

Day 280

The Separation from Foreign Wives c458BC

Ezra 9.1 – 10.44

When Ezra finds out that the Israelites have begun intermarrying with Canaanite women, he is distraught. Not only is this not permitted in the *Torah*, but the outcome is always the leading of the Jewish man astray to get involved with the pagan non-gods of the land.

Ez.9.1-4 Even the priests and Levites have been involved with marrying with the local women; presumably this refers to those who came with Zerubabel in the first tranche of returnees, who have in the meantime got involved with the indigenous people.

Ez.9.5 – 15 Ezra is a man of prayer – it has already been seen how he refuses Artaxerxes' protection preferring to pray and fast and seek God for safety. Now, having spent time in mourning before the Lord, he gets up and then kneels down to pray, as Daniel did, and 'spreads his hands out to the Lord' (Heb וַאֲפָרְשָׁה כַּפָּי אֶל-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי) *Ve'ephresah kappai el-Adonai(YHWH) Elohai*, from a meaning to spread out or to extend – this is interesting given Paul's exhortation for prayer to be made 'lifting holy hands' in 1 Timothy 2.8.) and prays.

Ezra expresses his shame at having experienced the favour of the Lord and of the king as a remnant of His people, yet still seeing the disobedience of the men who are giving themselves to idol worshippers in their marriage to them. He is afraid that the Lord in His anger will wipe out even this remnant.

Ez.10.1-4 Seeing Ezra's distress and burden in prayer, some of the Israelites see and gather around him. A man named Shekhaniah ben Jehiel proposes that they take drastic action and covenant to separate from the women of Canaan, with any children of those marriages. He urges Ezra to lead the action, and says they will support him.

Ez.10.5-8 Ezra leads the people of Israel to take an oath to make the separation, with sanctions of expulsion for those who do not take the needed action. He is still mourning and pouring out his grief to the Lord.

Ez.10.9-11 The picture painted here in words is very poignant, a sombre gathering of all Israel's men who have returned, sitting in the great square before the Temple, distressed by the reason for their coming together 'and because of the rain.' It is touches like this that render the Scriptures so credible; the ability of a writer to record this depressing moment in their story lets us see that this is not a glorified propaganda film, but a place of distress. Ezra appeals to the assembly to separate from the foreign women and their offspring.

Ez.10.12 – 15 The gathering responds with an almost unanimous agreement, and then want to get out of the rain! A commission is suggested who will sort out the terms of the separations, to ensure the Lord's anger is diverted from them. There is opposition, however, from Jonathan Ben Asahel and Jahzeiah Ben Tiqvah, with the backing of a couple of others, but they are in a tiny minority.

Ez.10.16 – 44 Representatives of the clans of the remnant are nominated to be part of the commission to deal with the mass separations, and their record of the names of those of the priests, the Levites and the other Israelites are presented as a sign of the sacrifice made by a people to put the Lord first. It is a hard road they are walking. It behoves us not to seek to fit this terrible and painful scene into a systematic morality, but to stand in awe at the repentance and its consequences of a people who know their God but have hurt Him with their actions.

Day 281

Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls c445BC

Nehemiah 1.1 – 3.32

Neh.1.1 – 4 Nehemiah Ben Hakhaliah, who is cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia (another Jew attaining high office) hears from an incoming friend who has arrived from Judah that the city of Jerusalem is undefended and still in ruinous condition. He grieves over this, then like Ezra, fourteen years before him, he prays.

Neh.1.5 – 11 He confesses the sin of his people, and asks the Lord to hear his prayer to favour him with an audience with the king when he is in his presence that day.

Neh.1.11 – 2.6 Nehemiah is unusually sad at his work of wine-tasting for the king, and this provokes Artaxerxes to ask what the matter is. Nehemiah tells him of the broken-down state of Jerusalem, and asks for permission to go back and help restore it.

Neh.2.7 – 8 Nehemiah asks for guarantees of safe conduct and also for materials from the royal forest to provide wood for building work, which he receives.

Neh.2.9-10 The local Samaritan officials of the government, Tobiah and Sanballat, are angry at the promotion of the Israelite welfare in the region. They will be making trouble for Nehemiah soon.

Neh.2.11-16 Without declaring his intentions, Nehemiah does a night inspection of the state of the city's defences. He says nothing to any of the local government officials of his plans.

Neh.2.17-20 Nehemiah proceeds to put his programme of rebuilding works to the local leaders, and backs it up with the royal support he has received. The Samaritan officials and an Arab named Geshem question the Jews' authority to rebuild. Nehemiah tells them that it's none of their business, and that God will give them success.

Neh.3.1-32 Nehemiah has a plan of works which has different people taking responsibility for different parts of the restoration. In this way, the whole circuit of the city wall and its gates is being worked on.

Day 282

Opposition from the Samaritans, Exploitation by the Jews

Nehemiah 4.1 – 6.16

Neh.4.1 – 5 Sanballat and Tobiah the Samaritan local officials hurl insults at the Jews for their work, saying that they are slow, that the quality is poor and that it will fall down at any moment. Nehemiah responds with a prayer, calling on the Lord for vindication in the face of this abuse.

Neh.4.6 – 9 The opposition now resorts to threats of violence, when the work is halfway through. But Nehemiah organises a round-the-clock watch to guard the workers.

Neh.4.10-12 On top of the possibility of attack, the workers are becoming discouraged at the scale of the work, with so much rubble to clear and failing strength.

Neh.4.13-23 To give more protection, the guard is redoubled at the points where the walls are most vulnerable. Nehemiah stirs the people to committed work, and reminds them of the Lord's presence with them. The enemy then gives up his attack plan, and the work continues with half the work force guarding the other half who were engaged on the rebuilding. He also devises an alarm system for the people to rally to the trumpeter when danger threatens. The work is so urgent, they live in the same clothes and stay armed and alert at all times, even when they go to relieve themselves.

Neh.5.1 – 5 In times of social crisis, there are always those who are willing to exploit the need of others for their own enrichment. It transpires that in order to get food, some of the Jewish families have had to mortgage their land, not only to pay for provisions, but also to be able to pay taxes which are being exacted by the local authorities and the interest which is being charged on the loan. If they are not able to pay, their daughters are being taken into slavery as payment in kind.

Neh.5.6-13 On hearing this, Nehemiah is furious, but he doesn't just react, - he considers and thinks about it (Heb וַיִּמְלֶךְ לִבִּי עָלַי *ve'yimmalekh libbi alay*, literally, 'and I caused it to reign to my heart over me', I gave space to my heart to speak.) Then he takes up the issue with the other leaders. His charge is that they are taking interest from loans to fellow Jews at a rate of one percent, something forbidden by the law of Moses. What is to be noted here is that Nehemiah is also lending money and grain to fellow Jews, so he is able to speak as one involved in the situation.

Nehemiah complains that the effect of what is happening is to re-enslave the freed people, who end up back in captivity because they can't pay their taxes. At a large gathering, Nehemiah demands the return of money and lands held in mortgage, as well as the interest charged! The lenders are so ashamed, that they agree to this, and an oath is taken to release the oppressed from their debts, with Nehemiah pronouncing a curse over anyone who does not comply.

There is a different spirit abroad among the Jews, it seems. They are more willing to hear the Lord when He speaks through His servants, perhaps aware of the terrible consequences of ignoring Him as they have done in the past.

Neh.5.14 – 19 Nehemiah as a governor does not take the perks of the job, the large amounts of provisions provided under the Persian law. Neither does he appropriate any land, but focuses on the building work. In addition, Nehemiah has one hundred and fifty guests to eat at his table every day at his own expense, because of the hard situation they are in. For this, he commends his work to the Lord.

Neh.6.1- 9 Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, the opposing leaders, do not give up their campaign of intimidation. They try and get Nehemiah to an out-of-town location to kill him, and when that fails, they accuse him of leading a revolt in which he plans to re-establish the throne of David, and have prophets prophesy the kingdom. Nehemiah does not yield to any of it, but dismisses them, praying for fresh courage to go on.

Neh.6.10 – 13 A Jew named Shemaiah Ben Delaiah invites Nehemiah to his well-secured house, and counsels him to take shelter in the sanctuary of the Temple, to hide from the enemy who he says is coming to take Nehemiah's life. Nehemiah realises this is a set-up, and that Shemaiah is in the pay of Tobiah and Sanballat. If Nehemiah were to go into the holy place, as a non-Levite, he would be desecrating the Temple, and disgracing himself. He sees the ploy and rejects it outright.

Neh.6.14 – 19 One of the major problems with Tobiah and his influence on the Jews is that he is joined by marriage to many of the Jews, having married the daughter of a leading Jewish family. This means his letters of intimidation are the more difficult to resist.

Nonetheless, the wall is completed; the enemies are discredited and give up, realising that the Lord has been helping in this great work.

Day 283

The Resettlement of Jerusalem c444BC

Nehemiah 7.1 – 73; 11.1- 12.26

Having completed the building up of the walls of Jerusalem, it is now seriously under-populated. Also, given the hostility shown towards the Jews in the rebuilding, there is a need to make the city secure in terms of access through the now-repaired gates.

Neh.7.1-3 Nehemiah as governor (Heb פֶּחַח *Pechah*, (see Neh 12.26) a Persian word for governor, just less than a satrap in the Persian hierarchy,) appoints his brother Hanani and the commander of the fort, Hananiah to oversee the city and its safety, and he sets the opening times of the gate from when the sun is well up until the end of the gatekeeper's duties at night. There are also to be guards to police the city from among the residents.

Neh.7.4 – 73 Although the walls have been built, there are few habitable houses in it. Nehemiah hears the Lord call him to take a census, (which is important, given the

previous problems with unauthorised censuses,) and he registers all those who have returned from exile and their pedigree. A long list of the returnees follows, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and even those who claim their lineage from the servants of King Solomon. As before, those priests who could not find the record of their lineage were required wait until divine lots could be taken, so that they did not desecrate the Temple.

The total number registered is around fifty thousand people, including slaves, plus a large number of animals for transport and labour, notably six thousand seven hundred donkeys, far outnumbering the horses, mules and camels.

11.1-2 In order to re-inhabit the holy city, lots are drawn to take one in ten of the men to live in Jerusalem. These are commended by the people for their willingness to move.

11.3 – 19 There is a record given of those who moved in to the new situation, a mixture of all the people, including the priesthood.

11.20 – 36 There is also a record of where officials stayed in Jerusalem, and where the people settled as returnees back in the land of Judah, finding lands in the place that once had belonged to them, now living among others with whom they shared the territory.

12.1 – 26 This chapter of Nehemiah is a record of the priests and Levites who had come back to the land in the original return with Zerubbabel, including the singers. Finally, a family tree of the high priests, their families and the Levitical leaders are given, all given their roles in the service of the second temple, whether praising the Lord, or watching the gates and storerooms.

Day 284

The Great Reading of the Torah

Nehemiah 8.1 – 10.39

Neh.8.1 – 6 On the day of *Rosh Ha-Shana*, the first day of the civil year, first of the month of Tishri, the seventh month, Israel gathers for an extraordinary festival, as the scrolls of the *Torah* of Moses are produced. Both men and women are together for this major event, something reasonably unusual in the culture of Israel, as well as all those of understanding, including older children.

From sun-up until noon, Ezra reads from the Law, surrounded by Levites, and the people listen attentively. When he opens the book, everyone stands, and Ezra praises the Lord, joined by the Amen of the people, who then engage their bodies in worship as they bow down before the Lord, prostrate.

Neh.8.7 – 8 Not only is the *Torah* read, but the Levites give commentary and illumination to the people, so that they can follow the meaning.

Neh.8.9 – 12 There is an awesome sweep of emotion across the crowd as they listen to the history of God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness, as they hear the promises of

blessing to Abraham and Moses, and as they realise how hard-hearted their ancestors have been. They hear how the Lord had foretold to them how harsh the reign of the kings would be, and the blessings and curses of Ebal and Gerizim. And so they weep, a great howling and mourning breaks out. But Ezra and Nehemiah are afraid that the focus of the day will be taken away from the greatness of the Lord and onto the emotion of the people. They call for a break in the reading, and for some relief, for people to go home and send one another presents and sweets to celebrate.

Next day there is opportunity to do something very creative. It is time for the re-enactment of the sojourn in the desert after the Exodus by a celebration of *Sukkot*, the festival of booths, from the second day of the month. There is a party atmosphere now as the people build huts of palm-fronds and branches on their house-roofs; there had not been a celebration like this since Joshua's day. During the festival, the reading of Torah continues, as the people experience what they are reading about.

Neh.9.1-38 Later in the seventh month, there is a corporate confession of sin, alternating with worship of the Lord. The Levites lead the gathering in a prayer of contrition, remembering the covenant with Abraham, the deliverance from Egypt, the waywardness of the nation and their rebellion that led to the captivity. The prayer ends with a ringing declaration of the incessant *chesed*, the self-sacrificial obligation of the Lord, deriving from his covenant. They recognise they are still in slavery, held in the sway of the Persian Empire, but intent on serving the Lord as a people.

Neh.10.1- 27 A list is given of those who sign the covenant, sealing it with their various seals, beginning with Nehemiah, then the priests, the Levites and the leaders of the people.

Neh.10.28 – 39 The second part of the chapter gives the content of the covenant which is made with the Lord by the people, a covenant to keep themselves holy to God, belonging only to Him, under the force of a curse and an oath. Foreign marriage will not be entered into, Sabbath will be kept, tithes and offerings given and the priesthood ordered in their service at the Temple. 'We will not neglect God's house', they promise.

Day 285

The Dedication of the Wall c425BC

Nehemiah 13.4 – 11, 15 – 31; 12.27 – 47, 13.12-14; 13.1-3

Nehemiah returns to Susa and the court of Artaxerxes around 432BC, later asking permission to make a revisit to Jerusalem. He finds things already serving to rot after the declarations of the people to follow the Lord.

Neh. 13.4 – 11 In particular, a priest named Eliashib has provided Tobiah the Canaanite accommodation in the very Temple itself. Nehemiah expels the enemy from the Temple and his goods. He also restores the supplies for the Levites and singers who have not been paid, admonishing the local officials in the process for their neglect.

Neh.13.15 – 22 Nehemiah is shocked to see work and trade carrying on on the Sabbath, including Gentiles from Tyre selling fish to the resting city. He has the city gates closed so that nothing can go in or out on Sabbath, with a guard set up.

Neh.13.23 – 31 It is also discovered that Jew have married Philistines, Ammonites and Moabites. Nehemiah takes action against these men and has them corporally punished with beating and pulling out of their hair. Nehemiah reminds them of the terrible downfall of Solomon, resulting from his congress with foreign women. Even one of the high priest's sons, Joiada, has married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite – he is removed from the community.

The priests are then ritually purified, and an order put in place for the provisions of the Temple.

Neh.12.27 – 30 Nehemiah has perhaps returned from Susa specifically to attend the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem whose restoration he was so instrumental in overseeing. Now he witnesses a great festal gathering, with singers and musicians from all around the region coming together, as the priests purify themselves, then the gates and the reconstructed wall.

Neh.12.31 – 39 There is a vivid description given of the forming of the singers and musicians into two choirs, proceeding in opposite directions around the city walls, meeting up at the Guard Gate. As they go, Ezra leading the first choir, they are singing songs of thanksgiving to the Lord.

Neh.12.40-43 Arriving at the Temple they join up to sing praise, while sacrifices are made. There is a great sound of joy carrying into the hills around the restored city.

Neh.12.44 – 47, 13.12-14 The provisions are brought into the Temple storehouses to ensure that the priesthood is supplied as they serve the Lord. The regular service of worship is reconstituted also, as in the days of David. Nehemiah commends his work to the Lord as the fruit of his life.

Neh.13.1-3 The *Torah* is read during this assembly, and it is found that Moabites and Ammonites are specifically excluded from the Temple, because of their refusal to aid Israel in their travels through the desert in centuries gone by.

Thus Israel is back in the land; she will continue to suffer oppression for centuries to come, but never again will she be able to shut herself away from the nations to whom she is destined to be a blessing.

Day 286

The Chronicles of Israel

1 Chronicles 1.1 – 2.41;4.1-23; 3.10 – 24

Because telling the story is so important to the people of Israel, they take care to record the line of descents, so that each one can know their place in the unfolding drama.

Anyone who has traced a family tree will know how useful it is to know who one's antecedents were. In the case of priests and Levites, it is essential in order for them to serve with a clearly defined lineage back to the tribe of Levi.

1 Chron.1.1-4 The common line from Adam to Noah, and his three sons.

1 Chron.1.5-7 The Japhethites in tradition and legend are those descendants of Japheth who went west and built nations such as Greece (Javan) and Spain (Tarshish).

1 Chron.1.8 – 16 The Hamites were by tradition those who settled in the middle East and north Africa, such as Egypt (Mizraim), Ethiopia (Cush) and Canaan, father of the Canaanite tribes.

1 Chron.1.17 – 27 The Shemites (or Semites) were those who by tradition settled in the Fertile Crescent and eastern deserts, giving rise to northern nations, such as Assyria (Asshur), Arabs (Ishmael) and of course Jews, through Nahor and Abraham.

1 Chron.1.28 – 42 Here are given the sons of Abraham down to the children of Esau, Jacob's brother.

1 Chron.1.43-50 The Kings of Edom (Esau's descendants) are named.

1 Chron.1.51- 54 At this point, a seldom-used term of leadership is introduced as the designation of the chiefs of Edom; they are called *aluph* (Heb אֱלִיפִי), linked to the word for bullock in Semitic language. The AV has them as 'dukes', other translations render them as 'chiefs.'

1 Chron.2.1-2 Here we are given Jacob-Israel and his twelve sons.

1 Chron.2.3 – 41 The descendants of Judah are important, because it is from them that the line of David and the later kings comes. Jesse, David's father appears along with David at 1 Chron.2,13 & 15, with his brothers also named.

1 Chron.4.1 – 23 Judah's descendants continue, with an interesting stop at the character of Jabez in 4.9; he is named as more honourable than his brothers, because he calls on the name of the Lord for increased territory and freedom from pain, which the Lord gives him. This prayer, the prayer of Jabez, has become a popular prayer in modern times.

1 Chron.3.10-16 Here are listed the Kings of Judah from Solomon to Zedekiah.

1 Chron.3.17-24 The royal line is continued after the exile, including Zerubbabel who returns with the first returnees from exile.