

Hello everyone,

PERCENT OF BIBLE COMPLETED: 67.7%

Weekly Readings will cover:

Sunday: Esther 9 & 10

Monday: Ezra 4:7 – 23

Tuesday: Ezra 7

Wednesday: Ezra 8

Thursday: Ezra 9

Friday: Ezra 10

Saturday: Nehemiah 1

Current # of email addresses in the group: 627

Happy Sabbath everyone! This next week we will finish two more books (Esther & Ezra). At the end of the week we start Nehemiah. We have 4 weeks left in the Old Testament!

Keep up the great work!

Current and archive of this reading program is available at:

<https://www.ucg.org/congregations/san-francisco-bay-area-ca/announcements/audio-links-re-three-year-chronological-deep>

The audio archive information is also available on our UCG Bay Area YouTube page here:

https://youtube.com/@ucgbayarea5792?si=EA_tacLBfv1XR3jH

You may actually prefer accessing it directly from this Playlist tab:

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3-YEAR CHRONOLOGICAL STUDY: Week 105

Read the following passages & the Daily Deep Dive on the daily reading.

Day 708 – SUNDAY: August 3rd

Esther 9 & 10

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: “The day decreed for the attack on the Jews, and subsequently for the Jews to strike out against their enemies in self-defense—even preemptively if deemed necessary—finally arrives ([Esther 9:1](#)). The 13th day of the 12th month, Adar, corresponds to March of 473 B.C. This day had been determined by Haman's

superstitious casting of lots, but it seems likely that God had interfered in the process—causing the date to be sufficiently late enough for the Jews to both determine who their enemies were and to make preparations against them. On this fateful day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to prevail, the opposite happened.

Besides the general fear that had come on the people of the empire because of the Jews' apparent divine favor and help, we are told that the officials of the land helped the Jews on this occasion because of their particular fear of Mordecai's growing influence in the empire (verses 2-4). They may have been trying to garner political favor with the new prime minister, and at the very least were trying to secure themselves against any possible reprisal.

In verses 7-14 we see a return to the conflict with Haman in the killing of his 10 sons. "The patterns of reprisal and vengeance were so deeply ingrained in the cultures of the ancient Middle East that the survival of even one of these sons might mean trouble for the next generation of Jewish people. By listing each of the vanquished sons of their mortal enemy, the Jewish people celebrated the fact that the victory was complete" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 7-10). It could also be that these sons had taken or threatened action against the Jews at some point. Moreover, we may perhaps see in this a continuation of the carrying out of the ancient divine edict of destroying the Amalekites. King Ahasuerus granted Esther's request that the bodies of Haman's sons be publicly displayed on the gallows (verses 11-14). This was to serve as a deterrent against anyone contemplating harm against the Jews.

Having overcome their enemies on Haman's determined day, the Jews set aside the next day, the 14th of Adar, as a holiday for celebration. The Jews at Shushan, however, were granted permission to continue fighting through the 14th. So they set aside the 15th as the day to celebrate (verses 13-19). Mordecai sent a letter directing the Jews to

observe both days annually from then on and this became an accepted custom (verses 20-25, 27). The days were referred to as *Purim*, named after the word *pur*, meaning "lot" (verse 26; see verse 24; 3:7). *Purim* is the plural.

At some point Esther sent out a second letter with Mordecai confirming the tradition of observing Purim ([Esther 9:29-32](#)). Though God had not established this feast in the law, it was appropriate for the Jews to commemorate God's intervention on their behalf in this annual celebration. Purim is similar in this respect to Hanukkah, which was instituted three centuries later to commemorate God's help and deliverance in the days of the Maccabees. Jesus Christ apparently went to Jerusalem for the observance of Hanukkah (see [John 10:22-23](#)). And as a Jew it is likely that He also observed Purim, especially as its institution is recorded in Scripture. Yet as Purim and Hanukkah are national celebrations not commanded in the law, it is not required that Christians observe them. Indeed, non-Jewish Christians would not be expected to, just as non-Americans are not expected to observe the American holidays of Thanksgiving and Independence Day.

What about the "fasting" in verse 31? "No date is assigned for this fast. Jews traditionally observe the 13th of Adar, Haman's propitious day (see [Esther 3:7](#), [Esther 3:13](#)), as a fast ("the fast of Esther") before the celebration of Purim. These three days of victory celebration on the 13th-15th days of Adar rhetorically balance the three days of Esther's fasting prior to interceding with the king ([Esther 4:16](#))" (*NIV Study Bible*, note on verse 31).

In the three verses that make up the short chapter of Esther 10, we see a final mention of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and Mordecai. Xerxes reigned eight years beyond the events of chapter 9—dying by assassination in 465 B.C. We know nothing of what became of Esther and Mordecai. But they left an amazing legacy, having cooperated with Almighty God in His grand design to save His people." [END]

Day 709 – MONDAY: August 4th

Ezra 4:7 – 23

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: "We read this passage earlier in following the arrangement order of the book of Ezra because of a widespread belief that the book is written entirely in chronological order—making the Artaxerxes mentioned in this passage the same as the ruler known to history as the imposter king Gaumata (also known as pseudo-Smerdis), who preceded Darius the Great. However, as explained earlier in the Beyond Today Bible Commentary on this passage, the majority view sees the Artaxerxes in this passage as the Persian emperor known to history as Artaxerxes I Longimanus—the king who issued the decree allowing Ezra to lead a group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. This seems more likely (see earlier [commentary on this passage](#)), which is why we are reviewing this section here and considering some other reasons for this conclusion.

The Samaritans resisting the Jews of Judea write to Artaxerxes (verses 7-16), complaining about the building up of the city walls and foundations of Jerusalem (verse 12). There is no corroborating reason to believe the city fortifications were built up under those of the *first* Jewish return from Babylon under Zerubbabel. Cyrus' decree had permitted them to rebuild the temple, not the city. Again, it seems more likely that the rebuilding referred to in the letter was done by those who returned with Ezra in the days of Artaxerxes I.

Artaxerxes' decree to Ezra had said nothing specific about rebuilding the wall or city (see [Ezra 7:12-26](#)). However, beyond the provision for religious offerings and temple refurbishment, the emperor did say, "And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God" (verse 18). Not long after arriving in Judea, Ezra says of God, "He

extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, *and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem*" ([Ezra 9:9](#)). Most people see this last phrase as a figurative expression of God's protection, as no literal wall had yet been built. But neither was the temple refurbishment complete in so short a time. This must all speak of what God had allowed the Jewish exiles to come to do—not of what they had already accomplished.

Consider also that Artaxerxes' decree of 457 B.C. appears to be the starting point of the 70-weeks prophecy of Daniel 9, the fulfillment of which was to commence with the command to rebuild not merely the temple but Jerusalem itself (verse 25; see the [Beyond Today Bible Commentary on Daniel 9](#)). Moreover, as we will soon read, Nehemiah is not long afterward grieved over Jerusalem's wall being broken down and the city gates burned ([Nehemiah 1:3](#))—these developments seeming to concern recent events rather than the Babylonian destruction more than 140 years before. Given all this, it appears that Ezra must have interpreted Artaxerxes' decree as allowing for the refortification of the city—as indeed it implicitly had. And so at some point it seems likely that Ezra and the returned exiles began on that project.

Yet perhaps the fact that Artaxerxes' decree had not explicitly mentioned the rebuilding of the city defenses gave the Samaritan resistance what they saw as a window of opportunity to bring an accusation against the Jews. Reminiscent of a modern legal challenge, the Samaritans saw and exploited a loophole in the initial decree. The result was a legal injunction that stopped the reconstruction project. And there were other factors at work that could explain why Artaxerxes, who had himself decreed the Jewish return and entrusted great authority to Ezra, would now heed such accusations and order the rebuilding stopped (see [Ezra 4:17-22](#)).

Recall from the Beyond Today Bible Commentary on Ezra 7 that Egypt had rebelled against Persian authority by allying with the Greeks. Artaxerxes had sent his brother-in-law Megabyzus, governor of Syria and Palestine, to wage war against Egypt to bring it back into submission to Persia—which was accomplished in 456 B.C. It seems likely that the sending of Ezra and his company to Judea the year before this was intended to strengthen loyalty to Persia in that region prior to the attack on Egypt.

But a few years later things changed dramatically in the region. "After Megabyzus, the Syrian governor, had subdued Egypt, he took the Greek and Egyptian commanders with him to Susa [the Persian capital called Shushan in Scripture] under promise of protection there. For several years the promise was kept, but in 449 Amestris, the widow of Xerxes and queen mother [who was possibly the Vashti of the book of Esther], demanded their execution. The fulfillment of her demands so infuriated Megabyzus that he fled Susa, returned to Syria, and from there declared the independence of the trans-Euphratean satrapy [of which Judea was part]. He had sufficient following to repel at least two campaigns against him" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 508).

This could well explain why Artaxerxes would now be suspicious of Judean loyalty to Persia. It was now part of a rebellious satrapy, and the refortification of Jerusalem could have played into the emperor's fears. He orders the Samaritans, who have professed loyalty to him by their letter, to see to it that the refortification is halted. And this they do—by military force (verse 23). Yet the king leaves open the possibility of future rebuilding (4:21), helping to set the stage for the book of Nehemiah." [END]

Day 710 – TUESDAY: August 5th

Ezra 7

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: "We return now to the book of Ezra. The events of Ezra 6 occurred during the reign of Darius the Great. Chapter 7 jumps forward to the reign of his grandson Artaxerxes I, also known as Longimanus (464-424 B.C.). It was between these two chapters that the events of the book of Esther took place—during the reign of Xerxes, the son of Darius and father of Artaxerxes. With the death of Xerxes in 465 B.C., "the reins of government should have been handed over to [another] Darius, the eldest son of Xerxes, but instead Artaxerxes his brother murdered him, with the encouragement of Artabanus, captain of the guard, and took his place as king" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 499).

Artaxerxes' reign was beset by "widespread unrest and even revolt, particularly in the more remote provinces. By 460 Egypt refused to pay further tribute and solicited and received support from the [Greek] Delian League in this bold act of defiance. Persia undercut this arrangement by bribing [the western Asia Minor city of] Sardis to go to war with Athens, a move that neutralized the league and jeopardized not only Egypt but Athens.... The orator-statesman Pericles had begun to lead Athens to a position of dominance amongst all the Greek states by 458, a situation that the latter feared and resented. The [Greek] civil wars which then broke out freed Artaxerxes of further concern for his western Asia provinces, allowing him to attend to matters closer to home" (p. 499).

It was in this time frame, specifically in 457 B.C., the seventh year of Artaxerxes (see verses 7-8) that the king gave permission to Ezra to lead a band of exiles back to Jerusalem. "Most scholars assume that the seventh year of Artaxerxes I should be reckoned according to the Persian custom of dating regnal years from spring to spring (Nisan to Nisan, which was also the Jewish religious calendar). Thus Ezra would have begun his journey on the first day of Nisan (8 Apr. 458) and arrived on the first day of Ab (4 Aug. 458.... [Yet] during the monarchy

the Israelites had adopted a civil fall-to-fall calendar (Tishri to Tishri) as well.... [And some] have argued that the Jews resumed such a calendar after the Exile partly on the basis of an Elephantine papyrus [of the Jewish community in Egypt at the time]. The seventh year of Artaxerxes I would have run from Tishri 458 to Tishri 457. Ezra would have left on 27 March 457 and arrived on 23 July 457" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 7-9). These latter dates appear to be the correct ones. For the fall-to-fall reckoning is confirmed by comparing [Nehemiah 1:1](#) and [2:1](#)—as the Hebrew month Kislev (corresponding to November-December) there precedes Nisan (corresponding to March-April) in the same 20th year of Artaxerxes (whereas Nisan would mark a new regnal year if a Nisan-to-Nisan reckoning were used).

Ezra 7 gives us our first introduction to Ezra himself. Introduced with a long genealogy showing his priestly descent from Aaron (verses 1-5), he is called the "son of Seraiah" (verse 1)—which actually refers not to his immediate father but to his line of descent, as Seraiah was the high priest at the time of Jerusalem's fall (see [2 Kings 25:18](#)) and his son Jehozadak went into Babylonian captivity (see [1 Chronicles 6:15](#)). The name *Ezra* (meaning "Help") is apparently a shortened form of Azariah ("Yhwh Has Helped"), a name that occurs twice in the list of his ancestors.

Besides being a priest, Ezra was also a "skilled scribe" (verse 6)—"one who copied and studied the Law. After the Exile, the office of scribe came into prominence, in some ways replacing the prophet in importance, and eventually eclipsing even the role of the priest" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 6). Verse 11 shows Ezra's deep spiritual commitment to studying God's law, living by it and teaching it to others. He is here called "Ezra the priest, the scribe, *expert* in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel." Ezra became known in Jewish tradition "as 'the scribe's scribe'

or the teacher of scribes" (note on verse 11)—considered founder of the scribal movement, which had a formative impact on the Jewish religion of Christ's day.

The king commits a remarkable degree of authority and wealth into Ezra's hand. There is no question but that God was involved in the giving of this decree, as that is explicitly stated in verses 27-28. Indeed it is from this decree that we are to date the commencement of the 483 years of the 70-weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 leading to the appearance of the Messiah (for more on this, see the Beyond Today Bible Commentary on Daniel 9).

Nevertheless, God often works through typical human motivations of national leaders to bring about his intended results. Biblical historian Eugene Merrill comments: "It will be helpful to see if there were any political factors that motivated Artaxerxes [who had murdered his own brother to become king] to this beneficent policy [of helping the Jews], for, try as we might, it is difficult to believe that the king was operating out of purely charitable motives.

"We have already suggested that the neutralization of the [Greek] Delian League after 460 left Artaxerxes free to deal with matters closer to home. He instructed Megabyzus [his brother-in-law], an official who had bribed Sparta to attack Athens and had then been made governor of the satrapy of Syria, to lead Persian troops south from Cilicia [in what is now southern Turkey] to wage war on Egypt, the ally of Athens. After defeating Athenian troops at Prosopitus (an island in the Nile Delta), Megabyzus brought Egypt itself to submission in 456. Very possibly, then, in 458 [or 457] Artaxerxes viewed a loyal Judean province as an important asset for his anticipated disciplinary action against Egypt. And what better way to ensure Judean loyalty than to allow Ezra, no doubt a highly popular and powerful Jewish leader, to reestablish Jewish life and culture in that little land that was so crucial to Persian success?" (pp. 506-507). God was no doubt involved in the geopolitical

circumstances that made such a decision appealing to Artaxerxes at this crucial time.

[Ezra 7:7-9](#) briefly mentions the journey of Ezra and his company to the Promised Land—a journey that took four months, including an 11-day wait at the beginning as we will see in the next chapter, which gives more details about this second Jewish return from captivity (compare [Ezra 8:31](#)).

The decree itself, in [Ezra 7:12-26](#), is written in Aramaic. In the decree, the Jews are referred to as "the people of Israel" (verse 13). While those represented were almost all from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, they were nevertheless looked upon as the remnant of Israel, especially since Israel was the name of the nation in covenant with God—the God of Israel, a term also used in the decree. It might seem odd that Artaxerxes would himself use such terminology. More peculiar still is the phrase "priests and Levites" (same verse), as this seems a particularly Jewish distinction and not one the Persians would make. This wording has in fact aroused suspicion among scholars about the authenticity of the document. Yet it is likely that the king used Jewish officials—perhaps Ezra himself—to help draft the decree.

The "seven counselors" of verse 14 are parallel to those of Xerxes in [Esther 1:14](#).

The support for local religions by the Persians is attested to in historical documents. "There are close parallels to the directive of vv. 15-16 [about specifics regarding offerings] in the Elephantine letters, i.e., in the so-called Passover Papyrus, in which [a later Persian emperor] Darius II ordered the Jews [of Elephantine Island in what is now the city of Aswan in southern Egypt] to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread...and also in the temple reconstruction authorization [for the Jews of Elephantine to build their own temple]: 'Let meal-offering,

incense and burnt-offering be offered upon the altar of the God Yahu in your name'" (*Expositor's*, note on verses 15-16).

There might have been some superstition on the part of the Persian rulers in their policy of promoting local religions. Perhaps they genuinely wanted to win the favor and avoid the wrath of the gods worshiped throughout their realm. Yet at the same time, it just may have seemed rather practical to them—to win the favor of subject peoples and keep order among them.

With the conclusion of the decree in verse 26, the text of verses 27-28 returns to Hebrew. These two verses, written by Ezra in the first person, begin a section that continues to the end of chapter 9 known as the Ezra Memoirs.

Ezra is greatly encouraged by the evident intervention of God to once again bless His people." [END]

Day 711 – WEDNESDAY: August 6th

Ezra 8

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: "Chapter 8 gives more details about the journey of Ezra and the band of exiles who went with him to Jerusalem. "Verses 1-14 list those who accompanied Ezra from Mesopotamia, including the descendants of 15 individuals. The figures of the men listed total 1,496, in addition to the individuals named. There were also a considerable number of women and children (v. 21). An additional group of about 40 Levites (vv. 18-19) and of 220 'temple servants' (v. 20) are also listed" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 1). The distinction "last sons of Adonikam" in verse 13 may indicate that these were following other family members who had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel 80 years earlier (see [Ezra 2:13](#)).

The river of Ahava, the departure point, was probably a canal a short distance outside Babylon. "'The canal that flows toward Ahava' probably flowed into either the Euphrates or the Tigris (cf. the 'River' Kebar in [Ezek 1:1](#), which was also a canal). [One scholar] suggests the modern Meem, classical Maschana or Scenae, on the right bank of the Tigris River, which was near the beginning of two caravan routes" (note on verse 15).

After camping there for three days, awaiting more arrivals, it was soon realized that there were no Levites (verse 15). A similar problem came up at the time of the first return. While more than 4,000 priests returned with Zerubbabel, only 341 Levites did, including singers and gatekeepers ([Ezra 2:36-42](#)). Perhaps they reckoned the Levitical role as lacking in prestige as compared with the priestly office. And maybe, with settled lives in Babylon, they did not want to go embark on a life of service and hard work in a faraway, undeveloped land. Yet, as noted above, about 40 Levites did answer the recruiting efforts initiated by Ezra (verses 16-19).

In [Ezra 8:21](#), Ezra proclaims a fast. There are some important principles here. The purpose of a fast is to "humble ourselves before our God"—not so that we can cajole Him into taking pity on us and answering our every wish, but so that we can realize our total dependence on Him and therefore be in a more appropriate frame of mind for receiving His blessings. As part of this mind frame, we will be more receptive to God's will. That will help us "to seek from Him the right way for us." When we face hard decisions about where to go or what to do or how to do what needs to be done, fasting is a way to help us see God's direction. He can answer in a variety of ways—through circumstances, advice from others, direct inspiration or revelation through His Word, the Holy Bible, or even by direct intervention.

Ezra and those with him were in a serious predicament. Being waylaid by bandits and robbers was rather common in the ancient world. And

yet Ezra had not asked the king for a military escort, as he felt it would have made his pious testimony to the king about the power and wrath of God seem phony (verse 22). Having fasted, however, Ezra says that God answered their prayers (verse 23). Whether this means that they received some confirmation of His protection is not clear. Perhaps they came across scriptural promises of protection during the fast. Perhaps God helped them to pick out a safer route. Then again, it may just refer to the fact that they made it to Judea without incident. Ezra does, however, specifically say that God delivered them "from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road" (verse 31). But whether actual ambushes were attempted and thwarted is not clear. Perhaps God kept any potential robbers from even thinking to ambush the returning exiles. This is quite remarkable when one considers all the treasure the company was transporting. "The 650 talents of silver weighed nearly 25 tons. The one hundred talents of gold weighed over three tons. These figures do not include the numerous other valuable objects of exquisite artistry" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 24-30). These sums equate to millions of dollars in today's money.

The exiles departed from Babylon and gathered outside the city at the Ahava Canal on the first day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar ([Ezra 7:9](#)). They remained there for 11 days, striking out on their long journey on the 12th day of the month ([Ezra 8:31](#)). From that point it took them about three and a half months to reach Jerusalem, as they arrived on the first day of the fifth month ([Ezra 7:9](#)). After resting for three days, the returned exiles deposited their treasure in the temple and then offered sacrifices (verses 32-35). Then, "the delivery of the royal orders to the regional governors ([Ezra 8:36](#)) may have taken weeks or even months. Ezra did not just deliver the decree, he secured the support of the king's satraps and governors" (note on [Ezra 9:1](#)).

We should realize that with this minuscule return of exiles, even added to those who had come in Zerubbabel's day, the vast majority of the

Jewish people remained in Babylonia or were scattered throughout the empire. More would come later with Nehemiah, but the vast majority of the Jews would still remain scattered. In historical fact, many more Jews have returned to the Holy Land over the past century than ever returned in ancient times. Yet even the modern return constitutes a minority of the world's Jewish population. These small returns, while necessary to fulfill God's scriptural prophecies, have not constituted the *great* return to the Promised Land prophesied in Scripture—in which all Judah and all Israel as well are to return with miraculous signs and wonders. This great event is yet future—to occur after Christ's return. Nevertheless, we should view the small returns of ancient times as a tiny foretaste of what is to come—in the sense of a joyful reunion with God and true worship in His land after so long a time being gone.” [END]

Day 712 – THURSDAY: August 7th

Ezra 9

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: “After settling in and completing the business of securing the support of the regional governors (see [Ezra 8:36-9:1](#)), a shocking report is brought to Ezra. This was apparently about four and a half months after his and his company's initial arrival on the first day of the fifth month (see [Ezra 7:9](#)), as the measures to deal with this issue are rather speedily announced on the 17th day of the ninth month (compare [Ezra 10:8-9](#)).

Ezra is informed that the people, priests and Levites included, had entered into mixed marriages with the neighboring pagan peoples ([Ezra 9:1-2](#))—a direct violation of the law that God had given through Moses (see [Exodus 34:16](#); [Deuteronomy 7:3](#)). The law in this regard was intended to keep the covenant people distinct as a nation and to protect them and their children from being influenced into false religious concepts and practices.

While it is possible that some of the new arrivals could have been guilty, it seems unlikely that any of them would have entered into marriages with foreigners in just a few months' time. More likely, the guilty were only of those Jews who already lived in the land when Ezra arrived. In stating that the transgressors were "of those who had been carried away captive," Ezra must have meant they were the descendants of those who returned with Zerubbabel. Certainly those who already had children by these illegal marriages had to have been in these marriages prior to Ezra's arrival.

It is pointed out to Ezra that the leaders and rulers of the people led the way in this transgression ([Ezra 9:2](#)). Leaders always have an opportunity to serve as examples for others to emulate—whether for good or ill. When those in such responsible positions are corrupted, they often lead others astray.

Specific motivations behind what happened are not given. "Humanly speaking there may have been reasons for such intermarriages, such as a disparity between the number of returning men and available Jewish women" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-2). Yet it would have been far better to remain single, even if it meant living alone with no perpetuation of one's family lineage, than to so flagrantly disobey God. The One who created marriage desires for people to experience its benefits, but only within the boundaries He has set. This is important for all of us to remember. Christians in the New Testament are instructed to not marry unbelievers ([2 Corinthians 6:14](#); compare [1 Corinthians 7:39](#)). This is for our own sake and that of any children we might produce—and that of the rest of the Church. Of course, many when they are first converted and become part of God's Church are already married to a spouse who is not yet called of God—and in this case the apostle Paul instructs that the marriage be maintained if the unbeliever is willing to continue the marriage in fidelity and peace (see verses 12-16).

Ezra is utterly distraught at the news that has been brought to him, rending his garment in grief and even tearing out some of his own hair ([Ezra 9:3](#))—a unique occurrence in Scripture, as *shaving* one's hair is otherwise given as a symbol of shame. As others gather about him in dire concern, Ezra collapses into a fast of mourning, rising from it at the time of the evening sacrifice to pour out a confession of guilt to God. The next chapter reveals that he did this before the temple (see 10:1).

Verses 10-12 of chapter 9, while stated as if a single quotation from the law regarding the present sin, actually draw from many passages (see [Deuteronomy 7:3-4](#); [Deuteronomy 11:8-9](#); [Deuteronomy 23:6](#); [Proverbs 10:27](#); [Proverbs 13:22](#); [Proverbs 20:7](#); [Isaiah 1:19](#)).

Ezra ends his prayer with a declaration that God is righteous—and that the remnant of Israel is deserving of being wiped out ([Ezra 9:13-15](#)). Perhaps he was going to now ask that the people be led to repentance and for forgiveness but, as we will see in the next chapter, his prayer is cut short—for a good reason.” [END]

Day 713 – FRIDAY: August 8th

Ezra 10

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: “As Ezra prayed and wept before the temple, a large assembly of the people gathered to join in his mourning and prayer to God. Just as corrupt leadership had led the people astray, so righteous leadership can lead others in the proper direction.

In verse 2 a certain Shechaniah remarkably observes that even though the people had grievously sinned, “yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.” That is a true and wonderful message. It characterized the whole history of the nation. And it remains true for all who will today or in the future be part of the Israel of God, His chosen people. Despite our past sins, God will still work with us and ultimately deliver us. Yet that is contingent on our making a change in our lives. People must

repent. And in verse 3, Shechaniah suggests a covenant with God to do just that—in this case, ending their illegal marriages.

Shechaniah is referred to as the son of Jehiel of the sons of Elam. "Possibly his father is the same Jehiel mentioned in vv. 21 and 26 as he also was of the family of Elam.... Perhaps Shechaniah was grieved that his father had married a non-Jewish mother. Six members of the clan of Elam were involved in intermarriages (v. 26)" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 2).

Specifically, Shechaniah's call is to put away their pagan wives and the children born to them. Shechaniah says, "Let it be done according to the law" (verse 3), evidently referring to the law of divorce in [Deuteronomy 24:1-2](#), where a man could divorce a wife if he found fault in her. In this case, the fault was evidently that the women were still pagans. Moreover, these marriages were illegal to start with. The sending away of the children with their mothers had a precedent in God telling Abraham to heed Sarah in sending Ishmael away with Hagar so that Ishmael and his lineage would not cause problems for the son of promise, Isaac, and his lineage (see [Genesis 21:8-21](#)).

Encouraged, Ezra has the leaders take an oath about putting away the foreign wives ([Ezra 10:4-5](#)). Yet he continues his fast (verse 6). In verses 7-8, a proclamation is issued demanding that all the Jews of Judea gather at Jerusalem within three days. "As the territory of Judah had been much reduced, the most distant inhabitants would not be more than fifty miles from Jerusalem. The borders were Bethel in the north, Beersheba in the south, Jericho in the east, and Ono in the west.... All could travel to Jerusalem 'within three days'" (note on verse 8). Those who would not come would have their property confiscated and be expelled from the Jewish community. Emperor Artaxerxes had given Ezra the powers of confiscation and banishment along with other state powers—even capital punishment—in the decree he issued regarding the return (see [Ezra 7:26](#)).

Incidentally, some see "all Israel" in [Ezra 10:5](#) and other such references to Israel as an indication that all 12 tribes of Israel had returned to the Promised Land. But verse 9 makes it clear that this referred only to "all the men of Judah and Benjamin" along with the Levites also mentioned in verse 5. These constituted the *remnant* of Israel—Israel, as mentioned earlier, being the name of the nation in covenant with God. While a small smattering of people descended from the northern tribes did live among the southern tribes, having been absorbed into Judah, the northern tribes, as tribes, remained scattered. They will not return to the Promised Land until the time of Christ's return.

The 20th day of the ninth month (verse 9) would have been in December. So besides being rainy, it was also probably very cold—leaving the people shivering (on top of their trembling over the current situation). This created a problem in dealing with the matter at hand. The people, while in agreement with Ezra's directive, recognized that it would take much more than a day or two to search out all the guilty and make sure all were sworn to putting away their pagan wives and children—and during this time the people who had traveled to Jerusalem couldn't reasonably be expected to live and sleep outside in the cold and rain. So they requested that the investigation be organized by their officials and carried out in rotations (verses 12-14).

The opposition of the four men in verse 15 lends credibility to the account. That is, rather than a general statement that "everyone agreed," we are specifically told of four who did not without any indication given as to why. It's like the reading of a vote tally. As to the objections of these four, it should be noted that it is not clear exactly what they were objecting to—whether to the rotational investigation proposed by the people or the putting away of wives and children. Whatever it was, their objections apparently had no effect. The investigations by Ezra and the leaders proceeded (verse 16).

Interestingly, we are told that it took a few *months* to "question" the men who had married pagan women (verse 17). It seems that for a mere blanket decree of putting away foreign wives, a simple identification of each woman's nationality would have sufficed and that this would not have taken so long. Perhaps there was a complicating factor. Some of these women may have converted to the Israelite religion, as with Ruth and Rahab. If so, the examination may have included determining if these women were indeed still pagan, and only those who still were would have to have been put away, along with their children who would have been adversely affected by their mothers.

Verses 18-44 list 113 men who had married pagan women. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* comments that this is "an exceptionally small number in a community of some 30,000 persons. It is probably a truncated list, including representative names and pointing to the involvement of all classes, as the schematic arrangement may indicate. For the most part members of the upper classes are named, which also seems to reflect the genuineness of the list since they alone were in a position to contract such marriages and stood to benefit most from them" (quoted in *Expositor's*, note on verse 44). On the other hand, it could have been a complete list—as the sins of a few could bring guilt on the whole nation (compare the sin of Achan in Joshua 7). Either way, it is worth noting that of the 113 listed, 17 are priests, 10 are Levites and 86 represent the rest of the nation. Thus, nearly 25 percent of those listed are religious leaders. What a sad state of affairs this was.

Presumably, all who were married to pagan wives gave their promise to put them away, though that is explicitly stated only about those listed first (see verses 18-19; compare verses 20-44). Yet whether or not all of them followed through on their promise is not even hinted at. It seems hard to believe that Ezra would have allowed this to continue on any kind of wide scale. But his hand may have been weakened over time.

Indeed, around 25 years later Nehemiah would have to redress this problem once again.

We should not look at Ezra 10 as the conclusion of the book. For as mentioned in the Beyond Today Bible Commentary's introductory comments on this book, in the Hebrew canon Ezra and Nehemiah are reckoned together as one book. Yet before proceeding to Nehemiah 1, we will, after a supplementary reading, turn back a few chapters in the book of Ezra for the sake of following the apparent chronological order." [END]

Day 714 – SATURDAY: August 9th

Nehemiah 1

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: "As explained in the Beyond Today Bible Commentary introductory comments on Ezra and Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah is evidently a continuation of the book of Ezra. While Ezra is traditionally reckoned as the compiler of both sections, several parts of the section now referred to as Nehemiah were evidently written by Nehemiah himself. This is the case with [Nehemiah 1:1-7:5](#).

As chapter 1 opens we are immediately introduced to Nehemiah (verse 1), whose name means "Comfort of Yhwh [the Eternal]," "Yhwh Comforts" or "Yhwh Is Consolation." The time is the month Kislev (corresponding to November-December) in "the twentieth year," referring to the 20th year of Persian Emperor Artaxerxes (see 2:1)—apparently Artaxerxes I Longinus, the same king who had earlier sent Ezra (see [Ezra 7:1](#)) but later ordered the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls halted (see 4:21-23). This would date [Nehemiah 1:1](#) to the end of 445 B.C.—more than 12 years after the return of Ezra to Judea in 457.

The place, according to [Nehemiah 1:1](#), is Shushan, also known as Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire—the one in which the book of

Esther was set. This city was around 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf in what is today Iran.

Nehemiah is an important person. Like Joseph, Daniel and Esther before him, Nehemiah appears to have been placed by God in a strategic position in a foreign imperial government to accomplish God's will on the world scene. He refers to himself at the end of chapter 1 as "the king's cupbearer" (verse 11). This was an honored position of trust. Consider that a cupbearer was to ensure against the poisoning of a ruler. But there was much more to the job than that. The apocryphal book of Tobit, also from the Persian period, refers to a certain Ahikar as "chief cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts under King Sennacherib of Assyria" (1:22, NRSV). As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes on verse 11, "Varied sources suggest something about Nehemiah as a royal cupbearer:

"1. He would have been well-trained in court etiquette (cf. [Dan 1:4-5](#)).

"2. He was probably a handsome individual (cf. [Dan 1:4, 13, 15](#); Jos[ephus] *Antiq[uities of the Jews]* XVI, 230 {viii.1}).

"3. He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Qamma* 92b) states: 'The wine belongs to the master but credit for it is due to his cupbearer.'

"4. He would have to be a convivial companion, willing to lend an ear at all times.

"5. He would have great influence as one with the closest access to the king, able to determine who was able to see his master.

"6. Above all Nehemiah had to be one who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king. The great need for trustworthy court attendants is underscored by the intrigues endemic to the Achaemenid court.

Xerxes, father of Artaxerxes I, was killed in his own bedchamber by Artabanus, a courtier."

In verse 2 of chapter 1 we see that Nehemiah's brother has just returned from a visit to Jerusalem. (We will see him mentioned again in [Nehemiah 7:2](#) as receiving charge from Nehemiah over Jerusalem.) The report of Hanani and his traveling companions is not good. The Jews of Judea are suffering disgrace and persecution. The city wall is broken down and the gates of the city have been burned. While this could conceivably have referred to the Babylonian destruction of 142 years prior, it seems more likely to refer to recent devastation. Most scholars understand it to refer to the Samaritan military action to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city wall as ordered by Artaxerxes (compare [Ezra 4:21-23](#)). As explained in the comments on our previous reading, this probably occurred in conjunction with the rebellion of the satrap Megabyzus in 449 B.C.

About two years later, Megabyzus reasserted his loyalty to Artaxerxes (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 508). But the damage in Jerusalem was done. It was now five years after the revolt and just three years after the reaffirmation of Persian rule. Evidently, things had not improved for the Jews of Judea in this short period.

Nehemiah is sorely grieved and immediately commences on a period of fasting and prayer, confessing the people's sin. In doing so, he is evidently speaking generally of the Israelites' national proclivity to sin rather than some specific sin of the Judean Jews, as he includes his own sins in the confession. He well understands that the people's long history of immorality is the reason they have been reduced to being such a weakened people. Yet Nehemiah reminds God of His promises to regather His people and asks particularly that God will grant him favor with the king ([Nehemiah 1:4-11](#))—evidently to make a case for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, as we will see in chapter 2." [END]