26]. Ezra's selfless example of solidarity with his weak brethren inspired this man, as it should us. *Yet now there is hope for Israel concerning this thing-* This could equally be translated to the effect that the hope of Israel of the restored Kingdom was still possible, despite "this thing" of failure. If they repented. "Shecaniah" means 'Yah's shekinah'; he had been named in

hope of the *shekinah* glory returning visibly to Zion. And he felt that was still possible, although as it happened, it didn't happen.

Ezra 10:3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God. Let it be done according to the law- They claimed that this mass divorce, on pain of expulsion from the community and confiscation of property, was required by the law of Moses: "Let it be done according to the law". But the law didn't require such punishments. He wrongly predicated hope of forgiveness upon works, in this case, divorce. They had made their extrapolation from God's law equal to God's law. In expounding the Bible, it may indeed be that some things logically follow from others, and we can make inferences and fair deductions. But they are not God's word. It could be that "according to the law" was an appeal to the teaching of Dt. 24:1-4 that a man could divorce his wife "if she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some unseemly thing in her". But the Lord explains that this provision was "for the hardness of your hearts" and says that the pattern of the Genesis creation was not to make use of this. So in this case, Ezra hardly presents as a deep student of Torah, despite being called a skillful scribe of that law. He presents [perhaps, presents himself now, in his memoir] as a petty legalist who had ignored the foundational spirit of the Torah in early Genesis. Majoring on minors and ignoring the majors. And we might note that Shecaniah's idea of making a covenant with God about these things was apparently ignored. It seems what was important to Ezra was the divorces, and then claiming that anyone still married to a Gentile [such as very many amongst the Jews who had remained in the land] was in fact not "Israel". We are invited to consider whether Ezra's casting himself down was partly mere theatrics. And it is Ezra who invites us to this reflection, because these are his memoirs and he is himself pondering these matters about himself. I suggested on :2 that the "therefore" suggests that repentance would have led to the prophetically promised hope of Israel still coming true in his time.

These relationships and children are defined as being part of mixing with the abominations of the peoples (Ezra 9:1,2). And "abominations" always refers to idol worship. So it could be that the relationships with "their daughters" were a result of sleeping with cult prostitutes and having children thereby. There was therefore far more to what happened than simply marrying out of the faith. To 'take daughters for themselves' (Ezra 9:2) may not mean marriage itself, but could refer to the kind of cultic relationships which went along with idol worship at the shrines. This is why the separation from these women with whom they had had children would not then be quite the same as breaking up marriage and full blown family life.

The double reference in Is. 66:1-5 to trembling at Yahweh's word is a definite prediction of the situation in Ezra 9:4; 10:3, where the same rare Hebrew word is used regarding how those of the exiles who repented for their marriage out of the Faith trembled before the word in repentance. Then, at that point, the Kingdom blessings could have been brought about, as described in the rest of Is. 66. But again, there was no staying power in their repentance. By Nehemiah's time, and by Malachi's time even after his, marriage out of the Faith was still their weakness.

GNB "We will do what God's Law demands" highlights the problem: separation from wrongly taken wives was not stated in God's law. As so often happens, men assumed that their interpretation of His law was what His law "demands". But God never commanded divorce for marriage out of the faith, let alone loss of property. But divorce for no reason was not according to the law, neither in letter nor spirit.

Shecaniah is manipulative. He puts the idea of mass divorce to Ezra, then says that Israel must do according to the counsel of Ezra. But Shecaniah is putting his words into Ezra's mouth. And now Ezra in his memoirs is admitting this. The "they" in :7 who send out the summons to the meeting were quite possibly Shecaniah and his supporters, rather than Ezra.

Ezra 10:4 Arise; for the matter belongs to you, and we are with you. Be courageous, and do it- Shecaniah is seen as encouraging Ezra to do that which he was perhaps nervous to do- making the people swear to end their illicit relationships, and not to begin new ones. Being courageous and doing it is the language of encouragement given to Joshua, so that he might enter the land and establish God's Kingdom there. This was the same situation the exiles were in.

Ezra in this his memoir seems to say that he was told that he was the one to act, with the promise that he would be supported, and therefore he acted. They told him to "arise" and "do", and so he did. So often legalists egg each other on. And he now looks back and sees it for what it was... ending with that terrible final verse, admitting he had left children fatherless in the 112 marriages he broke up. And that list of names appears to be just of the priests and Levites. It rightly haunted him. And looking back, he sees Shecaniah as having put him up to it. Ezra 1-6 are Ezra's giving background information about the first return under Zerubbabel about 60 years before. The material about his own life's work is taken up almost exclusively with his response to the issue of intermarriage. He saw it as his defining work and legacy, although surely he did many other things with his life. And looking back, he is haunted by it. And his record draws us in to his own reflections and introspection.

The call to "be courageous!", 'Be strong for the truth!' has been heard so often. David uses the same words to Solomon when encouraging him in the work of building a temple which God never wanted: "Take heed now; for the Lord hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary: be strong, and do it" (1 Chron. 28:10). Possibly they are assuming that divorcing wives and breaking up families was in fact establishing the temple.

Ezra 10:5 Then Ezra arose, and made the chiefs of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they would do according to this word. So they swore- The "word" was that of the proposed covenant of :3. The way Ezra had to 'make' them swear could imply that he forced this direction upon them. Which would explain why in Nehemiah and later in Malachi we find them committing the same failure; because their repentance was more likely a bought position which was enforced upon them by Ezra and Shecaniah. And repentance cannot be a group thing nor a bought position; it has to be from the heart, on an individual level. The fact the leading priests and Levites failed in this matter is a reflection of how unspiritual were the spiritual leadership of the people. We recall that Ezra had offered money for the Levites to come back to Judah at the last minute. They clearly were not spiritually committed to the whole project in spiritual terms.

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra rose up from before God's house, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came there, he ate no bread, nor drank water; for he mourned because of the trespass of the captives- Jehohanan had come up with Zerubbabel in the previous return of the exiles (Neh. 12:13). He was presumably a faithful one amongst the largely apostate priesthood. Ezra refusing

bread and water is in imitation of Moses in his great intercession (Ex. 34:28). I discussed on :1,2 how sincere all this was.

Ezra 10:7 They made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together to Jerusalem- There was and is a value in group repentance; the repentance of one person provokes that of another. This is why it is helpful to confess sins to each other as James asks.

Ezra 10:8 and that whoever didn't come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the assembly of the captives-

"Forfeited" is the word for *herem*, devotion, to the things of the temple. And yet the Persians had given them unlimited resources for this. This command and demand was quite unnecessary, so it was done in order to railroad people into submission. Never does the law of Moses require this as a punishment for intermarriage. Dt. 7:1-3 is clear that they were not to intermarry with the nations then in the land, but there is no sanction mentioned if Israel did so. They did so, and there is never any "forfeiting" of property as a Divine legal punishment. The anger of God would be with the idolatry which could well arise from intermarriage, not with the intermarriage itself: "Your daughter you shall not give to his son, nor shall you take his daughter for your son. For he will turn away your son from following me to serve other gods; so the anger of Yahweh would be kindled against you and He would destroy you quickly" (Dt. 7:3,4). Ezra surely had in view that the Jews who had remained in the land had intermarried, and he was seeking to ensure that they "lose their right to be members of the community" (GNB). His legacy was divisive. That large excluded group became the Samaritans, and the Lord's parable of "the good Samaritan" showed His identity with them. He was considered a Samaritan, and we recall His favourable acceptance of the Samaritan woman. But there may be another reason why the person's property was to be confiscated. The exiles had returned hoping to regain the property of their ancestors. But the fields and vineyards of the land, the property of the wealthy, had been given by the Babylonians to the people of the land- the Jews who remained in the land (Jer. 39:10). This heavy punishment was likely also an attempt to get those lands into the hands of the returned exiles.

This talk of *herem*, being forfeited or destroyed, is an out of context midrash on various passages in the law of Moses that spoke of property being made *herem*, dedicated to Yahweh or destroyed. The spoil of some enemies or an idolatrous town was to be dedicated as *herem* to Yahweh (Dt. 13:15-18; 20:16-18). That's as bizarre as orthodox churches today taking some Biblical reference to High Priestly robes and dressing up likewise. Taking a single word from the scriptures and applying it out of context. Particularly in view was Dt. 7:2,3: "When Yahweh your God delivers [the local nations] up before you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy [*herem*] them. You must make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them, neither shall you arrange marriages with them; your daughter you shall not give to his son, nor shall you take his daughter for your son". *Herem* means both destruction and devotion / being forfeit to God. Having stated that about the Canaanites, the passage goes on to warn about intermarriage with such people. Shecaniah and Ezra are twisting this to mean that the punishment for anyone who marries one of the "peoples of the land", who may well have been second class Jews [in their estimation], was that their property would become *herem*, forfeit and taken from them. That is a big jump of logic. *And Ezra surely knew better than this-* he was a scribe and student of the

law. And yet he failed to successfully teach basic things from the law to Judah, e.g. keeping the feast of tabernacles. The common people were likely illiterate. Ezra is really abusing his knowledge of the scriptures at this point. And here in his memoir, he looks back and to his credit, recognizes what he has done. "Let it be done according to the law" (:3) was a terrible blasphemy, really. For this mass forced divorce was not at all according to the law of Moses- which contained no sanction for those who did intermarry. Ezra failed to realize that his actions were so similar to how Israel took an oath to put to death anyone who did not come to the assembly in Jud. 21:5, thereby making the men of Jabesh-Gilead *herem* because they failed to appear at the meeting (Jud. 21:11). The moral of that story was that such bulldozer behaviour was wrong, and led to the decimation of God's people and almost the cutting off of an entire part of Israel. But Ezra didn't see that clear Biblical precedent in his obsession for purity amongst others.

"Captives" is as AV "those that had been carried away". Although that had happened some generations previously, Ezra encouraged the exiles to perceive themselves as those who had first gone into captivity and who were now returning. We too are to see ourselves as of "no continuing city" even if for generations we lived in the same area. The exclusion from the community was like all Divine judgments- it was only really a confirmation of the position these people had themselves chosen by marrying those outside of the community of faith. The logic reflects how serious is marriage out of the faith.

Ezra 10:9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together to Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month: and all the people sat in the broad place before God's house, trembling because of this matter, and because of the great rain- Apparently "all" of them came, nobody refused to repent. This however raises the possibility of group repentance, when repentance is essentially a personal matter. The restoration prophecy of Is. 66:2 is relevant: "But to this man will I look, even to him who is poor and of a broken spirit, and who trembles at My word". The Jews did tremble at the word at the beginning of the rebuilding. But it was a momentary thing; they came to see the building of the walls as more important than keeping a trembling spirit. Works eclipsed spirituality. Yet Isaiah had taught that the trembling at the word was more essentially important than building temples. But Judah paid no attention in the long term.

Ezra 10:10 Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, You have trespassed, and have married foreign women, to increase the guilt of Israel- The implication may be that by repentance and a devoted life, they were to decrease that guilt. But Ezra still comes over as a legalist, considering sin built and diminished by degrees. Israel had broken the old covenant. All they could do was throw themselves upon God's grace and accept the new covenant, as the restoration prophets had taught. But he is still far from perceiving that.

Ezra here defines the "trespass" as merely marrying foreigners. Yet the key issue was idolatry. He doesn't much mention that. There was the teaching that idolatrous wives deserved death (Dt. 13:6-11). But that is not appealed to as the basis for divorce. The focus instead is on excluding from the community anyone who remained married to a Gentile or to the "people of the land", the Jewish community who had remained in the land after the exile.

Ezra 10:11 Now therefore make confession to Yahweh, the God of your fathers, and do His will- See on :16. "Confession" is the same word translated "thanksgiving" (s.w. Neh. 12:27,31,38). Praise of Yahweh is in confession of sin. But this is the word used about the "praise" or "confession" which was to characterize the restored Kingdom (s.w. Is. 51:3; Jer. 30:19; 33:11). So even through this sin, the repentance from it led to the "confession" which produced a potential fulfilment of the restored Kingdom.

And separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the foreign women- We notice that relationships with "foreign women" is paralleled with union with "the peoples of the land". I discussed on Ezra 9:1 how "the peoples of the land" were likely the Jews who had remained in the land after the exile. Separation from brethren is not God's "will". But like a pastor telling the congregation that giving him money is God's "will", so Ezra tells these people. He is now using the word "foreign" about the Jewish "people of the land".

Marriage is not just with a woman as an individual, but with the society she is part of it; we marry a family and not just a person. But "The people of the land" were to have a part in the new system of things (Ez. 45:16,22; 46:3,9), and yet this very phrase is repeatedly used concerning the Samaritan people who lived in the land at the time of the restoration (Ezra 4:4; 10:2,11; Neh. 9:24; 10:30,31). God's intention was that they should eventually be converted unto Him; it was His intention that Ezekiel's temple be built at the time of the restoration under Ezra. And yet Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5 criticize the Jews who returned and built the temple for continuing to oppress the stranger / Gentile. Israel would not.

Ezra 10:12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, As you have said concerning us, so must we do- This was repeated by the penitent people later shouting likewise their confession of sin "with a loud voice" (Neh. 9:4). But yet again in Malachi's time, they sinned again by marrying unbelievers. The point is that repentance is not necessarily related to the loudness of our confession that 'we're all sinners', especially when pronounced in unison with others. For repentance has to be personal. The LXX however brings out their obedience to God's word, practically doing what they had been told: "This thy word is powerful upon us to do it".

"It is so; we must do as you have said" suggests they were forced into agreeing with the judgment upon them. It was, after all, on pain of losing all they owned and being removed from the community. Their language is also an echo of the covenant ceremonies of Sinai (Ex. 24:3) and Shechem (Josh. 24:16-28). But at Sinai the people promised to do "all the words that Yahweh has spoken", whereas here the promise is to keep the commandments of Ezra. They were being kidded that by divorcing their wives, they were re-entering covenant with Yahweh. But covenant relationship didn't depend upon divorce. The new covenant which Ezra ought to have been offering was that of Jer. 31, Ezekiel and Isaiah. That was even then still on offer from God. Instead, he kids them that they need to re-enter the old covenant through divorcing their wives and disowning their kids. And this, from a man who was 'skilled' in the law of Moses- which said nothing about all this. Ezra knew the law, he was literate; his victims didn't know it as well as he did, and so they assumed he must be right, or at least, felt unable to argue with him in terms of Biblical interpretation. So often this has been the case. It is classic religious abuse. Ezra presents badly here; and he was clearly just following the lead of Shecaniah, who had falsely claimed they were breaking covenant with God

and needed to make a new one (:2). The answer to that should have been that they needed to bring their Gentile wives and children into the new covenant with Yahweh.

Ezra 10:13 But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand outside; neither is this a work of one day or two; for we have greatly transgressed in this matter- The idea seems to be that they felt they had to wait in line outside in order to each come before Ezra and have absolution from sin or their marriages dissolved. Perhaps I am being too critical, but I do get the sense that they were still in a 'religious' mindset, rather than seeking to God personally on their knees. For repentance and receipt of forgiveness doesn't need to be formalized by men, nor are those things mediated through men. Perhaps this is why by the time of Nehemiah, they sinned again in this manner; and again in Malachi's time.

The torrential rain made an open air meeting very difficult. Why did this occur, and why does the record labour it? Possibly because this agreement to mass divorce wives and break up families did not have God's blessing. In fact they couldn't effect the divorces as planned because of the rain, and had to delay it. We think of the rain sent when Israel wanted a king, a sign of God's displeasure with their decision making. His wrath at that point was hardly with the Jews for their marriages, which had been contracted before, and now they were repentant. His wrath, I suggest, was with the divorces.

Ezra 10:14 Let now our princes be appointed for all the assembly- "Appointed" is AV "stand"; the idea may be as in GNB: "Let our officials stay in Jerusalem and take charge of the matter".

And let all those who are in our cities who have married foreign women come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and its judges, until the fierce wrath of our God be turned from us, until this matter is resolved- They seemed to think that the legal resolution of the marriage issue was required to turn away the wrath of God, and it took three months to do so (see on :17). But getting paperwork right in a legal sense is not going to turn away the wrath of God; He doesn't cherish being angry and His wrath can be turned away in a moment by repentance. Yet they seemed to think that the three months of legal process was required to turn away His wrath.

Ezra argues that the mass divorce will turn away God's wrath (:14). Despite having spoken about guilt and trespass, he never suggests they offer a sacrifice for their guilt and transgression, even though this was specifically stipulated for leaders who had sinned. This lack of attention to basic Divine principle and law was because Ezra failed to understand that the blood looked forward to that of the Lord. It was all of works, to him, and not of faith in grace.

Ezra 10:15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood up against this; and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them- This could mean that they "opposed the plan" (GNB), or that they alone assisted Ezra in it, "were with me concerning this" (LXX).

Ezra 10:16 The children of the captivity did so. Ezra the priest, with certain heads of fathers' households, after their fathers' houses, and all of them by their names, were set apart; and they sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter-

The account of Judah's separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged,

and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by Ezra 9:1 they are in need of separating again; then they separate (Ezra 10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Nehemiah 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God's law (Nehemiah 10:28). There was a powerful logic- either separate from the world around, or be separated from the people of God (Ezra 10:8). It's a separation- one way or the other.

Ezra 10:17 They made an end with all the men who had married foreign women by the first day of the first month- This seems a long period of time to resolve the issue; three months. Presumably this was because there was some local law to the effect that divorce could not be effected immediately but required a period of time. And yet as explained on :14, they were mistaken to think that such legalism would turn away God's wrath of itself. It was from the heart repentance that was required. Because of this legalistic approach, it is unsurprising that by Nehemiah's time they were committing the same sin.

Ezra 10:18 Among the sons of the priests there were found who had married foreign women: of the sons of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and his brothers, Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah- This would indicate that Joshua of Zech. 3 was not so spiritually strong, and therefore failed to fulfill the potential of there being a Messianic high priest in the reestablished Kingdom of God whose name was Jesus. This public listing of the sinners, beginning with the family of the High Priest, was itself a form of discipline; and may be the basis of "them [elders] that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20).

Ezra 10:19 They gave their hand that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their guilt- The implication could be that all who were guilty also offered the guilt offering. But a ram was offered for a guilt offering when people had sinned in ignorance (Lev. 5:14-19). It is hard to believe that they really had acted in ignorance; so their repentance was rather compromised by claiming they had in fact sinned in ignorance. If indeed they had sinned in ignorance, then this is a tacit reflection of the extent to which they were totally adrift from the word and spirit of their God. We note that although the cult was established and an altar in place, Ezra doesn't make the individuals offer a personal sacrifice for atonement- although for priests it was required in Lev. 4:1-6:7. He failed to perceive that atonement required the shedding of blood, looking forward to that of Messiah. Despite being "a scribe expert in the law of Moses".

Ezra 10:20 Of the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah- Only four courses of priests returned, when there were supposed to be 24 of them, namely Pashhur, Jedaiah, Immer, and Hardin (Ezra 2:37; 1 Chron. 24:7, 8,14). The priesthood had been deeply corrupt at the time of the exile, and it seems most of them preferred to remain in Babylon. And even of those who did return, they married unbelievers, despite having the 'Yah' suffix in their names.

There are only around 112 men mentioned here as having divorced their wives, and most were priests or Levites. Surely there were many others who had married women from the "people of the land"? There is no record of the threatened sanctions being carried out. We suspect that this repentance was not very deep reaching; and around 15-20 years later, in Nehemiah's time, the issue persists.

Ezra 10:21 Of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and Uziah- "Harim" means 'snubnosed'; the priest in whom there was a physical defect, such as to exclude him from priestly service. For this is the word used of how a 'flat nosed' man was excluded from priestly service (Lev. 21:18). Perhaps they were eager at the chance to serve in the restored temple, guessing that the regulations would be relaxed due to the relative lack of priests and Levites returning. Or the idea could simply be that the requirements of the law were not followed by the priests who returned. Perhaps this was why Harim's sons married out of the faith; or perhaps their physical defect made them prone to any possibility of marriage.

Ezra 10:22 Of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah- Perhaps descendants of the unfaithful Pashur the priest of Jer. 20:1-3. We note that a relatively large number of this family returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:38). They would have been perceived as relatively faithful; but relatively many of them married unbelievers. So having a 'good name' amongst the community of believers is no guarantee of abiding spirituality.

Ezra 10:23 Of the Levites: Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah (the same is Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer- "Shimei" = 'famous' and "Kelaiah" = 'insignificant'. The impression is that the well known and prominent as well as the insignificant were alike caught up in this weakness of relationships with Gentile women.

Ezra 10:24 Of the singers: Eliashib. Of the porters: Shallum, and Telem, and Uri- Again the impression is given that weakness in terms of illicit relationships is a weakness which is found in all sectors of society; from the high priest to the priests to the singers and even the porters.

Ezra 10:25 Of Israel: Of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, and Izziah, and Malchijah, and Mijamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah- We note again that the exiles of Judah are called "Israel"- because Ezra was seeking to redefine "Israel" as the returned exiles, to the exclusion of all others. "Of Israel" appears to refer to the ordinary Israelites, apart from the priesthood. 85 offenders are now listed, compared to 28 amongst the Levites in the previous verses. A fair case could be made that the Levites / priests, those who were intended to be the spiritual leaders and teachers of the community, had sinned proportionately far more than the rest of the general population. And we noted on Ezra 2 that there were relatively few from the tribe of Levi who returned. This was truly a sad state of affairs, especially as I suggested on Ezra 9:2,3 that the relationships with these women were associated with an acceptance of their gods.

Ezra 10:26 Of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Elijah- It was their brother Shecaniah who realized that there really had to be action taken about the situation (:2). This is the more commendable because it involved a recognition that his own family had done wrong; and as in many churches today, to accept wrong behaviour amongst family members isn't something which comes easy, and involves a willingness to see things from a far wider and Godly perspective.

Ezra 10:27 Of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and

Zabad, and Aziza- Zattu was one of the elders who later was to sign to the covenant that they would separate themselves from the peoples of the land (Neh. 9:2 cp. Neh. 10:14). So this separation at this time was quickly undone, so quickly that we can assume it was somewhat fictive and insincere.

Ezra 10:28 Of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, Athlai- "Bebai" isn't a Hebrew word; some of the exiles had so assimilated that they only had local Persian names. And so the attraction to Gentile women in Judah was in turn hard to resist. They failed to appreciate their high calling in one context and so failed in later contexts.

Ezra 10:29 Of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, Jeremoth- Bani = "Builder", perhaps so named because he was keen to rebuild Jerusalem; it was a popular name because there are three separate men in this chapter called that name (:29,34,38). But, as we all can, he focused so much on the physical aspects of God's work that he failed to appreciate the spiritual implications.

Ezra 10:30 Of the sons of Pahathmoab: Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, and Binnui, and Manasseh- The family of Pahathmoab also features in those who returned under Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:6) and were later noted for their work in rebuilding the walls (Neh. 3:11). And yet the founder of this family apparently had Gentile connections- "the pit of Moab". This might explain their tendency towards marriage out of the faith. But see on Ezra 8:4.

Ezra 10:31 Of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon- All these names are very 'spiritual'; but we can have a name we live and yet be spiritually dead and worldly.

Ezra 10:32 Benjamin, Malluch, Shemariah- Shemariah is LXX Samaria. This is incidental evidence that some of the ten tribes returned with the people of Judah. But the grand reunion of Israel and Judah on the basis of repentance, to form a new people of God, simply didn't happen; for most of the ten tribes as well as Judah chose to remain in captivity.

Ezra 10:33 Of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, Shimei- Admittedly "sons of..." may mean relatives. But if they were all the sons of Hashum, this is a sad spiritual statement about the family- that the seven sons all married out of the faith. We see here how spiritual attitudes spread so easily within families, and negative attitudes spread easier than positive ones.

Ezra 10:34 Of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, and Uel- Bani = "Builder", perhaps so named because he was keen to rebuild Jerusalem; it was a popular name because there are three separate men in this chapter called that name (:29,34,38). But, as we all can, he focused so much on the physical aspects of God's work that he failed to appreciate the spiritual implications.

Ezra 10:35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi- Benaiah was a popular name, taken in memory of the chiefest and most loyal of David's mighty men (2 Sam. 23:22); there are four men in this chapter of this name (:25,30,35,43). The tendency to name children after spiritual heroes is understandable, but spirituality isn't inherited; it has

to be personal. And these four men of this name are named and shamed here for their marriage out of the faith.

Ezra 10:36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib- In all, 12 "sons of Bani" married out of the faith. The family of "the builder" were shamed by their apostasy. To physically work for the Lord isn't the same as true personal spirituality.

Ezra 10:37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu- Again we note the Yah suffix or prefix in the names. But this was all external spirituality only.

Ezra 10:38 and Bani, and Binnui, Shimei- This seems to mark a new clan or "sons of...". LXX "And so did the children of Banui, and the children of Semei"; GNB "Clan of Binnui: Shimei, Shelemiah...". See on :34.

Ezra 10:39 and Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah- Shelemiah's son Hananiah worked on repairing the walls (Neh. 3:30). So perhaps Shelemiah's repentance was genuine and his son learnt the lesson from seeing his half-siblings being separated from.

Ezra 10:40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai- "Machnadebai" is a form of the word translated 'willingly offered' (Ezra 1:6; 2:68; 3:5; Neh. 11:2). And yet he married an unbeliever. No amount of freewill offering to God or voluntary work for Him can compensate for a heart given to Him. And he clearly lacked that, otherwise he wouldn't have married an unbeliever and been named and shamed for it.

Ezra 10:41 Azarel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah- Many of these names reflect thankfulness to God- meaning things like "God has helped" or "Yah has guarded". But it's as if the receipt of grace and recognition of grace had resulted in a continuance in sin that that grace might abound (as in Rom. 6:1), rather than a dedication of themselves solely to Him.

Ezra 10:42 Shallum, Amariah, Joseph- A name like Joseph is incidental evidence that some of the ten tribes returned with the people of Judah. But the grand reunion of Israel and Judah on the basis of repentance, to form a new people of God, simply didn't happen; for most of the ten tribes as well as Judah chose to remain in captivity.

Ezra 10:43 Of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Iddo, and Joel, Benaiah- Benaiah was a popular name, taken in memory of the chiefest and most loyal of David's mighty men (2 Sam. 23:22); there are four men in this chapter of this name (:25,30,35,43). The tendency to name children after spiritual heroes is understandable, but spirituality isn't inherited; it has to be personal. And these four men of this name are named and shamed here for their marriage out of the faith.

Ezra 10:44 All these had taken foreign wives; and some of them had wives by whom they had children- These relationships and children are defined as being part of mixing with the abominations of the peoples (Ezra 9:1,2). And "abominations" always refers to idol worship. So it could be that the relationships with these women were a result of sleeping with cult prostitutes and having children thereby. There was therefore far more to what happened than simply marrying out of the faith. To 'take daughters for themselves' (Ezra 9:2) may not mean marriage itself, but could refer to

the kind of cultic relationships which went along with idol worship at the shrines. This is why the separation from these women with whom they had had children would not then be quite the same as breaking up marriage and full blown family life.

We have seen that the demand to break up families was not in fact in accordance with God's law, which is "holy just and good", and is never willfully destructive of man. Again and again, Ezra invites us to ponder his motives, and the degree to which we can break one Divine principle in order to attempt to keep another. This in fact is the spirit in which Ezra's memoir ends, with this otherwise strange comment after Ezra had made the Jews divorce their Gentile wives: "some of them had wives by whom they had children" (Ezra 10:44). Ezra is looking back and reflecting on the long term impact of his decisions. For there was no Mosaic command to separate from Gentile wives. We could say that what he did haunted him, even though there were strands of sincerity in his motivation. Just as those who disfellowship individuals from churches in their zeal for "God's truth" end up wrecking families... and at the end of their days must look back and wonder about what they did... See on Ezra 8:22.

We read no more of Ezra until in Neh. 8:1 he is asked to read God's law to the people in Nehemiah's time. Ezra returned from Babylon in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7:7) in 458 BC, and Nehemiah arrived in the same king's twentieth year (Neh. 2:1) in 445. Ezra's work over those 13 years isn't recorded. In that time, Jerusalem had gone from a populated city (Ezra 1:1) to a depopulated city with broken down walls (Neh. 7:4; 11:1-3; 13:10-13). Possibly Ezra had returned to Babylon in that period; or perhaps he had a ministry which, like that of so many, produced little fruit. Yet still he kept on, for he reappears in Neh. 8:1 to read the law to the people. His attempt to fix the mixed marriages didn't go well, because Nehemiah had to address the same problem. The scene in Neh. 13 is very similar to that in Ezra 9,10- to make the point, that the problem recurred and Ezra had failed to address the root of the issue. But nearly all the prophets were failed reformers, and only a very few believers ever seem to remain consistently faithful to the Lord. In fact only Jonah, of all the prophets, had a successful ministry. On the other hand, we could say that Ezra himself is reflecting that his defining work had simply been to break up 112 marriages- and it hadn't worked. In Nehemiah's time, 13 years later, the people apparently had not even been taught the need to keep the feast of Tabernacles. They are very disobedient to Torah, practicing usury, not tithing and breaking the sabbath. Ezra's ministry had failed, or perhaps he had not really bothered doing the hard work of teaching God's word; he had simply maxed out on marriage out of the faith. And broken up families with kids. And in his memoirs, he admits this.