



Ezra and Nehemiah Judaism

Ezra and the Chronicles

The deportation to Babylon of the elites of the people of Judah, in 606 and 587, put an end to the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine. Most of those people, the northern tribes: Ephraim, Manasseh and the other less important ones, had already ceased to exist as the “Kingdom of Israel” after the Assyrian deportations of 634 and 621.

When Cyrus from Persia took over Babylon, in his decree of 538, he invited the deportees of Judah not to rebuild their kingdom, but instead, a Persian province of Jerusalem. However, nothing of the sort had happened with the northern tribes. They were never able to impose their culture and religion on the Canaanites and on the new immigrants with whom they had intermingled (2 K 17:24-34).

From then on, the history of Israel in Palestine will be the history of the province of Judah and the term Jewish came from the word Judea. The religious and cultural community that is going to be born and to develop is going to be known in history by the name of Judaism.

The Chronicles and the books of Ezra are the testimonies of the formation of Judaism. These books, that came into the Hebrew Bible at a later date, are inseparable.

Ezra and Nehemiah

It is not easy to discern what corresponds to each of these two men. In addition to the other reasons that might have induced the author to combine the work of these two men, he was deceived by the fact that, in various places, his documents were mentioning king Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7; 8:1; Ne 1:1; 2:1; 5:13...) as if he had been the only king. However, there were two kings with that name: Artaxerxes I, who ruled from 465 to 423, and Artaxerxes II, who ruled from 404 to 358.

Nehemiah probably arrived at Jerusalem in 445 and he went back where the king was in 433. Then he returned for a second mission at an undetermined time. He might not have been present when Darius II ruled (423-404). And it was only the seventh year of the rule of Artaxerxes II (Ezra 7:8), that is to say in 398, when Ezra arrived at Jerusalem.

The Stages of the Rebuilding of a People

The 538 decree of Cyrus was a sign of his benevolence with the different cultures and religions of the peoples that he had gathered in his immense empire although his intentions were also political. Be that as it may, he was not mistaken in trusting the Jews. The Jews who had already emigrated to many regions of the Middle East had acquired the reputation of being more trustworthy. Therefore, the rebuilding of the people of God would be the result of God’s teaching in previous centuries as well as the product of the circumstances that God had foreseen in the history of the world.

Zerubbabel

A first wave of deportees returned to the land of Judah and they tried to make room for themselves where others had occupied their abandoned lands. Zerubbabel, a descendant of Joachim the last king, stood out among the exiles and he took the initiative to rebuild the Temple, although he could only create a pale copy of it. The fact is that it was not as simple as it seemed (Ezra 4:1-6). The prophets Haggai and Zechariah had encouraged the work. The Temple was rebuilt in the year 520 (Hg 1:1; Zec 1:1). This was a first stage.

Nehemiah

The rebuilding of the Temple produced friction between the repatriates and the people who had stayed behind in the country. It was certainly a question of interests, due to the fear of those who had stayed and who were facing the arrival of more motivated groups who had the support of the king and of the richer Jews of Babylon. But it was also a religious question because if the people of God were no longer identified with a nation or a territory, the criteria of belonging to the community had to be redefined.

This situation lasted almost eighty years. The enthusiasm of the repatriates declined, morality in general stooped to the same level as that of the country's inhabitants. The prophets Zechariah, Malachi and third Isaiah denounced the same misdeeds as the previous prophets had done.

It was at that time that Nehemiah experienced his call. He understood that the community would not be respected if it did not have any borders. He was not seeking to become independent from the Persian Empire. However, ramparts were needed to face the threats, the violence of the powers in-between and of neighbors. Therefore, it would be necessary to reorganize the community, demanding solidarity from the richest toward their brothers and sisters in need and respecting the priority owed to divine worship. The community would escape the danger of being assimilated by its environment thanks to barriers that would soon be imposed: there would be no more mixed marriages and families would be Jewish; the Sabbath rest would be observed; civil power, like the priests, would be responsible for religious fidelity.

Ezra

Ezra arrived twenty years after Nehemiah. The Great King wanted all people to have a code of written laws. This is why he relied on a teacher of the Law for the Jews. The Law of the Jewish people was contained, in its entirety, in the sacred books. Although we do not know clearly if Ezra personally participated in the writing of the sacred books, we do owe their compilation to him (Ne 8:1). It was Ezra who really established "Judaism" by making the reading and the practical application of that Law into the supreme rule of the community. The document that we read in Ne 10 (the name of Nehemiah in verse 2 is an anachronistic insertion) confirms what Ezra had undertaken.

With Ezra, who was a priest and with his official mission, the group of priests became the dominant group of the Jewish province. The priests would necessarily be tied in with the Persian imperial power and they would guarantee stability, something which, at the religious level, contained a threat for the future. One might think that the prosperity of the Temple, the continuity of the sacrifices, the acceptance of the Law would assure appropriate relations between God and his people. However, the hope for new times diminished; prophetism became marginal and Ezra's later works would be included in the previous prophetic books just as it was the case with Joel and the second part of Zechariah.

That type of Judaism was not disavowed but it would be seriously questioned by the invasion of Hellenic culture and the Hasidean movement was going to emerge as a response from the Jewish soul. See the introduction to Daniel on that subject.

Cyrus helps the Jews return to Jerusalem

36:22-23;
Jer 25:11;
29:10;
Is 44:28

1 • ¹In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, Yahweh willed to fulfill the word he had said through the prophet Jeremiah, so he moved the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, to issue the following command and send it out in writing to be read aloud everywhere in his kingdom, ²“Thus speaks Cyrus, king of Persia: Yahweh, the God of heavens, who has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, has ordered me to build him a Temple in Jerusalem, in the land of Judah. ³To everyone belonging to his people, may his God be with him! Let them go up to Jerusalem with the help of their God and there build the House of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴In every place where the rest of the people of Yahweh live, let the people of those places help them for their journey with silver, gold and all kinds of goods and livestock. Let them also give them voluntary offerings for the House of Yahweh which is in Jerusalem.”

Is 45:1

Is 10:20

2:68;
Ne 7:69

⁵Then they rose up—the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, and all those whose spirit God had stirred up—and they decided to go and build the House of Yahweh. ⁶And all their neighbors gave them all kinds of help: gold, silver, livestock and precious objects in great quantity, besides every kind of voluntary offering.

2K 25:13

⁷King Cyrus also brought out the vessels of the House of Yahweh which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in

the house of his gods. ⁸Cyrus, the king, gave them into the hands of Mithredath, the treasurer, who counted them and turned them over to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

⁹This is the list: golden cups for the offering, 30; silver cups for offering, 1,000; knives, 29; ¹⁰other cups of gold, 30; of silver, 410; other vessels, 1,000.

¹¹Total number of golden and silver vessels: 5,400. All this was brought out by Sheshbazzar when the exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem from Babylon.

The list of the returning exiles

2 ¹These were the people of the province who returned from captivity and exile. After being deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, they returned to Jerusalem and to Judah, each to his own town. ²They arrived with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah.

Ne 7:6-72

The list of the clans of the people of Israel: ³the clan of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-two; ⁴the clan of Sehphathiah, three hundred and seventy-two; ⁵the clan of Arah, seven hundred and seventy-five; ⁶the clan of Pahathmoab, that is to say the sons of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve; ⁷the clan of Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four; ⁸the clan of Zattu, nine hundred and forty-five; ⁹the clan of Zaccai, seven hundred and sixty; ¹⁰the clan of Bani, six hundred and forty-two; ¹¹the clan of Bebai, six hundred and twenty-three; ¹²the clan of Azgad, one thousand two hundred and twenty-two; ¹³the clan of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-six; ¹⁴the clan of Bigvai, two thousand and fifty-six; ¹⁵the clan of Adin, four hundred and fifty-four; ¹⁶the clan of Ater, that is to say of Hezekiah, ninety-eight; ¹⁷the clan of Bezai, three hundred and twenty-three; ¹⁸the clan of Jorah, one hundred and

• **1.1** To understand the book of Ezra, it might be helpful to read the Introduction.

We note that only those who accept “being liberated” will be sent home. There can

be no liberation or external help for the indifferent.

Those who return *are those whose spirit has been aroused by God.*

twelve; ¹⁹the clan of Ha-shum, two hundred and twenty-three; ²⁰the clan of Gibbar, ninety-five; ²¹people of Bethlehem, one hundred and twenty-three; ²²people of Netophah, fifty-six; ²³people of Anathoth, one hundred and twenty-eight; ²⁴the clan of Azmaveth, forty-two; ²⁵people of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty-three; ²⁶people of Ramah and Geba, six hundred and twenty-one; ²⁷people of Michmas, one hundred and twenty-two; ²⁸people of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty-three; ²⁹people of Nebo, fifty-two; ³⁰people of Magbish, one hundred and fifty-six; ³¹people of another Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four; ³²people of Harim, three hundred and twenty; ³³people of Lod, Hadid and Ono, seven hundred and twenty-five; ³⁴people of Jericho, three hundred and forty-five; ³⁵people of Senaah, three thousand six hundred and thirty.

³⁶The priests: the clan of Jedaiah, that is to say the House of Jeshua, nine hundred and seventy-three; ³⁷the clan of Immer, one thousand and fifty-two; ³⁸the clan of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred and forty-seven; ³⁹the clan of Harim, one thousand and seventeen.

⁴⁰The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the descendants of Hodaviah, seventy-four.

⁴¹The Temple musicians: the clan of Asaph, one hundred and twenty-eight.

⁴²The gatekeepers: the clan of Shalum, the clan of Ater, the clan of Talmon, the clan of Akkub, the clan of Hatita, the clan of Shobai: in all, one hundred and thirty-nine.

⁴³The helpers: the clans of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, ⁴⁴Keros, Siaha, Padon, ⁴⁵Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub, ⁴⁶Hagab, Shamlai, Hanan, ⁴⁷Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah, ⁴⁸Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam, ⁴⁹Uzza, Paseah, Besai, ⁵⁰Asnah, the Meunites, the Nephisites, ⁵¹Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, ⁵²Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, ⁵³Barkos, Siera, Temah, ⁵⁴Neziah, Hatipha.

⁵⁵The clans of Solomon's slaves: Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda, ⁵⁶Jaalah,

Darkon, Giddel, ⁵⁷Shephatiah, Hattil, Pochereth-hazzebaim, Ami. ⁵⁸The total of the helpers and the sons of Solomon's slaves: three hundred and ninety-two.

⁵⁹The following who came from Telmelah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan and Immer, could not prove that their families and ancestry were of Israelite origin: ⁶⁰the clans of Delaiah, Tobiah, Nekoda: six hundred and fifty-two. ⁶¹And among the priests: the clans of Habaiah, Hakkoz, Barzillai, who had married one of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, whose name he adopted. ⁶²These people searched in their ancestral registers but could not be located in them, so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean ⁶³and His Excellency forbade them to eat the sacred foods until a priest could be found for the Urim and Thummim.

⁶⁴The whole assembly numbered forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty people, ⁶⁵not counting their slaves and maidservants to the number of seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven. They also had two hundred male and female singers. ⁶⁶Their horses numbered seven hundred and thirty-six, their mules two hundred and forty-five, ⁶⁷their camels four hundred and thirty-five and their donkeys six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

⁶⁸When they arrived at the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, some of the leaders of the clans made voluntary offerings for the Temple of God, for its rebuilding on its old site. ⁶⁹In accordance with their means they gave to the building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes.

⁷⁰The priests, Levites and part of the people settled in Jerusalem; the gatekeepers, Temple musicians, workmen and all the other Israelites, in their own towns.

Rebuilding the altar

3 ¹By the seventh month, the Israelites were already settled in their

Lev
22:10;
28:30

25:2;
Num 7:1

Ne 7:
72-8:1

• **3.1** For the Jews, the restoration of the Temple became an opportunity to rediscover how different they were from all the other nations in that they served the only God. It also

allowed them to affirm their identity as Jews among the people of the country, since working together strengthens unity.

We will also note that, when they first ar-

cities. Then all the people gathered in Jerusalem.

5:16 ²Joshua, son of Jozadak, with his fellow-priests, and Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, with his brothers, began rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel, to offer the sacrifices upon it, as it is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God.

9:1; 10:2 ³They built the altar in the same place, in spite of the fear they had of the people of the land, and they offered burnt offerings upon it, and the morning and evening sacrifice. ⁴They celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles as it is written, and offered burnt offerings daily according to the established ritual. ⁵Then they continued offering the perpetual sacrifice and the sacrifices on the sabbaths, the new moon and all the solemnities of Yahweh, besides what everyone would offer voluntarily to Yahweh.

29:38;
Num
28:6;
Dt 16:13

⁶They began offering burnt offerings on the first day of the seventh month, although the foundation of the House of Yahweh had not yet been laid.

⁷They gave money to the masons and the carpenters. They also gave food, wine and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar lumber from Lebanon to Joppa by sea, according to the authorization of Cyrus, king of Persia. ⁸In the second year, after their arrival at the House of God in Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, son of Jozadak, with the rest of their brothers, the priests, the Levites and all who had returned to Jerusalem from exile, began the work: they appointed the Levites who were twenty years old and upward to supervise the work in the House of Yahweh.

⁹Joshua, his sons and his brothers, Kadmiel and his sons, and the sons of Henadad, all together agreed to supervise those who worked in the House of God. ¹⁰When the workers had laid the foundation for the sanctuary of Yahweh, the priests, clothed in fine linen, came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, sons of Asaph, with cymbals, and they sang to Yahweh according to the ordinance of David, king of Israel.

¹¹They gave thanks to Yahweh, singing and praising: "For he is good, for his love for Israel is eternal."

Ps 100:5;
106:1;
Lev 23:4;
Num 29:1

All the people shouted aloud the praises of Yahweh for the foundation of the House of Yahweh had now been laid. Many of the priests, Levites and older heads of the families who have seen the first house wept with great lamentation as the foundation was laid. ¹²But others raised their voices with shouts of joy, ¹³and the people could not distinguish the shouts of rejoicing from the cries of weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the noise was heard afar.

Hag 2:3

The rebuilding is interrupted

4 ¹When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin learned that those who had returned from exile were building the sanctuary of Yahweh, the God of Israel, ²they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the families, and said to them, "Allow us to help you in the work of reconstruction for we are also concerned about your God. We have offered him sacrifices from the time of Esar Haddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here."

2K 17:24

³Zerubbabel, Joshua and the heads of the Israelite families answered them, "We

rived from exile, they generously offered to provide all that was needed to build the Temple (2:68). Yet, twenty years go by and the intervention of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah was needed to implement the projects agreed upon in the enthusiasm of their return.

• **4.1** With the support of the prophet Haggai (see Hg 2:10) the Jews refuse Samaritan cooperation in rebuilding the Temple. They have no desire to mix anything unclean in this religious endeavor. To put it differently, they are determined to build a community based on the practice of the Law and cannot

accept that unconverted people have any claim on the Temple.

The same thing happens now as well. Though we might wish to welcome everyone, we cannot surrender holy things nor leadership of the communities to unconverted people. Neither can the Church accept political support which would compromise its freedom.

The story begun in verses 1-5 continues in chapters 5 and 6. The Jews remain steadfast, and Providence helps them. They are assisted by Tattenai, the Persian governor of the province West-of-Euphrates, including all of Palestine with Samaria as the capital.

cannot let you join us, for we alone must rebuild it, as Cyrus, king of Persia, has commanded.”

Hag 1:2 ⁴Then the people of the land set about discouraging the workers of Judah and frightening them to keep them from building. ⁵They hired some counselors of the royal court to make the project fail, and they did this all during the time of Cyrus, king of Persia, until the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

An unrelated document

• ⁶In the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged a complaint against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. ⁷Again in the time of king Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Ta-beel, and the rest of their colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. So it began this way:

⁸“From Rehum, the governor, and Shimshai, the secretary, ⁹and from the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the legates, and all Persian officials, the people of Erech, Babylon and Susa, that is, the Elamites, ¹⁰and from the rest of the nations whom the great Assurbanipal deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province at the other side of the River...”

¹¹This is a copy of the letter they sent to king Artaxerxes:

“Your servants, the people beyond the River, send greetings.

¹²It should be made known to the king that the Jews who came up from your side to ours and have gone to Jerusalem are now building this rebellious and wicked city. They are now rebuilding the walls and have laid the foundation. ¹³Be it known, then, to the king, that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, they will no longer pay taxes, tributes or toll duties, and in the end, this city shall bring harm to the kings. ¹⁴Now, as we eat the salt of the palace and we do not wish to see the king dishonored, we are sending this information to the king. ¹⁵If you look into the records of your fathers, you will find that this city is a rebellious city. It has

disturbed the kings and the provinces, and has fostered sedition from of old. It is precisely because of this that it was destroyed. ¹⁶We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls restored, you will soon lose your territories on that side of the River.”

¹⁷The king wrote this in reply:

“To Rehum, the governor; to Shimshai, the secretary; and to the rest of their colleagues who are in Samaria and in the other places at the other side of the River: greetings.

¹⁸The letter you sent to me has been read word for word in my presence. ¹⁹I gave orders to inquire into these things, and it has been found that from ancient times that city has rebelled against the kings, and that sedition and rebellions have happened there.

²⁰There were powerful kings in Jerusalem, masters of all the land at the other side of the River, to whom tribute taxes and toll duties were paid.

²¹Therefore, order the people to stop work; they shall not rebuild that city without my authorization. ²²Do not neglect this grave concern, lest further harm be done to the kingdom.”

²³When the copy of this letter of king Artaxerxes was read before Rehum, the governor, Shimshai, the secretary, and their colleagues, they went hurriedly to Jerusalem and they used force and violence to make the Jews suspend their work.

²⁴So the work on the House of God in Jerusalem was interrupted and not begun until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

Work resumes

[5] ¹The prophets Haggai and Zechariah, son of Iddo, addressed the Jews who lived in Judea and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was with them. ²Upon hearing them, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, son of Jozadak, began to rebuild the House of God in Jerusalem. The prophets of God were with them, supporting them. ³Then Tat-tenai, the governor of the province at the

2K 18:7;
24:1

Ne 1:3

Hag 1:14;
Zec 4:9

Hag 2:23

• 6. The letter found in verses 6-23 corresponds to a later intervention on the part of the Samaritan notables when, a few years later, the Jews try to build the Jerusalem walls.

other side of the River, and Shethar Bozenai came with their counselors and said to them, "Who has ordered you to build this House and its walls?" ⁴And they also asked, "Who are the men working on the construction of this building?"

⁵But the favor of God was with the leaders of the Jews, for these people did not oblige the Jews to stop the work while the matter was being referred to king Darius and they were waiting for his answer.

⁶This is a copy of the joint letter to king Darius from Tattenai, governor of the province of the other side of the River, Shethar Bozenai and his counselors, the Persians at the other bank of the River:

⁷"To king Darius, peace.

⁸We wish to inform the king that we went to the province of Judea, to the House of the Great God. They are now building the Temple with hewn stones and timber to reinforce the walls; the work is being done with great care and progresses quickly at their hands. ⁹We questioned the Elders, and asked them: Who has ordered you to build this House and finish this Sanctuary? ¹⁰We also asked them their names and wrote down the names of their leaders for your information.

¹¹They gave us this answer: We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the House that was built many years ago. A great king of Israel built and finished it. ¹²But then, our ancestors angered the God of heaven, so he gave the children into the hands of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.

¹³However, in the first year of his reign Cyrus, king of Babylon, issued a decree that the House of God should be rebuilt.

¹⁴The gold and silver vessels of the House of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple of Jerusalem, and placed in the temple of Babylon, were taken from there by Cyrus and turned over to Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor. ¹⁵He said to him: Take these vessels, and bring them to the temple of Jerusalem, and let the House of God be rebuilt in the same place. ¹⁶Then Sheshbazzar came and laid

the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that time until now, it is gradually being rebuilt but is still not finished.

¹⁷Now, if it seems good to the king that inquiries be made into the royal archives there in Babylon, to verify whether a decree was indeed issued by king Cyrus for the rebuilding of the House of God in Jerusalem, then may the king inform us of his will in this matter."

Darius helps build the Temple

6 ¹Then king Darius commanded that inquiries be made in the house of the archives in Babylon, where the records were kept. ²And in Ecbatana, a fortress in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which the following was written:

³"In the first year of his reign, king Cyrus has issued this decree concerning the House of God in Jerusalem: Let the foundation of that House be laid and the House be rebuilt in order that sacrifices be offered in it. The said House shall be thirty meters high and thirty meters wide, ⁴with three layers of hewn stones and one of wood. The expenses shall be paid for by the house of the king. ⁵Moreover, the vessels of gold and silver, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple of Jerusalem, are to be returned to the place where these used to be kept in the House of God.

⁶Now therefore, I say this to you: Tattenai, governor of the province at the other side of the River, Shethar, Bozenai, and their Persian counselors living at the other side of the River, do not interfere in this matter. ⁷Let the governor of the Jews together with their leaders build the House of God on its former site.

⁸This is the command I give as to what you should do to help those Jewish leaders rebuild the House of God: pay the expenses in full and without delay, with the income from taxes of the province at the other side of the River which is allotted to the king. ⁹Then, upon the request of the priests of Jerusalem, give them daily and without fail what is needed for the sacrifices to the God of Heaven: young bulls, rams, lambs, wheat, salt, wine and oil. ¹⁰With these, they shall offer sacrifices acceptable to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and

1K 6:2;
7:10

Dt 12:11

his sons. ¹¹Moreover, I command the following: if anyone opposes these ordinances, a beam shall be pulled out of his house and he shall be hung on it, and his house reduced to a heap of ruin as punishment for his rebellion. ¹²And may the God who makes his Name dwell there crush every rebel, king or people, who goes against this and tries to destroy the House of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, give this command. Let it be carried out at once.”

¹³Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar Bozenai, and his counselors acted in conformity with the order of king Darius. ¹⁴And the leaders of the Jews continued to make progress in building, encouraged by what Haggai, the prophet, and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, had said; and they finished the work according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus and Darius. ¹⁵The House was finished on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius.

¹⁶The children of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of those who had returned from exile celebrated the consecration of this House of God with rejoicing, ¹⁷offering on this solemnity one hundred young bulls, two hundred rams and four hundred lambs; and twelve he-goats as a sin-offering for all Israel, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

29;
Lev 8

¹⁸Then they installed the priests according to their ranks, and the Levites according to their classes, for the service

of the house of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

¹⁹Those who had returned from exile celebrated the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month, ²⁰for the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together, and all of them were clean. So, they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all who had returned from exile, for their fellow-priests and for themselves.

²¹The Israelites who had returned from exile ate the Passover lamb with all those who had separated themselves from the people of the land and joined the returned exiles to seek Yahweh, the God of Israel. ²²They celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread joyfully for seven days; the reason for their joy was that Yahweh had turned the king of Assyria to look favorably on them so that they had been allowed to continue the work of rebuilding the House of the God of Israel.

12:15;
Lev 23:6

Ezra comes to Jerusalem

7 ¹After this, in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Seraiah, came from Babylon. He was a descendant of Azariah, Hilkiah, ²Shallum, Zadik, Ahitub, ³Amariah, Azariah, Meraioth, ⁴Zeremiah, Uzzi, Bukki, ⁵Abishua, Phinehas, Eleazar, and Aaron, the high priest.

⁶This Ezra, well-educated in the law given to Moses by Yahweh, the God of Israel, went up from Babylon, and as the hand of Yahweh, his God, was upon him,

• **7.1** Almost sixty years passed between what is related in chapter 6, the Passover of 515 and Ezra's mission. Ezra may have come in 458 or he may also have come in 427 after Nehemiah's first mission. Then, these chapters 7-10 should be read after Chapter 6 of Nehemiah.

Ezra was in the Persian province of Babylon as the person in charge of Jewish religious affairs. He was a priest and belonged to the groups which had meditated on the Law of Moses under the influence of Ezekiel. They had gathered the different texts and may even have edited the biblical books forming “the Law”—from Genesis to Deuteronomy—into their final version. These priests understood that Israel was beginning a new phase of its history. The Jews who had returned from the

Exile must be guided by God's Law. This law, which separates Jews from non-Jews and regulates all the details of life will become the foundation of a religious community—and later also of a political community—making them a united people.

Upon coming to Jerusalem with an official mission, Ezra intends to impose the Mosaic Law edited in its final form; the Jewish people are reborn as the people of the Law.

The Law will transform the Jewish people into a more faithful and responsible people, serving God in every detail. This also entails the risk of confusing authentic faith with external practices. A people who equate serving God with Temple worship and religious practice only can become indifferent to what is most important in life.

the king granted him all he asked. ⁷Many children of Israel, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants, also came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of king Artaxerxes.

⁸Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. ⁹He had left Babylon on the first day of the first month, and arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the good hand of his God was upon him. ¹⁰Ezra had indeed dedicated himself with all his heart in putting into action the Law of Yahweh and teaching his commandments and precepts to Israel.

¹¹Here is the copy of the letter given by king Artaxerxes to Ezra, priest and scribe, learned in the commandments and laws Yahweh has given to Israel.

¹²“Artaxerxes, King of kings, to Ezra, priest and teacher, learned in the Law of the God of heaven, peace.

¹³I have given orders so that all the Israelites who are in my kingdom and are ready to go with you to Jerusalem may leave with their priests and Levites. ¹⁴As for you, you shall go as the representative of the king and of his seven counselors to see to it that the Law of God which is in your hands is observed in Judah and Jerusalem, ¹⁵and to bring there the gold and silver which the king and his counselors have generously offered to the God of Israel, whose House is in Jerusalem. ¹⁶You shall also bring all the silver and gold you can gather in Babylon with the voluntary offerings of the people and the priests for the House of God in Jerusalem.

¹⁷With this money, take care to buy young bulls, rams, lambs, and everything needed for the grain offerings and the libations, which you shall offer upon the altar of the House of your God in Jerusalem. ¹⁸Do whatever seems best to you and your brothers with the rest of the silver and gold, according to the will of your God.

¹⁹Place before God in Jerusalem the vessels given to you for the service of the House of your God, ²⁰and take from the treasuries of the king whatever is needed to pay for other expenses for the House of your God.

²¹I, king Artaxerxes, command all the treasurers in the region at the other side of the River to do exactly all that Ezra,

priest and scribe, learned in the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of them, ²²giving him up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred sacks of wheat, a hundred measures of wine and a hundred measures of oil; salt shall be given him without measure. ²³Everything commanded by the God of heaven should be done with great care for the House of the God of heaven in order that his wrath may not come upon the kingdom, the king and his sons.

²⁴We also make it known that taxes, contributions or toll duties cannot be collected from any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, ministers and servants of this House of God.

²⁵And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God, appoint judges and magistrates to administer justice to all the people at the other side of the River, to all who know the Law of your God; and teach it to those who do not know it.

²⁶Whoever will not fulfill the Law of your God and the law of the king shall be severely punished with death, banishment, fine or imprisonment.”

²⁷Blessed be Yahweh, the God of our ancestors, who inspired the king with this will to exalt and glorify the House of Yahweh in Jerusalem, ²⁸and who let me win the favor of the king, of his counselors and of all his important officers. For my part, I took courage, since the hand of Yahweh my God was with me, and I gathered together the leaders of Israel to go up with me.

List of the Jews returning with Ezra

8 ¹These are the heads of clans who set out from Babylon with me in the reign of king Artaxerxes—their predecessors are named:

²Of the clan of Phinehas: Gershom; of the clan of Ithamar: Daniel; of the clan of David: Hattush ³son of Secaniah; of the clan of Parosh: Zechariah, with whom one hundred and fifty males were registered; ⁴of the clan of Pahath-moab: Eliehoenai, son of Zerariah, and with him two hundred males; ⁵of the clan of Zattu: Shecaniah, son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males; ⁶of the clan of Adin: Ebed, son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males; ⁷of the clan of Elam: Jeshaiiah, son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males; ⁸of the clan of Shepha-

tiah: Zebadiah, son of Michael, and with him eighty males; ⁹of the clan of Joab: Obadiah, son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males; ¹⁰of the clan of Bani: Shelomith, son of Josiphiah, and with him a hundred and sixty males; ¹¹of the clan of Bebai: Zechariah, son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males; ¹²of the clan of Azgad: Johanan son of Hakkatan, and with him a hundred and ten males; ¹³of the clan of Adonikam: the younger sons, whose names are: Eliphelet, Jeiel and Shemaiah, and with them sixty males; ¹⁴and of the clan of Bigvai: Uthai, son of Zabud, and with him seventy males.

¹⁵I gathered them by the river that runs to Ahava, and there we encamped for three days; and having searched among these people, I did not find anyone from the tribe of Levi. ¹⁶Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, who were leaders, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were wise. ¹⁷I gave them orders concerning Iddo, the leader who was in Casiphia; I gave them a message to relay to Iddo and his brothers, the helpers, in Casiphia, to send us ministers for the House of our God.

¹⁸As the good hand of God was with us, they brought us Sherebiah, a very sensible man, of the sons of Mahli, son of Levi, son of Israel, and with him were his sons and his brothers, numbering eighteen; ¹⁹Hashabiah and with him Isaiah of the sons of Merari, their brothers and their sons, twenty; ²⁰and of the helpers whom David and the leaders had placed at the service of the Levites, two hundred twenty-two men, all written down by name.

²¹There at the banks of the river Ahava, I proclaimed a fast so we might humble ourselves before our God, to implore him for a safe journey for ourselves, our children and our goods. ²²I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on the way, for we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is for good, upon all who seek him; and the power of

his wrath upon all who abandon him." ²³So we fasted and prayed to our God for this intention, and he listened to us.

²⁴I chose twelve of the leaders of the priests, besides Sherebiah and Hashabiah and ten of their brothers. ²⁵I weighed out before them the silver and gold, the consecrated vessels given by the king, his counselors and his leaders, and by all the Israelites who were there, for the House of our God. ²⁶And I entrusted into their hands six hundred and fifty talents of silver, silver vessels worth a hundred talents, ²⁷twenty bowls of gold worth a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as vessels of gold. ²⁸Then I said to them, "You are consecrated to Yahweh, these vessels are sacred objects, and the silver and gold are voluntary offerings made to Yahweh, the God of our ancestors. ²⁹Take care of them and keep them until you weigh them before the leaders of the priests, the Levites and the families of Israel in Jerusalem, in the chambers of the House of Yahweh."

³⁰Then, the priests and the Levites received all that we had weighed: the silver and gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem to the House of our God.

³¹We left the banks of the river Ahava to go to Jerusalem on the twelfth day of the first month. The hand of God was with us and he kept us from all attacks and ambushes from enemies throughout our journey. ³²We arrived in Jerusalem where we rested for three days. ³³On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver, the gold, and the vessels were weighed into the hands of the priest Meremoth, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar, son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad, son of Jeshua, and Noadiah, son of Binnui. ³⁴After counting and weighing everything again, the total weight was written down.

³⁵The Jews who had returned from exile offered sacrifices to the God of Israel: twelve young bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin-offering, twelve he-goats. All these were burnt offerings to Yahweh.

Num 3:8

1K 6:5;
Ezk 41:5

• 8.21 Note this section where the strict master of the Law, Ezra, appears very human and likable.

³⁶ And the decrees of the king were delivered to his governors and officials of the province beyond the River, who helped the people and the House of God.

About intermarriages

Mal 2:10

9 • ¹After all this was finished, the leaders approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites have not departed from the pagan peoples and are now serving the idols of the Canaanites, the Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. ²For they took women from among these people for themselves and for their sons, and mixed their holy race with that of the pagans. The leaders and magistrates were the first in committing this sin.”

Ne 9:2

³When I heard this, I tore my garments and my mantle, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down very much grieved. ⁴All who remembered the words of the God of Israel gathered around me; they were afraid because of this sin committed by those who had returned from exile. ⁵I remained seated and dismayed until the evening sacrifice; and then, at the time for the evening offering, I rose from my fasting, and with my clothes and mantle torn, I knelt down, spreading out my hands to Yahweh, my God.

Is 66:2;
34:15;
Dt 7:3

⁶I said, “My God! I am ashamed and confused, my God, I do not dare raise my eyes to you for our sins have increased over our heads and our crimes reach up to the heavens.

⁷From the days of our ancestors to

this day, our guilt has been great. We, our kings and priests have been given into the hands of foreign kings because of our crimes; we have been delivered to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and put to shame as on this day. ⁸However, for a brief moment, the mercy of Yahweh, our God, has been shown to us. He made a remnant of our people survive, and allowed the survivor to settle once again in his Holy Place; he has given us joy and life, though we are in bondage. ⁹We are no more than slaves, but in the midst of our slavery, God has not abandoned us, he has extended a merciful hand over us to support us before the kings of Persia. He has revived our life, enabled us to rebuild the House of our God, and to have walls in Jerusalem and in the other cities of Judah.

¹⁰But now, our God, what shall we say when, in spite of all this, we have abandoned your commandments? ¹¹You have said through your servants, the prophets: The land you are entering to take possession of was defiled by the impurities of its inhabitants; they made it entirely unclean from one end to the other with their idolatry. ¹²Therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters as wives for your sons. Do not work with them for their prosperity and well-being forever. Be strong, eat the best fruits of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever.

Lev
18:25;
Dt 18:9

¹³After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our sins, you, our God, have pardoned our wickedness,

• **9.1** The Jews were intermingled with people who did not share their religion and thus they were in danger of losing their identity. Ezra is worrying about the future and thinks that the identity of Jewish people, now living among not Jewish, must be strengthened by very strict laws. The prohibition of marrying with not Jewish persons is one of the key elements of this legislation: God’s people will never be confused with the others, even leaving in the same territory, and family will necessarily be Jewish.

The barriers built by Ezra proved very effective and we may see the will of God there. The Jewish people resisted very harsh persecutions (see Maccabees). Then, after the coming of

Christ, they were dispersed and had to live for almost twenty centuries among officially Christian countries that usually persecuted them or tried to convert them to the Christian faith through every means. Possible yet, the Jewish people have remained unique in history—in part, thanks to their faithfulness to the Law. Christians can also draw a lesson from all of this. If we are called to be yeast for the masses, co-existing without prejudices with people of different creeds, we also need demands and external practices, accepted by all who join our Christian community.

See what is said to this effect in Nehemiah 13.

since you allowed all who are here to survive. ¹⁴How could we despise your commandments once more and intermarry with these wretched peoples? Will you not be angry with us and destroy us without leaving any remnant or survivors?

¹⁵Yahweh, God of Israel, you are just; see that we are a remnant of survivors. We are here in your presence with our sins, but we cannot remain so in your presence.”

The foreign wives are cast out

10 ¹While Ezra bowed before the House of God, weeping, praying and making this confession, a great crowd of men, women and children of Israel were gathered around him; and these people wept bitterly.

²Then Shecaniah, son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have treated our God badly, by marrying foreign women taken from the peoples of this land, but Israel is not without hope because of this. ³Let us make a covenant with our God, and send these women away with their children according to the statement of my lord and all of us who respect the commandment of our God. ⁴Let the Law be obeyed. You command and we are with you. Have courage and command.”

⁵So Ezra arose and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites and of all Israel swear that they would do what had just been said, and so they swore. ⁶Then, Ezra withdrew from where he stood, in front of the House of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan, son of Eliashib, but he did not eat bread or drink water there, for he was much afflicted by the sin of those who had returned from exile. ⁷A proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all who had returned from exile should assemble in Jerusalem, ⁸and if anyone would not come within three days, according to the decision of the leaders and of the local elders, all his property would be confiscated and he himself banned from the assembly of those who had returned from exile.

⁹All the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled in Jerusalem within the three days. It was the twentieth day of the ninth month, and all the people were in the open square of the House of God, trem-

bling because of this matter and because it was raining.

¹⁰Then the priest Ezra stood up and said, “You have been rebels in marrying foreign women, and have increased the offense of Israel. ¹¹Now then, acknowledge your sin before Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, and carry out his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of this land and from your foreign wives.”

¹²The whole assembly answered with a loud voice, “Yes, we shall do as you say.

¹³But the people are so numerous and we are now in the rainy season; we cannot endure the inclement weather, and besides, this matter cannot be settled in a day or two, for we are many who have committed this sin. ¹⁴Our leaders can represent the whole assembly: those in our cities who have married foreign women shall come at appointed times, accompanied by the local leaders and judges of every city, until we have turned aside from us the anger of our God because of this matter.”

¹⁵The only ones who opposed this option were Jonathan, son of Asahel, and Jahzeiah, son of Tikvah, who were supported by the Levites Meshullam and Shabbethai. ¹⁶But those who had returned from exile complied. In accordance with what the priest Ezra ordered, they selected a family head for every family group, each of them designated in a personal way, and they sat down to resolve the matter on the first day of the tenth month.

¹⁷On the first day of the first month, they finished attending to all the cases of Jews who had been married to foreign women.

The list of the guilty

¹⁸In the clan of the priestly clans, these are the names of those who were found to have married foreign women: among the clan of Jeshua, son of Jozadak, and among his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah; ¹⁹they pledged their word to put their wives away and, for their sin, offered a ram as a sacrifice of reparation;

²⁰In the clan of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah;

²¹In the clan of Harim: Maaseiah, Eliah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uziah;

²²In the clan of Pashhur: Elieoia,

Gen
41:45;
Num
12:1;
Ru 1:4;
Dt 23:4

Jos 7:19;
Jer 13:16;
Mal 2:2

Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasah.

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

²⁴ Among the Temple musicians: Eliashib and Zaccur.

Among the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem and Uri.

²⁵ And among the Israelites:

of the clan of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah and Benaiah;

²⁶ of the clan of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Meremoth and Elijah;

²⁷ of the clan of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad and Aziza;

²⁸ of the clan of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, Athlai;

²⁹ of the clan of Bigvai: Meshullam, Maluch, Jedaiah, Jashub, Sheal, Jeremoth;

³⁰ of the clan of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui and Manasseh;

³¹ of the clan of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, ³² Benjamin, Malluch, Shemariah;

³³ of the clan of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, Shimei;

³⁴ of the clan of Bani: Maadai, Amran, Uel, ³⁵ Benaiah, Bediah, Cheluhi, ³⁶ Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, ³⁷ Mattaniah, Matenai and Jaasau; ³⁸ of the clan Binnui: Shimei; ³⁹ Shelemiah, Nathan and Adariah. ⁴⁰ of the clan Zaccai: Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai ⁴¹ Azarel, Shelemiah Shemariah, ⁴² Shallum, Amariah, Joseph;

⁴³ of the clan of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, Benaiah.

⁴⁴ All these had married of foreign wives; they put them away, both women and children.