

*A Patristic Commentary*



# THE BOOK OF Ezra

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# THE BOOK OF EZRA

A COMMENTARY BY

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“THE HAND OF GOD IS UPON ME”

If the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah that were originally one book, fitting all eras, they are rather more fitting for the believers at the beginning of the twenty-first century AD; It is the book of the contemporary believer.

## **HE WHO SITS ON THE THRONE MOVES ALL THRONES:**

The contemporary man stands confused; cannot predict what is going to happen neither in the near nor in the far future. Even men of politics in the world are in fear of the future; as though the world came to be a kind of toy in the hands of some unknown people.

The book of Ezra presents peace of mind to the believer; that, above all thrones, kings, leaders, and evil-planners, whether hidden or manifest, there is the Almighty God of the universe, in whose hand is the whole history. According to the human mind, it was not possible for the people in captivity to believe that an idol-worshipper king would believe that the Lord God of heaven has given him all the kingdoms of the earth, and has commanded him to build for Him a house in Jerusalem. ... In this book we stand in awe before the amazing and good hand of God that worked in all directions to achieve what no one could ever imagine and expect.

## **“THE HAND OF GOD IS UPON HIM”**

The secret of Ezra's strength and success in his tough mission, was expressed in this phrase often repeated in his book: “*The hand of God was upon me*”. Ezra trusted that the Lord his God, the Almighty and Good; is faithful in His promises, merciful toward His believers, would turn the bitter events into sweetness for His people and believers, protect them under His divine hand; that no one can come near them without His divine permission.

It is the book of opening the eyes of the believer, to perceive that he is not alone, but the hand of God is upon him, supports him, works by, and in him; and realizes His goals for which He created him to do.

Ezra, the great scribe, the man of the Holy Book, lived, as though in the bosom of the Holy God; believed in the collective work through a pure people, Never enduring sin, he was serious in confronting it, to experience truly the deposit of heaven, by the holy life exultant in the Lord.

He was the brave man who worked with the spirit of humility, flatters nobody, even the high priest and all the leaders; at the expense of the holy life.

## **A SUCCESSFUL LEADER**

The most prominent feature of that brave and holy leader, was that he counted his life an integral part of the plan of God working along the history. Not separating his work from the work of God, with his predecessors, nor despising those who came after him; he strongly cherished the work of God with the two leaders before him: Zerubbabel the leader, and Jeshua the High priest; and stood by the new leader, Nehemiah, and strongly supported him. By such an attitude, Ezra truly presented himself a practical role-model to the leaders and the people as well.

## **THE TWO BOOKS OF THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM**

### **IN THE LAND OF CAPTIVITY**

Because of sins, the Jewish people fell under the Babylonian captivity; lived in colonies in the kingdom of Babylon, like Tel Abib (Ezekiel 3: 15) – not the one nowadays -- Tel Melah ,Tel Harsh ( Ezra 2: 59); and Casiphia (Ezra 8: 17).. Although the great majority of the captives suffered from the labor and humiliation of bondage, yet some of them managed to establish prosperous business projects, earned great fortunes (2; 65, 69; Zechariah 6: 10-11), built houses, and planted gardens (Jeremiah 29: 5); and acquired slaves and maidservants.

### **THE WORSHIP DURING CAPTIVITY**

Solomon's temple was destroyed, and the city of God Jerusalem was devastated and turned into ruins. As it was not possible, according to the law to build a temple in the land of captivity, because it was considered unclean (Amos 7" 17); there were no other important rites before the Jews to practice except observing the Sabbath and the circumcision.

### **A NEW EXODUS**

The episode of the exodus of the people of God from the bondage of Pharaoh, and of setting forth to the promised land is engraved in the heart of every believer, which he celebrates annually together with the whole people in the feast of the Passover; and even in his daily worship. It is the episode of the liberation of the people and of every one of its members from bondage. The episode of the return from the land of captivity back to Jerusalem, is a new exodus; the leader of which is the Lord Himself.

It may seem that the Lord was late to liberate His people, leaving them seventy years in captivity. Yet, He Himself has already promised through His prophets that the duration of this captivity is fixed by seventy years (Jeremiah 29: 10-13); And He even proclaimed the name of king Cyrus whom He anointed – although an idol-worshipper – to fulfill that goal, two centuries before its actual realization (Isaiah 45: 1, 13).

Both the first and the second exodus are symbols of the exodus we enjoy through the new covenant. The Word of God came incarnate, He who proclaimed "*I came forth from the Father*" (John 16: 30). He came forth to us to carry us in Him, to bring us out from the sonhood to the fallen Adam to that of God the Heavenly Father through the grace of adoption.

The real Leader of the two exodus is the Lord Himself, who confirmed to the prophet Moses: "*I shall be with you*"; and to those returning from captivity, that His good hand is upon king Cyrus, He stirred up his spirit, and that of the leaders and the people around him. He is the One working in all.

While the first exodus was done all at once under the leadership of the prophet Moses; the second exodus was done in three batches under the leadership of many. The Lord works in every way according to His exalted divine plan. Although the liberation from the cruel-hearted Pharaoh, was extremely more difficult than that according to the decree of the more tolerant Persian Cyrus , yet the first exodus was done as one batch, to confirm that God is Almighty; Whereas the return

from captivity, while relatively easier, was done according to a well-controlled divine plan for the sake of the people. God works through the individual leader, as well as through the collective ones.

The first exodus symbolizes our exodus from the bondage of the devil, to the wilderness, to set forth to the heavenly Canaan, on the hand of our Christ by His cross. Whereas the second exodus symbolizes our renewal and recreation by the same Lord, the true Reformer of man, who renews him by His Holy Spirit.

### **SEVENTY YEARS TO SABBATHSIZING THE LAND**

490 years before captivity, presenting a whole year every seven years, as a Sabbath to the Lord, for the sake of giving rest to the land to resume its fertility, was, according to the Jews, a waste of energies and possibilities within their hands. And it was necessary to realize it against their will, when they were carried into captivity, and their land was forsaken, devastated, inhabited by the enemy, and roamed by the wild beasts. It is as though the land cried out to God seeking rest from the lack of wisdom among the people at that time, and the Lord heard her hidden cries. It is said: *“Those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to the king and his sons, until the reign of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years”* (2 Chronicles 36: 20-21). ... When man thinks that he is wiser than the law of God, he brings forth upon himself desolation and bitterness.

### **SAINTS IN THE LAND OF CAPTIVITY**

The book did not narrate the history of the people in the land of captivity in detail, nor spoke of their religious, mental, economic, and educational circumstances; but, while concentrating upon the events of the return from captivity; It presented as well a shining portrait of leaderships, and of regular people who lived faithful to God in the land of captivity, and even presented exalted portraits of magnificent and rare acts of heroism;. The author intended to confirm to us two facts:

- 1- What preoccupies the mind of God, even during the moments of chastisement, is the return from captivity; namely, **the return of the soul from the captivity of the devil back to the divine bosoms in the High Jerusalem.**
  - + You will go into captivity, O people of Zion, You will be taken to Babylon. But within a number of years you will come back from there, not in the company of a soldier who pushes you ahead, but in that of the divine Leader who, by His ascension to heaven, made captivity captive. You will follow Him together with Paul and his companions, and the leaders of our army, those who captivate our minds to the account of Christ.

(St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian)

- 2- **The appearance of heroes in the time of affliction:** The captivity, no doubt, carried much bitterness: On the psychological aspect in particular; the zealous suffered from being denied of the presence in the temple of the Lord, worshipping the living God; And on the political aspect, being denied of the sovereignty of their state, and of many social aspects of life; clearly expressed in the book of the prophet Ezekiel . Yet in the midst of that bitterness, certain mighty men of faith appeared, who would be difficult to encounter in the normal times.

Both Israel and Judah fell under captivity for their chastisement; and, in the land of captivity, there were saints on all levels, although of diverse features and personalities, but integral to, and supporting one another:

a- **Daniel:** He was taken among the captives from Judah. He was the one, being "*greatly beloved by God*", as testified by the archangel Gabriel (Daniel 10: 11, 19), has shaken the hearts of emperors, and turned the dungeon of hungry lions into heaven, where he saw the angel of the Lord close their mouths shut; talks to him; and opens his inner eyes wide to see the future; in particular the coming of the Messiah to save mankind; and His second coming at the end of time. ... Commenting on the expression "*greatly beloved by God*", St. Jerome says: [It is a fitting expression, as every saint who carries such beauty in himself, will certainly be greatly beloved by God]..

b- **The three saintly young men:** Being faithful to God, He turned for them the fiery furnace into dew; Being in the company of the Word of God; they sang a praise while in the furnace, saying:  
{Bless the Lord, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High;  
Praise Him, and raise His name high forever;  
For He rescued us from Hades, and saved us from death;  
Saved us from the flames of the fiery furnace;  
From the fire He saved us (Daniel 3)

+ Hananiah and his companions came forth into a spiritual blessing, granted to all saints; as uttered by Isaac when he said to his son Jacob: "*May God give you of the dew of heaven*" (Genesis 27: 28); which is even greater than the material dew that quenched the flames kindled by Nebuchadnezzar.

+ Now, we, the true Hebrews of the life to come (Hebrew 11: 13) experience the heavenly dew that quenches all fires from us; and by the same exalted aspect of our souls, we follow the lead of those saintly young men.

(The scholar Origen)

+ The three saintly young men, the blessed heroes, who were tempted in Babylon" Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; once they became safe, and the fire for them became like dew, they glorified, praised God and gave Him thanks, And I, as well, writing to you brethren, have that in my mind; for God in our days, still performs things that seem impossible in the eyes of men; For what men cannot do, God can; namely, to bring us forth to you, and not to deliver us as a prey in the mouths of those who intend to swallow us.

(St. Athanasius the apostolic)

c-- **Ezekiel:** A priest who never had the chance to practice the priestly work in captivity; was shown in a vision the exalted temple of the Lord; the gates of heaven were opened before him to see the divine throne; to become the only one who could see the heavenly holy city; and could proclaim his amazing prophecy concerning the temple of the new covenant.

d- **Zerubbabel:** led the first batch of captives back to Israel (Ezra 2: 2); And together with Jeshua the high priest and his brethren the priests, they rebuilt the old altar to offer burnt offerings, and organized the worship

(Ezra 3: 1-9). He was appointed 'a governor over Judah' (Ezra 1: 8) laid the foundation of the temple (Zechariah 4: 6-10); rebuilt the temple, which was called by his name 'The temple of Zerubbabel', that remained until the year 20 B.C., to be rebuilt anew by Herod.

He was called '**Sheshbazzar**' (Ezra 1: 8), meaning (rejoice amid afflictions); on account of that the king, the statesmen, the leaders, and even the Persian people, saw in him an amazing portrait of an exultant man, even while in captivity and in the midst of afflictions.

e-- **Mordecai:** An unknown captive who worked in the royal palace, saved the king from a plot against him (Esther 2: 21-23), and saved his whole people by his amazing faith in God, by his contrite heart, courage, and

support of queen Esther..... In his prayer it came:

[You, O Lord, knows everything; You know that what I did today, by refraining to bow nor pay homage to the arrogant Haman, was not out of pride or haughtiness ;

As a matter of fact, I would readily bow down and kiss the sole of his feet to save Israel;

but I so refrained, so as not to put the glory of man above the glory of God.

I shall never bow before anyone but You, O Lord].

f- **Esther:** an orphan Jewish captive girl who became queen; yet never coveted to sit at the royal banquet.. In the book of Esther it came that she prayed to the living God, not only with a contrite heart, but proclaimed that

she abhorred luxury; and enjoyed nothing but the Lord alone. Obeying her uncle Mordecai, she put herself at risk to redeem her people, with humility, together with fasting and praying. .... In her prayer she said:

[ You, O Lord,, knows everything. You know how I hate the glory of those uncircumcised foreigners. You know how I despise the crown I put on my head when I appear before the king; which I never use in my secret

place. You know how Your maidservant never ate at Haman's banquet; did not even look forward to that of the king; nor drank his wine].

g- **Ezra:** He was beloved and trusted by the Persian Emperor who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, to set a self-governorate, yet remain submitted to Persia. A zealous priest, he returned together with other priests

to practice worship in the temple, which he cared to establish. He returned to Babylon, then came back again to Israel when Nehemiah became governor on it. Loving the Word of God, he collected the divine Holy Scripture. He cared as well to purify the Jewish blood through sending the foreign wives together with their children away, for which he found support from the people. He represented the priest who cares for the spirit of worship, together with the enjoyment of the Word of God, and the holy life, without disregarding the other aspects of life.

h- **Nehemiah:** He was not preoccupied with his exalted position as the cupbearer of the king, to care for his own people and land. Although, while in captivity he was neither a religious, civil, or military leader of his people,

yet he took over himself all these tasks of leadership through his love of God, his practice of repentance, and his unique spiritual personality; together with his living faith in the divine promises; saying to God:

*"Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses"* (Nehemiah 1: 8)

## **CAPTIVITY AND VISIONS**

Once the true believer is expelled out of his native land, he will find the gates of heaven open before him; through which he will recognize the secrets of God, and will find a place for comfort for himself. In the Old Testament, we find no

prophets who enjoyed the heavenly visions, like Daniel and Ezekiel in the land of captivity. And in the New Testament we find no one who did like John the beloved in his exile.

### THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM

The same way Judah was led to captivity in three batches (605, 597, 589 B.C.); the Jews returned from captivity back to Jerusalem in three batches:

The batch	The leader	The number of men	The events
The first batch 538 B.C.	Zerubbabel (Sheshbazzar) and Jeshua the priest	49897 men	The building of the temple started, then stopped until 520 B.C.. The building was completed 516 B.C.. As the people were preoccupied with building their own houses, and not with building the Lord's house, they were rebuked and encouraged by the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 6: 1)
The second batch 548 B.C.	Ezra the scribe	1754 men	Problems concerning the mixed marriages to pagan wives (Ezra 7-10)
The third batch 444 B.C.	Nehemiah the governor	Number unknown	Allowed to build a wall around the city, he built it in 52 days, despite the objection of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. Dedication of the walls; and reading the law

It is as though God pushes his people to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple, even through pagan kings. Many of those who settled down in Babylon and established prosperous commercial businesses were reluctant to return; And those of them who did return got preoccupied with building their own houses; and presented excuses that it was not the right time to build the temple because of the fierce opposition by the Samaritans and other peoples.

During that era, Buddha, by his mere behavioral views, managed to draw many in India (560 - 480 B.C.); So did Confucius in China (551 - 479B.C.); both of whom were worshipped as gods. And Socrates, by his philosophical views (470 – 399 B.C) drew Greeks to adore him; While the people of God were hesitant to attach themselves to the true God, and to enjoy His dwelling in their midst.

### THE POLITICAL SITUATION AFTER THE RETURN

The Jews returned from captivity, yet without a king; They were relieved from the yoke of captivity, with better conditions; were allowed to build the temple; yet they were citizens under the king of Persia, who appointed for them a governor to rule over Jerusalem. The peoples all around, bearing animosity against them, used every chance to accuse them of treason and rebellion against the king of Persia. The Jews, most of whom were poor, were committed to pay taxes, tributes, and customs for the king, for the governor, and for the local administration (Ezra 7: 24; Nehemiah 5: 4), which they could not afford.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EZRA

### THE MAN OF THE LAW

Ezra, a priest by birth, of the seed of Hilkiah the priest who, in the days of Josiah, found the book of the law of God given by Moses (2 Chronicles 34: 14); did not practice his priestly task, on account of that he was raised in captivity. Yet he so loved the Word of God, that he cared to study the law (7: 10) with zeal and godliness. God set him to teach the law, and to gather together and to put in order the Holy Books. According to the tradition, he formed, and became the head of an assembly of the Sanhedrim of 120 members, which established the law of the books of the Old Testament.

He cared for the worship of God under his guidance in the land of captivity. And as the temple in Jerusalem was a ruin, and the people were scattered all over the land, synagogues were set for worship, that remained even after the return to Jerusalem, beside those in the promised land.

He was called 'a scribe', being an employee in the Persian court, and a counselor to the Persian Emperor 'Artaxerxes' for the Jewish affairs of the people in Mesopotamia. Yet the king was so impressed by him, having seen in his life that he was not like the other scribes in his royal court, but carried a unique heavenly feature, to call him "*A scribe of the God of heaven*" (Ezra 7: 12, 21); And in his writings, he called the God of Israel, "*the God of heaven*" (7: 23).

Ezra was so zealous, that he was counted by the Jews a leader of the same caliber of the prophet Moses; and a founder of the later Jewish systems (the fifth century B.C.).

## **THE BOOK OF EZRA**

It covered the history of about 80 years, starting by the Persian king Cyrus issuing a decree, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Sheshbazzar), of David's seed, to build the temple. But in the days of 'Cambyses', the son of Cyrus, the work was stopped through the provocation of the Samaritans and other peoples west of the River Jordan. But in the days of king Darius Hystaspes, the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah appeared, and encouraged the leaders and the people to resume work, with the help of the king himself.

Ultimately, Ezra, through his good and strong relationships, could return to Jerusalem as a leader of the second batch of the Jews, carrying money and jewels; But with more concentration on "law of God", as the secret of worship to God, and of building the inner temple in the souls of men..

## **CYRUS, KING OF PERSIA**

A pagan king who reigned on Persia for 20 years, then occupied Babylon in the year 539 / 538 B.C. In the book of Daniel it came that, when king 'Belshazzar' the son of Nebuchadnezzar started using the vessels of the house of the Lord to drink wine; While drunk together with his elites, Cyrus, the king of Persia came and took Babylon over (Daniel 5). By that time, Daniel has grown old; and he probably together with other godly Jews, provided king Cyrus with the prophecies by the prophet Isaiah, two centuries before (Isaiah 44: 28; 45: 1 – 4); beside the prophecies by Daniel himself; of which:

- 1- Isaiah, mentioning Cyrus by name; confirmed that he was set a king by a divine allowance; and that his conquest over the great Babylon has been from God. In those prophecies God calls Cyrus "*His anointed*" (Isaiah 45: 1); opens before him the closed doors, destroys strongholds, and gives him the hidden treasures of Babylon.

Commenting God's promise to Cyrus; saying: "*I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places*" (Isaiah 45: 3), St. Basil the Great says, that God revealed to him the depths of

His storehouses, and the secrets and interpretations of the prophecies; through which our knowledge is renewed day by day; like taking new wine from a new vineyard, and put it in new vessels; as



said in the gospel.

- + Although Cyrus himself has been a slave of the vanity of idol-worship; he got his royal status from the God of the universe; and enjoyed great help from Him. Although he could not perceive the secret of that grace; yet God counted him worthy of the mission as a tool to chastise the Babylonians, and to liberate Israel.
- + God granted Cyrus the title "*His anointed*"; to proclaim that He is the One who chose him to defeat the Babylonians, to put an end to the captivation of the Jews, and to rebuild the temple of God.
- + By all that, it is as though God says that He chose Cyrus a king, gave him the necessary authority to guide his empire by a good will; and to appease the difficult issues and make them easier. That is the meaning of the verse, saying: "*I will go before you; and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze, and cut the bars of iron*" (Isaiah 45: 2)

(Father Theodoret, bishop of Cyrus)

- 2- Daniel prophesied the union of the two kingdoms of Persia and Media in a very direct and obvious way.

All that motivated Cyrus to issue his decree concerning the return of the Jews to build the temple in Jerusalem; to which less than 50,000 Jews responded, set forth to Jerusalem as the first batch under the leadership of Zerubbabel; walked on foot along more than 700 miles, to reach the devastated city at the time.

We do not know what went on in Cyrus' mind, but his amazing decree did not stop at allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem; but went further to exhort the Jews to do that; to give orders to the one responsible for the treasuries of the palace to deliver to them the vessels of the Lord's house, that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar, to bring them back to Jerusalem; as though they were kept there for that very day; In addition, Cyrus called the people to donate to rebuild the house of God, he, himself adopted that task, saying: "*The Lord God of heaven has commanded me to build a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah*" (Ezra 1: 2).

That episode of Cyrus shows indeed that God is the Almighty Controller of history, God of the impossible, the Performer of wonders. Jeremiah saw all that before it happened, and talked about it (Jeremiah 29: 10 – 14)

## **BETWEEN CYRUS AND THE LORD CHRIST**

Although Cyrus was pagan, yet he was a symbol of the Lord Christ on certain aspects, like:

- 1- The word 'Cyrus' means (sun); he considered himself the sun that shines over the land. In this he is a symbol of the Lord Christ "The Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4: 2).
- 2- Cyrus said that "*All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given him*" (1: 2). And the Lord Christ is the King of the church that extends all over the world, from the time of Adam to the end of time.
- 3- Cyrus counted that his task is to build the Lord's house and temple (1: 3). And the Lord Christ came to set His church, the spiritual house of the Lord; and to build His temple in every heart,
- 4- Cyrus liberated the people, and allowed them to leave the land if they wish. The Lord Christ as well, is the Liberator: "*If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed* (John 8: 36).
- 5- Cyrus did not commit the people to leave, but exhorted them to do. And the Lord Christ, as well, does not commit people to be saved against their will.

- 6- Cyrus exhorted them to use the gold, silver, etc. to the account of the house of the Lord (2: 69). And the Lord Christ exhorts us to use our talents, abilities, and possibilities, to the account of the kingdom of Christ.
- 7- Isaiah prophesied about Cyrus. And the prophets, including Isaiah, prophesied about the Lord Christ.
- 8- Cyrus came in the time designated to the return from captivity. And the Lord Christ came in the fullness of time.

### **DID CYRUS ACTUALLY BELIEVE IN THE GOD OF ISRAEL?**

In documents belonging to Cyrus, in which he refers his conquests to Merdoch, the Babylonian god. Which means that he has not forsaken idol-worship. But there are several possibilities:

- 1- When Cyrus came to Babylon, and Daniel and others presented to him the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah; from which he perceived that his conquest is from the living God; he, counting himself indebted to that God for his conquest, intended to consummate the prophecy.
- 2- Beside believing in the Babylonian god, yet he honored all gods, and allowed all the diverse peoples living in his country to return to their native lands, if they choose to do, and to take their gods with them. And as the Jews had no gods nor idols to take, he gave them the articles of the house of the Lord to take with them.
- 3- Intending to win the love of the different peoples, instead of forcing them to stay in Babylon against their will, he allowed them to return to their native lands, to live there and to pay taxes; not to be denied their culture, and their homes, as long as they submit to his military authority; a policy that was adopted by several great kings, those of the Roman empire in particular.

### **THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF EZRA**

The author is most probably Ezra, who started writing it while in Babylon, and consummated it in Jerusalem. The name 'Ezra', close to the name 'Lazarus'. Both mean (my God is my Helper), or (God is my comfort). Ezra was of the tribe of Aaron, of a priestly origin; born in captivity; and although he never practiced the priestly task, yet he had in his blood a strong longing to restore the glory of Israel, to rebuild the temple, and to practice all the rites of priesthood, the sacrifices in particular.

It is difficult for us now to imagine the inner feelings of Ezra as a priest denied of practicing his priestly work; on account of that, to the Jews, the priest was the "presbyter"; the one chosen by God to represent the whole people; who has the possibility to enter into the sanctuary in certain times; and from whose mouth the law is sought (Malachi 2: 7)..

As a representative of God, he collects the tithes from the people.

Representing the firstborn, the portion of the Lord, he had the right to take certain parts of the sacrifice..

Born in captivity, and denied of all those blessings, he preoccupied himself with studying the Holy Book; and the Word of God touched his depths. It is claimed that he was the author of psalm 119, that deals with the Holy Book; in which every one of its sections is formed of eight verses, arranged according to the Hebrew alphabet.

He is also claimed to be the author of the first and the second books of the chronicles; the book of Ezra, and the book of Nehemiah, (as its continuity). The following are certain features common between the two books of the chronicles and the book of Ezra:

- 1- Caring for the religious rites, like observing the feasts (Ezra 3: 4, 6, 19, 22); the ministry of the Levites (Ezra 2: 40; 8: 15-19; (: 1; 10: 5); the vessels of the Lord (Ezra 1: 7-11); and the divisions of the priests (Ezra 6: 18).
- 2- Caring for man (Ezra 8: 1-20; 10: 18-44).
- 3- The hand of God, the Controller of history (Ezra 8: 22)

Ezra could become a leader; and the secret of the strength of his leadership was the flame kindling in his heart; the longing to build the house of God; the strong belief in the prophesies, and in the promises of God to bring His people back from captivity, and to rebuild the temple. He was keen on consecrating all his time; he always had the Holy Book before him, to satisfy his soul with the Word of God. ... It is claimed that while in captivity, he gathered together and organized all the books of the Holy Scripture (the Old Testament); He was the priest, the scribe, and the leader of the people.

## THE TWO BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

Originally, they were one book, that narrates the episode or the return of the Jewish people from captivity; being the most important episode in the history of the Jews after their first exodus from the land of Egypt, or at the same level of importance; hence called "the second exodus". In the Latin translation of the Volgata by St. Jerome in the year 400 B.C. he divided the book of Ezra into two books: Ezra and Nehemiah. And in the Arabic translations, they were called: the first and the second books of Ezra.

The two books have many features in common, of which are the following:

- 1- The center of both books is the Almighty and the loving Lord, who works in the man of God, to let him believe that, by God, salvation will be realized; according to what came in the book of Zechariah: "*This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel; 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit', says the Lord of hosts*" (Zechariah 4: 6).
- 2- Each of the two books starts by a decree by the pagan king of Persia, allowing the return of the Jews from captivity; For God, being the Controller of history, works with all, even the pagans for the edification of His church.
- 3- Each of the two books ends with Jerusalem, the higher Jerusalem. Our life is a joyful working journey; ... Nehemiah talked only about the final batch of those returning from captivity, while Ezra talked about the second and the third ones.
- 4- The topic of both is the building of the temple; resuming the worship in it; building the wall of the city; and building the congregation on all aspects. The main topics of both books are building and work. The Lord Jesus says: "*My Father has been working up till now; and I have been working*" (John 5: 17. We as the Lord's children, work by Him to the account of His kingdom. ... While Nehemiah cared to build the outer walls of the city, Ezra, on the other hand, cared to talk about the building of the temple, and the resumption of worshipping in it. Yet the Holy Book started by Ezra, then followed up by Nehemiah. We expected that the work would start by the wall, to be followed by the temple; But it is amazing that Ezra talked about the temple, to be followed by Nehemiah who talked about the wall. Namely, started by the inside and not by the outside. ... Unfortunately we care more about the outer appearances, and forget about the inside; forget to enter into the depths, where the glory of the king's daughter is.
- 5- In the ninth chapter of both books, we find a collective prayer and a collective confession. Together with showing the role of certain persons like Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others; but the divine work is realized through the congregation, particularly through prayer and repentance.
- 6- Each of the two books ended by the purification and sanctification of the people; namely, by the inner spiritual reform; As the goal of our journey on earth is the enjoyment of the purity of heart, to be worthy to see God forever (Matthew 5: 8).

7- While the first book cares for the clerical aspect and the building of the temple; the second book cares for the civil aspect and the building of the wall.

8- Both of them tell us about reminding God of His divine promises; Although He may delay a little, yet He would definitely fulfill what he promised at His own proper time; As according to the prophet Jeremiah: "*For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place; ... I will bring you back from your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you*" (Jeremiah 29: 10, 14).

In the days of Ezra, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah appeared; and in the days of Nehemiah, the prophet Malachi appeared.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BOOK OF EZRA**

The goal of this book is to show how God reforms the conditions of His people in captivity; How His divine promises would definitely be fulfilled regardless of the persons; How He sets leaderships in the darkest and most difficult moments. It also tells about the movements of reform, and portrays the Lord of glory Jesus as a Reformer.

## **THE PERSONALITY OF EZRA**

1- **A worshipping man:** He loved the altar, although he was denied of it in the land of captivity; and loved both the individual and collective prayers (Ezra 8: 35; 9: 6 etc.).

2- **He trusted in the promises of God:** Holding fast to his faith that God is capable to fulfill His promises, and believing that God will protect His people in their journey from Babylon to Jerusalem,, he did not request from the Persian king to provide them with military escort; but, by prayers and fasting, he sought the divine protection, saying: "*I proclaimed a fast there at the River of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying: 'The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him'. So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer*" (8: 21-22).

3- **A self-denier:** He gives the glory to God, saying: "*Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me; and I gathered chief men of Israel to go up with me*" (7: 27-28).

4- **A man of fast, prayer, weeping, and humiliation (8: 21);** which he sought sharing it with others: "*I proclaimed a fast there at the River Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions*" (8: 21)..

5- **A man of faith;** Not trusting in the arm of men, but in that of God. "*Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God; ... set forth, ate no bread and drank no water* (10: 6); he humiliated himself before God, and denied himself. He did not say: I am a man of authority, and a leader, entered into his secret place wept and prayed (10: 6).

6- **A gentle reformer:** Believing in the work of God, he was a man of humiliation, and of tears. Although he trusted in the arm of God and not in that of men; yet he was firm: "*And they issued a proclamation throughout*

*Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem; and whoever would not come within three days according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the congregation of those from the captivity” (10: 7, 8).*

**7- He delivers himself to the Holy Spirit, to engrave the Word inside his heart.**

**8- A man of the Holy Book:** He did not preoccupy himself with the knowledge of the Chaldeans, who cared for literature, arts, and astrology; but was preoccupied with the true knowledge, with the divine Scripture, which he loved, being the treasure of the divine promises; and believed in the power of the Word in his life. To him, the law is a promise; God may be longsuffering, but He will definitely fulfill His promise. The book of Ezra is a study of the Word of God on the practical aspect.

Ezra set his heart on the divine Word; namely on seeking the law of God; searches for it, learns it, works according to it, and teaches it (7: 10).

#### **BETWEEN EZRA AND THE LORD CHRIST**

1- Ezra was a priest of the tribe of Levi; And the Lord Christ is our greater High Priest (Hebrew 4: 14)

2- He was called “a shepherd” (Isaiah 44: 28); And the Lord Christ is the Good Shepherd.

3- Ezra prayed and wept for the sake of the sins of his people; And the Lord Christ wept on Jerusalem, and carried the sins of the world.

4- Ezra returned to Jerusalem together with the captives; And the Lord Christ got those captivated by the devil, and brought them back into the heavenly Jerusalem.

5- The Lord called Ezra “His anointed” (Isaiah 45: 1); “*The man who executes My counsel*” (Isaiah 46: 11); “*The Lord loved him*” (Isaiah 48: 14); and said: “*He shall perform all My pleasure*” (Isaiah 44: 28).

#### **BETWEEN MOSES THE PROPHET AND EZRA THE SCRIBE**

1- The prophet Moses led the first exodus from Egypt; And Ezra led the second batch in the second exodus from Babylon to Jerusalem.

2- Each of them was a spiritual leader and an overseer of the affairs of the people.

3- Moses received the law, and cared for the divine commandment; And Ezra gathered together the Holy Scripture, and cared for the law.

4- Each of them cared for teaching the law of God.

5- Each of them fulfilled the plan of God for the enjoyment of freedom

6- Each of them was characterized by firmness together with love.

#### **THE KINGS OF PERSIA**

1- **Cyrus** (538 – 529 B.C.) The founder of the state of Media and Persia. He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem (the events mentioned in the first chapter of the book of Ezra happened in the year 538 BC).

2- **Cambyses (Artaxerxes) (529 – 522 B.C.)**. The son of Cyrus, whom the false accusers in Jerusalem managed to convince him to issue a decree to stop the building the city and the temple (4: 17-25). He was killed in war against Egypt.

3- **Smerdis** (522 – 521 B.C.), took over the responsibilities during his brother Cambyses' absence in war; But a scoundrel who looked like him reigned for a period of seven months.

4- **Darius Hystaspes the first (521 – 486 B.C.)**; A son-in-law of Cyrus killed the scoundrel and reigned in his place. In his days the kingdom of Persia extended from India to the River Danube. And in his days the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah appeared and provoked the people to resume building the temple (4: 24). He reigned for 36 years, and died in the year 486 B.C.

5- **Ahasuerus the first (Xerxes the first or Axerxes) (486 – 465 B.C.)** husband of queen Esther. He deployed a huge army of 5, 200, 000 men. But this great number was the reason of his defeat at Salamis in the year 480 BC, when he attempted to invade Greece. Was assassinated in the year 465 B.C.

6- **Artaxerxes the first (Longimanus, meaning long-handed) (465 – 424 B. C.)**. He showed kindness to the Jews; allowed Ezra to go to Jerusalem together with a number of Jews; and allowed Nehemiah to build the walls of Jerusalem (7: 11-13; Nehemiah 2: 1-10).

7- **Ahasuerus the second (Xerxes or Axerxes the second) (424 – 423 B.C.)**

8- **Darius the second (Notus) (423 – 404 B.C.)**.

9- **Artaxerxes the second (Pinomen) (404 – 359 B.C.)**

10- **Artaxerxes the third (Adchus) (359 – 338 B.C.)**

11- **Darius the third (Kadmanus or Codomanus) (338 – 331 B.C.)**; was defeated by Alexander the Great in the year 331 B.C, when the Greek empire started.

## **GOD IN THE BOOK OF EZRA**

This book presents God to us being:

1- God of heaven and earth (1: 2; 5: 11): Whom His people recognize, and in whom they trust

2- Keeps His promise (1:1)

3- Fulfills His goals at the designated time (1: 5)

4- The Holy One; who seeks to sanctify His believers (4: 3; 9: 15)

5- Good and merciful (3: 11); turns the bitter events into the benefit of His believers; Namely, by His goodness, He makes everything good for them \*5: 3- 6: 12)

6- This book confirms the fact that God does not leave the rulers, even the emperors, free to do according to their own whims without control; but He moves the thrones and the hearts, or allows them to move; and turns their actions to the edification of His people (7: 27-28).

7- keeps and guards His people (8: 22-23); and never forsakes them. He chastises them on their sins, yet He sends to them great leaders like Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and prophets; even while under chastisement in captivity, to provoke them to repentance.

8- Listens to the prayers of the humble (8: 23, 31)

9- What God seeks from man as an individual, or from humanity as a congregation, is to return to Him with repentance

#### **THE FEATURES OF THE CHURCH OF GOD**

1- God cherishes the collective church work, without disregarding the role of every individual member in it (3: 1)

2- The church is a congregation exultant with the spirit (3: 11-13; 6: 16)

3- It is befitting of the church not to be satisfied with half solutions (4: 1-3; 6: 21)

4- The church is a repentant congregation, returning to God (6: 17)

5- The true church is characterized by the spirit of obedience to God and His commandments (3: 2; 6: 18)

6- Not everyone whose name is written as a member of the church, is counted as a true member. When the Lord opened the doors before the Jewish church to return to Jerusalem, to build His altar, His temple, His city, and its walls, Not all, despite cherishing being the people of God, the children of the promise, and of Abraham used that exalted chance, but many of them preferred to stay in Babylon to benefit of their prosperous business there..

#### **OUR POSITION CONCERNING SIN**

1- We should be serious in resisting it (9: 3-4; 10: 6)

2- There should be no truce with the sin.

3- We are in need of true confession without self-justification (9: 5-15)

4- There is no way to deal with the sin except by resorting to the mercies of God (9: 13)

5- We should take practical steps to get rid of sin (10: 7-17)

### **THE BROAD LINES OF THE BOOK OF EZRA**

## THE FIRST DIVISION: THE FIRST BATCH (1 - 2) SETTING THE TEMPLE (3 – 6)

(22 years 538 to 516 B.C.)

### THE RETURN UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ZERUBBABEL AND BUILDING THE TEMPLE (Chapter 1 – 6)

According to Ezra the scribe, the return to Jerusalem, building the temple, and practicing worship, are the fulfillment of the Word of God; and a bond of the people with the Word of God and His commandment. Hence he frequently mentions the expression of “*the Word of God*”, proclaiming its role in the religious, social, and civil life of the people of God..

#### EZRA 1: HE WHO SITS ON THE HEAVENLY THRONE MOVES THE EARTHLY THRONES:

**Fulfillment of the Word of God of the return from captivity: A proclamation allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem.** After telling Cyrus king of Persia about his interpretation of what was written on the wall concerning the fall of Babylon into the hand of Persia, and its realization in the same evening (Daniel 5: 25-31); Daniel probably told Cyrus about the prophecies that were realized (Jeremiah 25: 11-12; 29: 10; Isaiah 44: 26-28;; 45: 1, 13), in which his name was specifically mentioned before he came by about a century and a half (Isaiah 44: 26-28), and that in his days the Jews will return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

#### EZRA 2: THE PROCESSION OF THE EXULTANTS:

The names of those who returned to lay the foundations of the temple were recorded in the Holy Book; for those who care for the dwelling of God in their midst, God will care for them and their names.

“*All Israel*” (2: 70; 6:17; 8: 35). After the captivity, there was no more mention of two kingdoms nor two peoples, but one people of twelve tribes (Luke 22: 30; Acts 26: 7; James 1: 1).

#### EZRA 3: A SACRIFICE, A TEMPLE, AND FEASTS:

The Word of God was fulfilled by the building of the altar and the temple. The people gathered together as one man (3: 1), and before even caring for building their own houses; they cared for building the altar being the heart of the temple; the same way the cross is the heart of the church. ... They put their hearts in their work. In the seventh month of the first year of their return, the altar was built; and the feast of the tabernacles was exultantly kept with thanksgiving to God, despite the tough atmosphere of opposition against them..

In the second month of the second year, when the foundations of the temple were laid, there was a mixture of the sadness of the elders who saw the first temple, with the joy of the youth for the assignment of Zerubbabel as a governor on Judea. Whoever concentrates his eyes only upon the past, will never enjoy the glories of the future (Philippians 3: 12-14). The past can either be a rudder to direct the ship of your life to go ahead with your work; or an anchor to keep it from moving forward.

#### EZRA 4: A FIERCE OPPOSITION BY THE ENEMY:

Once the Lord starts to bless the work, the enemy will jump to oppose it. The devil used the following serious ways:

- a- Deception: pretending to help.



- b- Terror and fear: (Whenever you feel fear, refer to Isaiah 12: 2).
- c- Provocation to despair
- d- Resorting to political ways: through claiming that the building was a rebellion and treason against the Persian authorities and the state. The main opposition actually came from the neighbors who have previously confiscated the possessions of the Jews who were carried into captivity. That opposition caused the work to stop for 15 years until the days of king Darius..
- e- Encouraging men to marry pagan wives to corrupt their holiness (Exodus 12: 38; Numbers 11: 4)

#### **EZRA 5 – 6: RESUMPTION OF BUILDING THE TEMPLE IN THE DAYS OF DARIUS:**

**THE APPEARANCE OF THE TWO PROPHETS: HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH:** in the second year after 16 years from the return of the Jews (between 4: 25 and 5: 1), God sent the two prophets to renew and encourage the will of the people to work, through the Word of God and reminding them of the divine promises. When we hold fast to the Word of God, His eyes will be upon us (5: 5); the work would succeed and prosper (6: 14; Joshua 1: 8; Psalm 1: 1-3). As the devil stir the wicked up against the divine work; God will send His godly men to support.

Darius was so impressed by their courage that he asked them to pray for him and his children. It took 4 years to complete the building (520-516 B.C.); and was dedicated with great rejoicing. The work began with a mixture of bitter shouts and screams (3: 8-13), and ended by gladness (6: 16-22).

For some reason or other, after the building of the temple, it took 70 years to renew the city. The temple of Zerubbabel was simple, not as great as that of Solomon; for which the elders who were contemporaries the old temple were sad and cried aloud. But the rest of the people thanked God for His work with them.

#### **THE SECOND DIVISION: THE SECOND BATCH (7 – 8): THE SPIRITUAL REFORM (9 – 10)**

**(One year 458 / 457 B. C.)**

#### **THE RETURN UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF EZRA AND THE REFORM OF THE PEOPLE (Chapters 7 – 10)**

There is an interval of about 60 years between the events of the end the sixth chapter, and those of the beginning of the seventh; Namely between the appearance of the two prophets and the return from captivity under the leadership of Ezra; During that interval the events mentioned in the book of Esther took place.

#### **EZRA 7: THE MESSAGE OF THE KING TO EZRA:**

The king sent to Ezra a magnificent message that reveals the extent of his love for Ezra; his impression by his person; his encouragement to the Jewish people to return; his call to donate for the cause of building the house of the Lord; and his care for pleasing the Lord with love, and for his submission to His law. After 13 years, the same king gave Nehemiah the right to build the walls of Jerusalem. The Persian kings who showed love to the Jews were Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes.

The journey was realized in the year 457 B.C. in the days of Artaxerxes the first, the son of the husband of queen Esther; about 60 years after the completion of the temple, and 80 years from the return of the first batch

to Jerusalem. Ezra arrived to Jerusalem, to find out that the people have fallen down into sin; and his role was to restore them to the Lord.

Although Ezra was a gifted man, yet he was unable to work without the hand of the Lord upon him (7: 6; 8: 18); the compassionate hand (8: 22, 31); the encouraging hand (7: 28); the leading hand (7: 9). The Word of God has been in the heart of Ezra, as well as upon his hand (7: 10); he studied it, obeyed it, and taught it.

#### **EZRA 7 – 8: EZRA'S JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM**

The Jews carried treasures to Jerusalem. The preparation for the journey was by:

- a- The gathering together of the elders by the River (the baptism)
- b- Praying
- c- Fasting and offering sacrifices

Being a priest, Ezra came to teach Judah the law of God; to beautify the temple; and to restore worship in it. He established the assembly of the Sanhedrim, and was its first head.

#### **EZRA 8: CONFRONTING THE SITUATION OF MARRYING PAGAN WIVES:**

Returning to Jerusalem, Ezra found out the situation to be worst than his expectations, whether on the people's level or on that of the civil leaders. In bitterness he tore off his garments, plucked the hair of his beard, and humiliated himself before God, confessing the sins of the people, counting himself as a sinner together with them. He fell down in confusion (9: 1-4); For it was befitting of the remnants to obey the Word of God concerning the marriage, and to learn from the lesson of their chastisement by captivation, and from the events of the past. He fell into shame (9: 5-9), seeing how the people were drunk because of their sin (9: 8)

He gave a warning (9: 10-15); proclaimed to them the Word of God, which they disobeyed; they did not benefit from the chastisement; and here was no other way except the more bitter punishment. Praying to God, Ezra was terrified (9: 4); he got down on his knees (9: 5); he bowed down (9: 6); as one can stand before the Lord (9: 15; Psalm 130: 3).

#### **EZRA 9: A RAY OF HOPE AMID THE DARKNESS:**

Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, who was one of those who married a pagan wife, encouraged the people to confess their trespasses, and to completely obey the Word of God. He probably thought of the promises of God in Exodus 34: 6, 7; Isaiah 55: 6-7; Jeremiah 3: 11-13. .... Believers nowadays refer to John 1: 9. Confession should not be done only in a deadly literal way, but with the perception of the awe of the Word of the Lord (Ezra 9: 14; 10: 3; Isaiah 66: 2); so that the believer would enjoy the contrite heart (Psalm 51: 16-17).

Not all the people obeyed (10: 15); but those who did, publicly confessed their sins; offered sacrifices, and forsook their pagan wives. Though it was very painful to do, yet there was no other way to enjoy purity; there is no easy way to deal with sin.

Ezra's contrition led to a likewise contrition among the people who confessed their sins; bitterly wept, proclaimed their readiness to obey anything uttered by Ezra; and forsook their pagan wives (10). By that the book of Ezra ended by building the house of the Lord in the people's hearts through confession, and practical true repentance.

**DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK OF EZRA:**

<b>The year</b>	<b>The king</b>	<b>The events</b>
539	The victory of Cyrus	The end of the Babylonian kingdom and the beginning of the kingdom of Media and Persia
538	Cyrus' proclamation and decree	A proclamation allowing the return of the Jewish people under the leadership of Ezra and Jeshua; Beginning the building of the temple; and the beginning of the oppression by the enemies (Ezra 1: 2; 4: 5)
529	Cambyses	A decree to stop the building
522	The scoundrel king	
521	Darius Hystaspis	
520		The appearance of the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The resumption of the building
516	(520 – 516)	The completion of the temple and its dedication within four years. The completion of 70 years of captivity (586 B.C.)
486	Xerxes the first	Ahasuerus the husband of queen Esther
480		His defeat in the battle of Salamis
464	Artaxerxes (Longimanus)	Compassion for the Jews
458		The return of the second batch under the leadership of Ezra
457		A decree to resume building the walls (Daniel 9: 25)
445	(Nehemiah 2: 1-9)	The return of the third batch under Nehemiah as the governor, with the decree to resume building the wall
433	(Nehemiah 5: 14)	The second return by Nehemiah to Jerusalem and his reforms
424		The death of Artaxerxes Longimanus
331		The end of the kingdom of Media and Persia; and the beginning of the Greek empire

# THE FIRST DIVISION

## THE RETURN OF THE PEOPLE FROM BABYLON

### UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ZERUBBABEL

(Ezra 1 to 6)

These first six chapters present to us a portrait of the events beginning by the return from captivity from Babylon (1) until the reform of the temple (6).

The initial return was at the beginning of the reign of the Persian king Cyrus when he took Babylon over. It was under the leadership of 'Shechbazzar' "*the prince of Judah*" (1: 8), most probably 'Zerubbabel 'the royal prince, together with Jeshua the priest; whom Later on, Darius the Persian king supported to consummate the reform of the temple.

What came in these chapters was supported by documents, as names of persons, and locations, dates, offerings, royal decrees (like that of Cyrus), and communications between the state officials west of the River Euphrates and the Persian emperors.

These six chapters covered a duration of 22 years from 538 B.C.(Cyrus decree) up to the dedication of the temple in the year 516 B.C.; although the author disregarded many aspects of life through the return and the reform.

## CHAPTER 1

### HE WHO SITS ON THE THRONE MOVES THRONES AND HEARTS:

The book begins by showing the work of God for the sake of His people, or by revealing the good hand of God that performs the impossible: He stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, allowing the captive Jews to return to their land; And stirred up, as well, the spirits of the priests, the Levites, and the leaders of the people of Judah and Benjamin to prepare themselves for the return; although God committed no one to return against his will.

The prophet Jeremiah has prophesied beforehand that the return from captivity would be realized after 70 years (Jeremiah 25: 12; 29: 10). When Cyrus invaded Babylon, he was encountered by the prophet Daniel who presented to him the prophesies of Jeremiah and Isaiah, which caused the king's heart to be shaken, to know that what happened to him was declared to the Jews two centuries before; and that the God of heaven has given him the kingdoms of the earth, and called him the "Lord's anointed" (Isaiah 45: 1). Here, the pagan king presents what is not expected of him:

- 1- He believed in the God of heaven (although he counted Him as one of several gods).
- 2- The pagan king exhorted the Jewish priests and people to move and return.

- 3- He presented to them the articles of the Lord's house in Jerusalem, that was confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar, and the kings of Babylon, all along the years did not attempt to melt those golden and silver articles to make statues of their idols. How amazing is the Spirit of God to stir up the spirits of the pagan king to proclaim his decree, to stir up the hearts of the priests and the people to move; and of the pagan people to donate for the sake of building the temple of the God of heaven in Jerusalem. That is the work of the divine Controller of history in the life of the church, as well as of everyone of its members who leans upon His chest. He presents to us what would seem humanly impossible.

The first chapter records to us the creed declared by the Persian king Cyrus, of the return from captivity ,in the same year he invaded Babylon. Here we notice the faithfulness of God who allowed the chastisement of His people for a certain time for the sake of their reform.

Some discovered inscriptions, contemporary to those events, reveal to us that Cyrus has also allowed captives of other nations in Babylon to return to their countries together with the idols of their gods. But as the Jews had no idols to worship and to take back with them on their return, they were given the holy articles of the temple (1: 7; Daniel 5: 2).

Although everyone was allowed to return, yet not all did; as some have settled down in Babylon where their life prospered, while the life in Judah was tough. They preferred to stay in Babylon and to provide donations to build the house of the Lord.

- |                                                        |        |
|--------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| 1- The fulfillment of the divine promise               | 1 - 4  |
| 2- God stirs up the spirit of the people               | 5 - 6  |
| 3- The return of the articles of the house of the Lord | 7 – 11 |

#### **1- THE FULFILLMENT OF THE DIVINE PROMISE:**

The beginning of this chapter came to conform to what came in the end of the second book of the chronicle (2 Chronicles 36: 22- 23); in which the author, not intending to end it with sorrowful and bitter events, he confirmed that God will never forget His people, even though the duration of chastisement would be long. God promised through His prophet Jeremiah that the captivation will not extend beyond 70 years (Jeremiah 25: 12; 29: 11); And here, the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah came to proclaim the fulfillment of that divine promise literally and accurately.

Having been granted by God an understanding of the events all along the 70 years of captivity, the prophet Daniel poured himself into a prayer in which he confessed his own, and his people's sins that caused the fall into such captivity; saying: "*I Daniel, understood by the books the number of years specified by the word of the Lord, given through Jeremiah, the prophet, that He would accomplish 70 years in the desolation of Jerusalem. Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, and said: ...*" (Daniel 9: 2-4).

*"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the Spirit of Cyrus king of Persia,*

*so that He made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: ..."* (1)

*"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia"*: That does not mean the first year of his reign on Persia, but of his reign on Babylon which he invaded in the year 538 B.C. No one could imagine that such a great kingdom as Babylon would be invaded by such a small nation as Persia.

Contrary to the kings of Babylon who found pleasure in humiliating the captivated people by taking their gods to Babylon to set as memorials to their conquest, and as a proclamation of the helplessness of those gods to help their people; The kings of Persia and Media, on the other hand, king Cyrus in particular, used to honor all gods and peoples, as long as they pay their taxes and submit to Persia politically.

Although the prophet Daniel presented the prophecies to Cyrus, proclaiming to him that his conquest was from the Lord, and has been prophesied ahead by prophets; yet, according to Ezra, a hidden hand worked in the heart of Cyrus, saying: "*The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia*" (1); and according to Solomon the Sage: "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes*" (Proverb 21: 1); The way the Lord allowed Nebuchadnezzar to take over Jerusalem, to devastate Jerusalem, and captivate the people to chastise Israel; He stirred the spirit of Cyrus to issue a decree to allow anyone to return, and to build the temple in Jerusalem. The prophet Daniel says: "*Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His; and He changes the times and seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings*: (Daniel 2: 20 – 21); and as Solomon the Sage says: "*To everything there is a season: ... a time to break down, and a time to build up*" (Ecclesiastes 3: 3).

The king sent an oral and a written proclamation all over his kingdom, that he intends to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem; and kept a copy of his proclamation in the official archives of his state, the value of which was proved, later on in the days of king Darius (Ezra 6: 1)

#### **KING CYRUS:**

He was born in Elam in the year 590 B C, reigned in Elam in the year 558, took over Media in the year 549, Persia in the year 548, Lud in the year 540, and Babylon in the year 538. And because Persia was the most important part of his kingdom, he was called 'the king of Persia'. He was among the best kings of the old as far as his ethics, might in war, and his religious tolerance.

**Did King Cyrus actually believe in the God of Israel?** We should not wonder that Cyrus refers himself to the Lord, God of heaven. when it came to his knowledge that there was a prophecy two centuries before his time that he will build the house of the God of heaven in Jerusalem (Isaiah 44: 38; 45: 1). But that does not imply that he accepted faith in the One God. Having been used to honor all gods and all religions, he sent written decrees to many peoples within his kingdom to restore their gods with honor to their lands. Among the excavations done by Hormuzd Rassam in Babylon in the years 1879 – 1882 AD, a piece of a barrel-shaped earthen vessel on which a like decree was engraved.

**Seventy years of captivity:** According to some, captivity started in the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakin, king of Judah, namely in the year 605 BC; and the decree and proclamation of the return to Jerusalem came in the year 538 BC, the duration of captivity was therefore 70 years; And according to others, the captivity of Judah was realized completely in the year 568 BC when the temple was destroyed. Rebuilding it in the year 516 BC, would mean that the duration of captivity was exactly 70 years.

*"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth, the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah'" (2)*

According to the Jewish Historian Josephus, when Daniel showed Cyrus the prophecy that came in the book of Isaiah that 'Cyrus' by name, will come to build the house of the Lord and to release the captives (Isaiah 45: 13), Cyrus felt that what he got of success was from the Lord, and not according to his own might; and felt a commitment and a responsibility to fulfill His proclamation.

According to Isaiah, the return of the people from Babylon was a second exodus; being said: "*Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldees! With a voice of singing, declare, proclaim this; Utter it even to the end of the earth; Say: 'the Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob'*" (Isaiah 48: 20). Cyrus was a symbol of the Lord Christ sent by the Father to build the church of God, His house.

The kingdom of Persia in the days of Cyrus, embraced Ethiopia to the south, Cyprus, Egypt to the west, submitted the Medes, the Persians, the Armenians, the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Arabs, the Cappaducians, the inhabitants of Verginia, Lydia, Phoenecia, India, Celicia, and many other peoples.

It is to be noticed that the books that were written after the captivity, almost always called God :*"The God of heaven"*; while those written before it almost always called him *"The Lord of hosts"*. According to some God intervned through a vision or a dream to confirm that the prophecies Daniel said to Cyrus were all from the God of heaven.

The believer believes that he, himself, has truly come to be a king of authority; that the enemy has no more authority to force himself into his depths; and before such a divine gift, he is committed to build for God a house in his heart, the inner Jerusalem, by the work of the Holy Spirit of God. The apostle says: "*Do you know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in You?; ... for the temple of God is holy, which temple you are*" (1 Corinthians 3: 16-17); "*Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own*" (1 Corinthians 6: 19).

+ The temple of God is holy. Whoever commits the sin of adultery, defiles the sanctuaries.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ According to the Platonic view, the body is a prison; Whereas according to the apostle Paul, it is the temple of God; for it is in Christ.

(The scholar Tertullian)

+ While the Lord dwells in heaven, sits on the right hand of the Almighty Father; yet he is on earth as well, intimately united to all the saints, and dwells in them. He is up high; yet he is also with those down there.

+ Now, therefore, my beloved brethren, acquire that second heat (the spiritual), so that everything would be light for you. For that heat which is according to God, will cast out every covetousness, will drive away from man every burden (any worry or boredom); and will make divinity dwell in him to make him the temple of God; according to what is written: "*I will dwell in them and walk among them*" (2 Corinthians 6: 16).

(St. Maccari the Great)

+ Beware inside and outside; Condemn no one, and blame nobody. A man of prayer should stand before God, meditating in Him and praising Him. He completely dedicates himself to glorify God all the time, with girded loins; and carries his lamp, with extra oil in his vessels; strengthened by God, in his fight against the devil; bears as fruits for God. His heart is pure; for he is the temple of God and a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit; a house built upon the rocks; longsuffering, meek, and alert.

(St. Steven El-Taibi)

- + Do not let your body be in your cell, while your heart is in (Egypt). But make your body a temple for God; direct your thoughts, and acquire an abiding mind.

(A message by St. Paula)

- + If someone claims that he has love, let him have inside him nothing hated by Christ. Let us care to purify our hearts from the abominations of the old man, hated by God; For we are the temples of God (2 Corinthians 6: 16); Godhead will never dwell in a defiled temple. Let us then enter and consummate our little peace, for what we have already done is enough; And let us pray seeking that our life be peaceful according to His will, and glorifying the Holy Trinity, without blemish.

(St. Parsnovius)

*“Who is there among you of all his people? May his God be with him. Now let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God) which is in Jerusalem” (3)*

The decree of Cyrus came respecting the will and freedom of man; he gave the captives the free choice to stay where they were, or to return to Jerusalem.

As Jerusalem is set upon high mountains; Therefore, whoever intends to go there has to *“go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah”*; And according to the psalmist: *“You, who have shown me great and severe troubles, shall revive me again, and bring me up again from the depths of the earth” (Psalm 71: 20)*

If Cyrus calls the believers to go up to Jerusalem, the book of psalms came bearing a section of psalms called “the psalms of Assents” (Psalm 120 to 134), which were recited by those pilgrims coming to Jerusalem in the major feasts. While giving their backs to the world, and enjoying the holy mountains of Jerusalem and the holy temple of the Lord, their hearts exult. ....It is an ascent to the deposit of heaven.

In this ascent the believer feels like a weaned child on his mother's breast (Psalm 131: 2); he feels that the secret of his comfort is the dwelling of God among His people (Psalm 132); and the gathering together of the priests with the people in a true fellowship; those coming to the Lord sing and praise Him even by nights (Psalm 134).

Those fifteen psalms conform to fifteen steps up to the temple (7 steps outside, and 8 inside). It is befitting of whoever intends to enter into the temple of the Lord to climb these steps.

- + He who is still at the lowest steps, let him concentrate his sight upon the highest step (the fifteenth step). And he who reaches the fifteenth step, has reached the outer court of the temple; the same temple we see now in ruin, for it did wrong against the Lord. .... What does the Lord say? [Come, get up to ascend from here... ]. Just meditate in how the earthly temple is a symbol of the heavenly one.

(St. Jerome)

Such an ascent is accompanied by a spiritual ascent, which could not be achieved unless accompanied by the Owner of the city and the house: “

*May his God be with him”*. *Our God descended to us, so that by His ascension He would carry us together with Him up to the Higher Jerusalem, where we would settle down in the heavenly temple.*



+ Now (in the feast of Ascension; we, who were counted before as unworthy to stay even on earth, are raised up to heaven. We, who were before counted as unworthy of the earthly glory, ascend now up to the kingdom of heaven, to enter into heaven, and to take our place before the divine throne.

This nature of ours, against which the cherubim stood guard on the gates of paradise; Behold, we now ascend above the cherubim.

How could we pass over such a great event in a hurry?

We who have done wrong to the divine mercies, to become unworthy of the earth itself, and have fallen out of every authority and honor; By what worthiness would we be raised to such an honor?!

How did the struggle end?

Why has God's anger been appeased?

It is truly amazing how: peace dwelt; not through something done by those who have sinned against God, but He, Himself, who has got angry on us, is truly calling us to peace. As according to the apostle: "*We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us*" (2 Corinthians 5: 20). What does this mean? Despite the fact that we have done wrong against Him, He is approaching us and calling us to peace. It is truly so; God, the loving God is calling us to Himself.

Look at how our nature has descended then ascended; for there could not be a deeper place than where man had fallen, and there could not be a higher ascension than where Christ had. To clarify this, the apostle Paul says: "*He who descended is also the One who ascended*" ... *Where did He descend? To the lower parts of the earth. ... And where did He ascend? Far above all the heavens*" (Ephesians 4: 9-10).

I meditate in the unworthiness of our race to have the honor we have got through the mercies of God, full of compassion; when we are no more than dust and ashes!.... But now, our nature has risen far above all creation.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"*Build the house of the Lord, God of Israel*". For the people are no more divided into two kingdoms or peoples: Israel and Judah; but have joined one another; namely, unity came back to the people under chastisement.

*"And whoever remains in any place where he sojourns, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem"* (4)

In the first exodus, the Hebrews sought from the Egyptians gold, silver, and garments (Exodus 12: 3), which they took with them on their departure from Egypt.. But here, the king of Persia, himself, issued a decree seeking from his people, whether Jews or other nations, to contribute in fulfilling his desire, namely, building the house of the Lord God of Israel. As some of the Jews were well beloved by the inhabitants of the pagan regions, they were exhorted by Cyrus to help them with gold, silver, goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of the Lord God of Israel. In the book of revelation it came that "*the earth helped the woman (the church)*" (Revelation 12: 16).

All the creation of God: gold, silver, goods, and livestock, could be used for our good, if we put them into good use. But in case our hearts get attached to them and not to the Creator; they would become an offense for us on the way of our salvation.

+ We should not put the blame upon the gold or silver because of the greedy; nor upon the food or wine because of the drunkards; nor upon the feminine beauty because of the adulterers and fornicators; etc. We may see how a

physicians uses fire in a good way on a patient; while we may also see a murderer use poisonous bread to kill his victim.

- + Although the righteous 'Job' lost all his riches and reached the lowest level of poverty, yet he kept his soul undisturbed; He concentrated his sight upon God, and not upon the valueless earthly things. If men nowadays have the same tendency; we would not be vehemently denied in the new covenant the possession of those things to reach perfection. For possessing those things without being attached to them would be more commended than not possessing them altogether.
- + If we intend to return to our original home where our happiness is, we are committed to use this world and not to get attached to it; *"For since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made"* (Romans 1: 20). Namely, we can see the eternal spirituals through what is temporarily physical.

(St. Augustine)

## 2- GOD STIRS UP THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE:

*"Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all those whose spirits God had moved, arose to go out and build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem" (5)*

The Spirit of God who shined the light of knowledge upon the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, to see the return by the spirit of prophecy, is He Himself who stirred the spirit of Cyrus to issue a decree to allow the return; and is He Himself who moved the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, the priests, the Levites, and others to arise to go and build the house of the Lord, regardless of the anticipated dangers on their way to Jerusalem, and of the opposition of the enemies in Jerusalem itself; although some of the captives have persisted on remaining in their places for the sake of their material benefits. The decision of the return to Jerusalem was, however, not an easy decision; for the city was burnt by fire, without walls; surrounded by enemies; and the way to it was tough, risky, and unknown to them. Many of them have not seen Jerusalem before; and some saw it while being little kids. Besides, it was difficult to forsake all their possessions in Babylon of lands, riches, slaves, male and female singers (Ezra 2: 65). .... Those were, therefore, in need of the hand of God to stir up their spirits to set forth to Jerusalem.

Those who responded to the Spirit of God were singing: *"If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand forget my skill. If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth – If I do not exalt Jerusalem, above my chief joy"* (Psalm 137: 5-6). This is the song of every true believer who desires to set forth to the Higher Jerusalem to enjoy the presence in the divine bosoms, and the heavenly glories.

According to St; Jerome, those ascending from Babylon to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem; were the sinners who remembered their past holy life, never forgot it, but sought to do the spiritual work, as though with the right hands; and their tongues utter the work of God with them, to resume their early holy life.

*"And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered" (6)*

When man concentrates upon the higher Jerusalem, and despises all the temporal things, they will come after him and cling to his feet. As it was said about how all those who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet (Acts 4: 34-35).

### 3- THE RETURN OF THE ARTICLES OF THE HOUSE OF THE LORD:

*"King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods" (7)*

Representing the serious man who follows his words by action, Cyrus did by bringing out the articles of the house of the Lord which were confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 35: 13-15). It is amazing how those articles remained intact for about 70 years; and how no one of the kings of Babylon thought of melting them to use as jewels or to make idols of their gods.

*"And Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah" (8)*

**'Sheshbazzar':** Although according to some he is someone else different from Zerubbabel, yet the prevailing view is that they are one and the same person; 'Sheshbazzar was his Persian name, meaning (joy in the midst of troubles) or (May the sun god or the moon god protect the father); whereas his Hebrew name 'Zerubbabel' means (the one born or planted a stranger in Babylon); the same way Daniel and the three saintly young men were given Chaldean names beside their Hebrew names. 'Zerubbabel was the son of 'Shealtiel' the older son of king Jehoiakin who died childless, and his younger brother married his widow and got him a son referred to him according to the law (Deuteronomy 25: 5-6). Therefore, according to the law, Zerubbabel is the son of 'Shealtiel' (Ezra 3: 2); and according to nature, he is the son of Pedaiah ( 1 Chronicles 3: 9).

*"This is the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty –nine knives, thirty gold basins, for hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind, and one thousand other articles" (9, 10)*

The articles of the house of the Lord were kept in a pagan temple, and were probably put there to use; Yet being articles of honor, the eyes of the Lord kept watching them to bring them back to His house; for "*The Lord knows those who are His*" (2 Timothy 2: 19)

The return of the gold and silver articles gave those returning a strong motive to build the Lord's house, as they carried precious holy things; not only for their material value, but for being holy articles of the house of the Lord.

*"All the articles of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem" (11)*

It is obvious that by adding the articles mentioned in verse 9 and 10 they would not add up to 5400. What are mentioned in verses 9 and 10 are most probably the large articles; and here the 5400 are the total of the large and the small articles together.

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## AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 1

## SET YOUR DWELLING PLACE IN ME

- + My soul moans together with the captives in Babylon;  
I hung my harp upon the willows (Psalm 137: 2)  
How can I praise You in the land of sin?  
How can I exult while my soul is enslaved to the enemy?  
You know those who are Yours;  
Behold, I am Yours; Do not forsake me in the violent Babylon.
  
- + My heart cries out: Bring me back to Your Jerusalem;  
Raise me up from the trash; and bring me forth into the bosom of Your Father;  
Let me join the exultant processions of faith;  
Lift me up to Your heavenly sanctuaries.
  
- + My soul praises You for the sake of all Your gifts;  
But it remains thirsty for You alone;  
Your gifts testify to Your love for me;  
I do not desire to be possessed by the world You created for my sake;  
But to be possessed by You alone, O King of kings;  
Liberate me from every temporal desire;  
Pour all my desires in You;  
For You are my life and my crown.

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# CHAPTER 2

## THE EXULTANT PROCESSION OF THOSE RETURNING TO JERUSALEM

In the first chapter, Cyrus king of Persia returned the precious articles to Jerusalem where the house of the Lord is to be built. In the present chapter, we see the human vessels of high price, namely, the people of God among whom the Lord dwells; the heavenly house which God is pleased to build Himself.

Having issued the royal decree allowing the captives to return, and having called his people to donate to build the house of the Lord, Cyrus brought out the articles which were kept in the temple of the gods of Nebuchadnezzar. About fifty thousand responded to the king's call, which is considered only a few of the captives; but God is preoccupied not with the number of people, as with the purity of their hearts. Those fifty thousand represent the few faithful whom the land of captivity, nor the tens of years could turn their sight away from the burnt city and the destroyed temple.

The same list of those returning from captivity in the second chapter of Ezra, which conforms to that included in the seventh chapter of Nehemiah; was a list of an amazing procession; of those with the pure heart, exultant for the work of the Lord. .... They included the following categories:

a- **The leaders** (1-2): include 12 persons, of whom Ezra mentioned 11, and Nehemiah added to them 'Nahamani' (Nehemiah 7: 7). All of them from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, who, counting themselves representatives of the twelve tribes, offered 12 bulls as burnt offerings for all the 12 tribes (Ezra 8: 35). The procession of the return was under the leadership of Zerubbabel the grandson of king Jehoiakin, representing the civil authority, and Jeshua the priest representing the religious authority. It was the procession of liberation from the devil and the ascension up to the high Jerusalem under the leadership of the Lord of glory Christ, being the King of kings and the heavenly High Priest; bearing the royalty and the priesthood at the same time. In every generation God sends great saints of diverse talents.

b- **The people** (3-35): Some of them were classified according to their families and tribes (3-19); and others were classified according to their locations of dwelling (20-35). It was like the book of life in which the names of those who strive for the Lord's sake are recorded; those who loved the heavenly temple more than all the riches of the earth "*See. I have inscribed you on the palm of My hand*" (Isaiah 49: 16);

c- **The priests** (36-39): Of them 4289 returned of four divisions; the sons of Jedaiah; the sons of Immer; the sons of Pashhur; and the sons of Harim (36-39)

d- **The Levites** (40-43): Only 74 persons returned; while the rest of them loved the service of the world more than the service of the temple; And of the **gatekeepers** 139 persons, who used to guard the temple; and of the singers the sons of Asaph 128 persons.

It was not possible for the priests, the Levites, or the people, to sing praise to the Lord in the land of captivity, for "*How shall we sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land?*" (Psalm 137: 4). But the singers gave the procession of return the spirit of praise, joy, and exultation, to make it an enjoyable journey; They had an important role in the procession, which was a symbol of the procession to the high Jerusalem, an exultant procession that makes all -- old and young; men and women -- forget the toughness of the journey of their strife and sojourn.

e- **The Nethinim** (43-54): A Hebrew name meaning (dedicated), who were most probably the grandchildren of the Gibeonites and the Medianites who worked in the house of the Lord in the days of Moses and Joshua, and were dedicated by king David to the service of the temple. Although they were not of the people of God, yet they preferred the service in the ruins of Jerusalem and the temple to having pleasure in the glories of Babylon.

f- **The sons of Solomon's servants** (55-58): Of the descendants of the Canaanites. Through their service in the temple, and getting attached to the Lord and sanctified in Him, they were relieved of the curse that dwelt upon them (See Genesis 9: 25). The Nethinim and the sons of Solomon's servants more zealous than the Levites "*Many will come from east and west and enjoy the divine bosoms*" (Matthew 8: 11); while the children of the kingdom are slothful to enjoy it. ... Behold, the procession is big enough to accommodate the whole world; and the gates of God are open before everyone.

It was necessary for that huge number of those returning from captivity (64-70) to settle down somewhere before beginning any work. But Jerusalem, being desolate (Lamentation 5: 18); they headed to the towns and villages around Jerusalem.

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|------------------------------------------------|---------|
| 1- The captives who returned to Jerusalem      | 1 - 58  |
| 2- Those whose genealogies were not identified | 59 - 67 |
| 3- Giving according to ability                 | 68 – 70 |

#### 1- THE CAPTIVES WHO RETURNED TO JERUSALEM:

*"Now, these are the people of the province who came back from captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his own city" (1)*

By "*the province*" here, he means "Judah" that used to be great kingdom with satellites, then turned into a mere province under the king of Persia. That is the work of sin that humiliates man, nations, and kingdoms; evil bound to reproach, shame, loss of peace, together with failure and inner defeat. The wicked needs no one to tell him off or to punish him, for what he does, present to him bitterness and death; and make him drink from the same cup he filled for himself; unless he throws it away through his enjoyment of his Savior, and his serious strife through the holy will in the Lord.

*"Righteousness exalts a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverb 14: 34)*

*"When the wicked comes, contempt comes also; and with dishonor comes reproach" (Proverb 18: 3)*

*"When they departed from what God prescribed for them, they were utterly defeated (and were delivered to the sword and reproach" (Judith 5: 18)*

*"Let them confounded and consumed, who are adversaries of my life. Let them be covered with reproach and dishonor, who seek my hurt" (Psalm 71: 13)*

*"There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked" (Isaiah 48: 22)*

*"Do not become an enemy instead of a friend; for a bad name incurs shame and reproach; so it is with the double-tongued sinner" (Sirach 6: 1)*

*"A liar's way leads to disgrace, and his shame is ever with him" (Sirach 20: 26).*

+ If you stay attached to dust, you will ultimately turn into dust. It is befitting of you to change; You should become heavenly.

(The scholar Origen)

- + While being utterly covered with the wrinkles of my sins, I spend my days and my nights in terror; but seeing how God loosens the chains, and supports the terrified humble souls, He says to me while lying in the tomb of my evil: "Jerome! come forth"

(St. Jerome)

- + The wicked tend to kill themselves with all kinds of covetousness; Yes!, even when living, they are in reproach; they count their bellies their gods; and when they die they are tortured.

(St. Athanasius the apostolic)

*"Those who came with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reeliah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah, the number of men of the people of Israel" (2)*

Those who returned to Jerusalem, having forsaken their possessions in Babylon, endured troubles and risks for the sake of building the city of God, Jerusalem and His temple, God honored them by mentioning their names; For "*The God of Israel says: 'Those who honor Me I will honor'*" (1 Samuel 2: 30), and "*The memory of the righteous is blessed*" (Proverb 10: 7). God will honor them now and in the time to come. Their names are registered to the account of the kingdom of God, until they are registered as well in the book of the eternal life (Revelation 3: 5)

This register, however, did not include all the names, sometimes only the names of the heads of the fathers' houses and the families. But those of God's godly men, their names are registered by the Lord in "*the book of remembrance*" (Malachi 3: 16-17).

- + "*The memory of the righteous is blessed*". He does not mean that the souls of those who departed are blessed by us; but on account of that those who bless the departed will gain a greater benefit by remembering them. I wish we do not despise the words of a wise man, but rather give them great care.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Nehemiah here (2) is not Nehemiah who led the third batch of those who returned to Jerusalem, and rebuilt the wall 80 years later. And also Mordecai here is not the one mentioned in the book of Esther.

*"The people of Parosh, 2172" (3)*

*"The people of Shephatiah, 372" (4)*

*"The people of Arah, 775" (5)*

*"The people of Pahath-Moab, of the people of Jeshua and Joab, 2812" (6)*

**"Pahath-Moab"**; namely( ruler of Moab); their father was probably a ruler of Moab when it was submitted to Israel.

"Pahath-Moab, namely, the governor of Moab; their father could be the governor of Moab when it was under Israel.

*"The people of Elam, 1254" (7)*

*"The people of Zattu, 945" (8)*

*"The people of Zaccai, 760" (9)*

*"The people of Bani, 642" (10)*

*"The people of Bebai, 623" (11)*  
*"The people of Azgad, 1222" (12)*  
*"The people of Adonikam, 666" (13)*

**"Adonikam"** means the great master. Here we notice that the figure 666 is that of the beast (Revelation 13); namely, the devil. It is as though, with every return to the Lord, we should expect wars from the devil, as long as we are still in the body.

*"The people of Bigvai, 2056" (14)*  
*"The people of Adin, 454" (15)*  
*"The people of Ater of Hezekiah, 98" (16)*  
*"The people of Bezai, 323" (17)*  
*"The people of Jorah, 112" (18)*  
*"The people of Hashum, 223" (19)*  
*"The people of Gibbar, 95" (20)*  
*"The people of Bethlehem, 123" (21)*  
*"The men of Netophah, 56" (22)*  
*"The men of Anathoth, 128" (23)*

**"The people of Anathoth"**, the inhabitants of the village of the prophet Jeremiah who accused him of treason and forsook him. Jeremiah prophesied about the return from captivity while in prison where king Zedekiah shut him up charged of being an agent of Nebuchadnezzar. There, 'Hanameel' Jeremiah's cousin came to ask him to buy his field in Anathoth, for the right of redemption in Jeremiah's to buy it. And despite knowing that the Chaldeans were coming to take over the land, Jeremiah bought the field, signed the deed and sealed it, took witnesses; and charged Baruch to put it in an earthen vessel; as a testimony that after the desolation of the land, houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land (Jeremiah 32: 43-44). And behold, God's promise has been fulfilled and the captives, including the people of Anathoth, have returned home.

*"The people of Azmaveth, 42" (24)*  
*"The people of Kirjath Arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743" (25)*  
*"The people of ramah and Geba, 621" (26)*  
*"The men of Mishmas, 122" (27)*  
*"The men of Bethel and Ai, 223" (28)*  
*"The people of Nebo, 52" (29)*

**"Nebo"**: is not the mountain in which Moses ascended to look at the promised land, but another location in Judah

*"The people of Magbish, 156" (30)*  
*"The people of the other Elam, 1254" (31)*

**"The other Elam"**, not Elam mentioned in verse 7. which is the name of a person, while here is the name of a location.

*"The people of Harim, 320" (32)*  
*"The people of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 725" (33)*  
*"The people of Jericho, 345" (34)*  
*"The people of Sennah, 3630" (35)*  
*"The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973" (36)*



“**Jeshua** mentioned here is not the one mentioned in verse 2.

We expected that all the priest would return, but unfortunately, only groups of four divisions; while the rest preferred to work in the land of captivity to ministering in the temple of God.

It is to be noticed that the number of the priests was 4200, namely about one tenth of those returning from Jerusalem; It is as though God intended to keep the tithes for himself.

*“The sons of Immer, 1052” (37)*

*“The sons of Pashhur, 1247” (38)*

*“The sons of Harim, 1017” (39)*

*“The Levites: The sons of Jesha and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74” (40)*

It is to be noticed that the number of the Levites is very few; probably because they rejected and despised their mission; preferred to have lands and possessions in Babylon; and forgot that the Lord is their portion; and that they are the portion of the Lord.

*“The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128” (41)*

*“The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, 139 in all” (42)*

*“The Nethinim: The sons of Ziha, the sons of hasupha, the sons of Tabaoth” (43)*

**The Nethinim** were most probably of the descendants of the Gibeonites, who were appointed to serve the Levites.

*“The sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon” (44)*

*“The sons of Lebanah the sons of Hagabah, , the sons of Akkub” (45)*

*“The sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmal, the sons of Hanan” (46)*

*“The sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah” (47)*

*“The sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekodah, the sons of Gazzam” (48)*

*“The sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai” (49)*

*“The sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephusim” (50)*

*“The sons of Bakkuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur” (51)*

*“The sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha” (52)*

*“The sons of Barkus, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Tamah” (53)*

*“The sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha” (54)*

*“The sons of Solomon’s servants: The sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Peruda” (55)*

“**The sons of Solomon’s servants**”, of the descendants of the Canaanites whom Solomon forced to build the temple (1 kings 9: 20-21)

*“The sons of The sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddei” (56)*

*“The sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth of Zebaim, the sons of Ami” (57)*

*“All the Nethinim and the children of Solomon’s servants were 392” (58)*

## **2- THOSE WHOSE GENEALOGIES WERE NOT IDENTIFIED:**

*“And these were the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsh, Cherub, Adnan, and Immer; but they could not identify their father’s house or their genealogy, whether they were of Israel” (59):*

The tables of genealogy had a great importance for the Hebrews, for the priests and the Levites in particular. Who among them, could not prove that he is a descendant of Abraham, would be denied all the special privileges.

It is a disgrace that some of those who returned, because of their love for money, have lost interest in identifying their fathers’ houses (59). They were Israelites, but lost the lists of their genealogies; some of whom were priests, descendents of Aaron.

*“The sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda” (60)*

“**Delaiah**” means (whom Jehovah liberated). “**Tobiah**” means (the goodness of Jehovah), and “**Nekoda**” means (famous). Despite what their names bear of beautiful spiritual meanings, yet they could not identify their genealogies as belonging to the people of God; on account of that their fathers probably married pagan wives. Those were counted as circumcised strangers, who have the right to worship and to offer sacrifices (Numbers 15: 14-16), but have no portion in the land.

*“And the sons of the priests, the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, and the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their names” (61).*

Some priests who changed their genealogy to belong to ‘**Barzillai the Gileadite**’, instead of to the tribe of **Aaron** (61), were denied eating “the most holy things” namely, their portion as priests; and were only given the right to eat “the holy things”, a portion for the families of the priests (61-62). ..... Many of the people, and even those of Gentile origin have come ahead of the priests, joined the procession, and came to be heroes for the Lord. Some people go ahead of the priests in the heavenly glories. “The sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, have lost their priesthood, having lost their worthiness for it; for although their father was a priest, yet he preferred to be called by the name of such a famous man like Barzillai the Gileadite, to being referred to Aaron; he did not perceive the honor of priesthood and the service of God, and rejected his priestly genealogy. He who denies the Son of Man, will be denied by the Son of Man before the angels of God (Luke 12: 9).

*“Those sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled” (62)*

*“And the ‘Tershata’ (the governor) said to them that they should not eat of “the most holy things” till a priest could consult with the Urim and thummim” (63)*

Those excluded from priesthood have been denied of the ‘showbread’ and the fellowship in the holy sacrifice which is eaten only by the priests, and called the “*the most holy things*”; whereas the firstfruit and the offerings of thanksgiving and the tithes, called “*the holy things*”, could be eaten by the households of the priests.

The “**Tershata**” (in the Arabic version) is a Persian title of honor that refers to the governor, like ‘his excellence’. The governor here was Zerubbabel.

“The **Urim** and the **Thunnim**” were two flat stones fixed on the breastplate of the high priest, called the “the breastplate of judgment”, they refer to delivering the will to God in the matters concerning the people as a whole. The word “Urim” means (the lights), and the “Thummim” means (consummate or perfect).. Here it refers to the anticipation of the Israelites of the coming of the divine High Priest, in whom are all the light and perfection; namely, the Lord Christ. Anyway the Urim and the Thummim, in the life of a priest, confirm that he should not depend in his ministry upon the human arms and counsel, but should primarily resort to the altar where he pours himself before God, seeking His divine light to shine in his heart and to

consummate every weakness in him. Having so many, serious, and inter-wined commitments: providing his congregation with their most precious gift – the salvation of their souls – and dealing with all kinds of people, under diverse situations, make him in need of being in a perpetual relationship with God his Guide, so that no soul would be lost because of his ignorance or incompetence..

+ God Himself is He who works in all

(St. John Chrysostom)

*“The whole congregation together were 42360” (64)*

*“Beside their male and female servants of whom there were 7337, and they had 200 men and women singers” (65)*

The whole congregation here is said to be 42360 (beside the male and female servants, as it also came in the book of Nehemiah); while the number mentioned here is 29818, and in Nehemiah 31089. What is the reason of these discrepancies?

1- The figure 42360 is the number of the prominent Jews who had the intention to return; as is mentioned in both Ezra and Nehemiah; but those mentioned by Ezra are those who actually moved to return, and had their name registered in Babylon; while Nehemiah registered them in Judah after the building of the wall of Jerusalem. The difference could be the result of the long interval between them, as some might have died on the way, or after their arrival before Nehemiah register the names; and still others might have changed their mind and did not actually travel, and their names were dropped from the seventh chapter of the book of Nehemiah.

2- After Ezra registered the names of those who actually moved to travel, others joined the procession, and were registered by Nehemiah, hence the increase in his numbers. As examples of that:

a- There is no mention of “Magbish” in the list of Nehemiah, but came in Ezra 2: 30. Ezra wrote his name while in Babylon, while Nehemiah wrote the names who actually arrived to Jerusalem.

b- The number of the sons of Adin (15) in Ezra’s list was 454, while in that of Nehemiah was 655; for those who actually traveled were more than those whose names were registered.

c- It was the custom among the Jews at that time to use more than one name for the same person – which is also common in Lower Egypt up to this day – the name registered in the birth certificate is different from that by which he is publicly known; and most probably no one knows his name in the birth certificate until the time he enters into the school or when he gets married, and needs to provide his birth certificate. . As an example “the sons of Siaha (Ezra 2: 44), came as “Sia” in (Nehemiah 7: 47).

**“The men and women singers”** (65) here, do not refer to the Levites who sing in the temple, but to common singers in civil celebrations and banquets.

*“Their horses were 736; their mules 245” (66)*

*“Their camels 435, and their donkeys 6720” (67)*

Those went into captivity without any possessions, but returned with horses, camels, servants, gold, and silver. Which are gifts by God to those who accept the chastisement with thanksgiving, and seriously care for the salvation of their souls; God will never leave them empty-handed.

### 3- GIVING ACCORDING TO ABILITY:

*“Some of the heads of the fathers’ houses, when they came to the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem offered freely for the house of God to erect it in its place” (68)*

Offering freely for the house of the Lord, the Lord blessed them.

Nobody dared to change the location of the temple, but the temple of Zerubbabel was erected at the same location of that of Solomon. The Jews up to this very day hope to build the temple at the same location, which creates problems with the Palestinians, which is difficult, if not impossible to solve.

*“According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61000 gold drachmas, 5000 minas of silver, and 100 priestly garments” (69)*

Those who returned have forsaken Babylon with all its glories, and came back to the desolate and burnt Jerusalem, all of them probably gave tithes; which is the (first mile), whereas the (second mile) is for every individual to give gifts and alms according to his ability; as according to the apostle: *“I bear witness that, according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing”* (2 Corinthians 8: 3).

+ That is the climax of praise:: In grief they stay in peace; and in the depth of poverty they give freely and generously from what they have.

(Theodoret, bishop of Cyrus)

**“Drachma”** was a coin used in the kingdom of Persia. That is the first time, a coin is mentioned in the Holy Book.

Those who returned gave to the treasury **priestly garments**, to put on during service, then taken off after it, and be kept in the wardrobe of the temple (Exodus 28: 41; 31: 7). They offered them to motivate the priests to start ministry once they arrive to the temple in Jerusalem.

**“Minas”** was a measure of weight, and not a coin, estimated to be about 50 shekels

*“So the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethanim dwell in their cities, and all Israel in their cities” (70)*

They returned to their dwelling places while singing their psalms, saying: *“Lord, You have been favorable to Your land...”* (Psalm 85: 1-3). So it is befitting of us to return to our heavenly city, and not be attached to the land of our sojourn in this world.

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## **AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 2**

### **LET ME JOIN YOUR JOYFUL PROCESSION**

+ If my sins brought me into captivity;  
Yet You Liberate the souls from the captivity of the devil;

And rescue them from bondage;  
Who can liberate me from the devil but You?  
Who can restore to me the honor of the glory of the children of God that You granted to me?  
Who can let me join Your exultant procession but Your grace?

- + Draw me and all my brethren in humanity to You;  
Make all souls rejoice by the flow of Your love;  
Let us join the procession of victory heading toward the Higher Jerusalem;  
Turn our life into an exultant heaven;  
Register the names of all in Your book;  
Inscribe them on Your divine palm.
  
- + Let them all: priests and people, join You;  
Let the children, the elders, together with the young men and women join You;  
Let everyone find a place in Your unique procession;
  
- + Let us offer a few of what You have granted us;  
Let us offer gold, silver, and spiritual precious stones.  
Receive them and smell them a sweet fragrance of pleasure;  
We desire to set Your holy temple inside us;  
We desire that all humanity become – if possible – honored living stones;  
We shall offer You sacrifices of perpetual thanksgiving, together with the praises of the angels;  
Glory be to You, O loving and amazing Leader.

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# CHAPTER 3

## A SACRIFICE, A TEMPLE, AND FEASTS

The first batch returned to Jerusalem, yet they did not encounter God through the altar and the sacrifice for the following eight months. Now, as the seventh Hebrew month, considered as the climax of the feasts, approached, they gathered together as one man, set the altar, offered the sacrifices, and started building the temple.

Having arrived at Jerusalem, they were preoccupied by three things:

1- **Setting the altar:** Being afraid of the non-Jews who settled down in the surrounding region, those who envied them for their return from captivity; the solution was to return to God through prayer and to reconcile with Him

by the precious blood of Christ. For there is no refuge for us other than His cross -- the amazing altar! The priority, therefore was to set the altar to offer the sacrifices.

2- **Building the temple of the Holy God:** Building the temple was next to the altar in importance. The ruins of the destroyed temple was a source of the stones; whereas all the wood were burnt (2 Kings 25: 9)

. According to the apostle Paul: "*Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*" (1 Corinthians 3:16).. God cared to provide them even with their material needs; but it was

befitting of the rich among them to cover the expenses of building the temple which Cyrus allowed them to do; even before spending their wealth on their personal affairs.

3- As the seventh Hebrew month was the most important concerning the Jewish feasts (Leviticus 23: 24-36; Nehemiah 8), the people gathered together in the ruined Jerusalem, after being away for decades in the land of

captivity, and set forth to celebrate the feasts. Their harps are no longer hung upon the willows, because of the bitterness of their souls, but they were now praising the Lord in His holy city (See Psalm 137: 2). Our Christ is our Feast who grants us his heavenly joy.

The great day came to lay the foundations of the temple, under the supervision of the Levites. The trumpets started blowing as is befitting, and the psalms of David started to be used to praise the Lord. According to verse 11, psalm 136 that was used in the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 5: 13; 7: 3) was used in the present occasion. A psalm or more are normally used for every occasion in our life (Ephesians 5: 10; James 5: 19).

We should not be ashamed to express our joy for the work of God through our emotions by praising Him. The elders who waited fifty years since the temple was devastated in the year 587 BC wept; whether out of joy for laying the foundations of the new temple, or out of grief when they compared them to those of the old temple (Haggai 2: 3). It is very good to look back at the past, to grieve and moan on what we lost; but not in the way that makes us lose our hope, and our enjoyment of what we already have today (Ecclesiastes 7: 10; Philippians 3: 13-14).

1- Setting the altar of the Lord	1 - 3
2- Celebrating the feasts	4 - 6
3- Laying the foundation of the temple	7 - 9
4- Celebrating the restoration of the temple	10 - 11
5- Tears of hope and tears of sorrow	12 - 13

## 1- SETTING THE ALTAR OF THE LORD:

*“And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem” (1)*

The seventh month conforms to the second half of September and the first half of October. They most probably started their journey which took between three and four months in the spring. The seventh month was the month of the feasts important to the Jews: the feast of blowing the trumpets, of the atonement, and of the tabernacles.

- a- On the first day of the seventh month, the feast of blowing of the trumpets is celebrated (Numbers 29: 1)
- b- On the tenth day, the great day of atonement is celebrated (Numbers 29: 7)
- c- On the fifteenth day, the feast of the tabernacles is celebrated; for seven days, and on the eighth day there is a sacred assembly for the Lord (Numbers 29: 12 – 35).

*“The people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem”*. There, all of them realized the need of having an altar for the Lord, who is capable of protecting them and supporting them in the terror that dwelt upon them from the peoples all around them, On another aspect, they were in need of collectively celebrating the feasts that would restore to them their joy in the Lord.

All, priest, Levites, and people, gathered together as one man to set an altar for the Lord.... In the New covenant, *“When the day of the Pentecost has fully come, they were all with one accord in one place”* (Acts 2: 1); when the Holy Spirit dwelt upon them, and the church of the new covenant was born, being the holy temple of the Lord.

Whenever there is the spirit of love and unity, God proclaims His presence, and sets His dwelling place among His people.

- + God so counsels us, not only lest every one would be separated from the other; but to present a flow of love and conformity. If the being of every man is set upon the peace of his neighbor, the least thing to do is to love him. ... The body sustains, through the clear differences between its members; whereas in case it perishes, this will not be the case; Destruction will definitely happen unless even the least members properly work.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- + You all are one in Christ Jesus; It is not that some are more enlightened, and others are less, in spiritual knowledge. Let everyone of us put aside all the carnal covetousness; and be equally spiritual before the Lord.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

*“Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shaltiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God” (2)*

Jeshua the high priest together with his brethren the priest, and Zerubbabel together with his brethren the statesmen, arose and built the altar of God to offer on it sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Lord, and to sing His praise, after so long being denied, and so long hanging their harps on the willows.

Jeshua was the first high priest after captivity. His name is mentioned before Zerubbabel, on account of that the work here concerns offering the sacrifices, a completely priestly task; whereas in verse 8, we find the name of Zerubbabel come

before that of Joshua, for the task concerned the building of the temple, which was commanded by king Cyrus to be executed by Zerubbabel. Here, we notice the elaborate commitment to keeping the law as it is written by Moses the man of God.

The altar refers to the divine presence, or more precisely to the reconciliation with God through the sacrifice.

In building the altar there is a confession by the people of their need to atone for their sins; and faith in the mercies of God, the Forgiver of sins.

The altar is a symbol of the cross, on which the incarnate Word of God delivered His life a sacrifice for our sake.

Believing that faith is the inner altar of the heart, St. Augustine says:

[We spiritually understand that faith is the inner altar of God, for which the seen temple is a symbol. Every gift we offer to God – whether a prophecy, teaching, praise, singing psalms, or any other gift coming from the mind – God will not accept, unless it is offered with true faith, to be bound with cords to the horns of the altar (Psalm 118: 28); for then, our words will come out pure without a blemish]

Believing that the inner altar is the dedication by the congregation of their life with one spirit and one mind, St. Clement of Alexandria says: [The heavenly altar set among us here is the gathering together of those who dedicated their life to prayer, to have one voice and one mind].

*“Though fear had come upon them, because of the peoples of those countries, they set the altar on its bases, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening burnt offerings” (3)*

Terrified of their enemies, they resorted to the refuge of the altar of the Lord, namely under His wings, trusting in His strength. It is to be noticed that they set the altar before building the wall of the city; for it is more important; on account of that the altar is the secret wall that protects the people of God. They even built the altar before building the temple itself, with the perception that the temple of the Lord is set upon the sacrifice that sanctifies the people of God His holy temple.

If sin causes confusion in the life of man, and lets him lose his peace and security, God alone is our refuge, stronghold, and peace; *“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe”* (Proverb 18: 10); and as said by the psalmist: *“God alone is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; the rock of my strength, and my refuge is in God”* (Psalm 62: 6-7). And having experienced the power of the altar of the new covenant, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul says: *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1: 18).

Some may wonder: If the animal sacrifices were abolished through the unique offering of the sacrifice of the Lord Christ on the cross, what is then our further need for an altar in the new covenant?!

The answer for this came in both the old and the new testaments of the Holy Book:

1- The prophecies of the old covenant confirm the setting of the altar of the new covenant, not bound to Jerusalem alone, and not confined to a specific people and not to others; of which we may mention:

a- The saying of the prophet Malachi: *“For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles. In every place incense shall be offered to My name ... ”* (Malachi 1: 11). This

saying certainly does not apply to the incense of the old covenant and its offering; on account of that it should not be offered out of Jerusalem, and only by the Hebrew priests.



b- The prophet Isaiah gave special care to the altar of the Lord in Egypt by saying: "*In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt; ... then the Lord will be known to Egypt; and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering*" (Isaiah 19: 19, 21).

2- The Lord Himself spoke in the new covenant about the altar, saying: "*If you bring your gift to the altar...*" (Matthew 5: 23-24)

3- Comparing between the Christian and the pagan worship, St. Paul says: "*You cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons*" (1 Corinthians 10: 21); If he refers to the altar of the pagans as the table of the demons, he surely refers to the Christian altar as the table of the Lord.

+ It is the collective sacrifice, offered by the Greatest High Priest – the Lord Christ.  
He who delivered Himself by passion for our sake, to make out of us a body to such a great Head.  
This is the sacrifice of the Christians, in which all become one unique body in Christ Jesus.  
That is what the church offers through the secret of the altar.  
For, while raising the sacrifice to God, she offers herself an offering to Him

+ You are on the table; You are inside the chalice.

+ The secret of our peace and unity originates on His altar.

(St. Augustine)

## 2- CELEBRATING THE FEASTS:

*"They also kept the feast of the tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings in the number required by ordinance for each day"* (4)

The congregation, were most probably subjected to the ridicule of the surrounding peoples, when they gathered together around the site of the altar to build it, and started collecting the remains of the old altar. Yet they paid no attention to their ridicule, perceiving that the secret of their strength is in the sacrifice offered to God.

**The feast of the tabernacles:** They kept it to remember that they were sojourners, to live with the spirit of sojourn. As the feast of the tabernacles conforms to the day of the dedication of the temple of Solomon, and the dwelling of the glory of God in it (1 Kings 8: 2); they cared for offering burnt offerings (3: 3-6); for it is "*a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord*" (Leviticus 1: 13).

Those who returned from captivity came to find the city desolate, and the temple as though it never existed. Their terror of the surrounding peoples so destroyed their souls, that they had no refuge except in God Himself.

Although it was Zerubbabel who got the permission to build the temple including the altar, yet, at the time of building the altar, the high priest had the precedence over him.

*"The daily burnt offering"* The feast of the tabernacles was held seven days, to be followed by the great day of atonement. Every day had its appointed number of sacrifice (Numbers 29: 13, 17)

*“And afterwards they offered the regular burnt offering, and those for new moons and for all the appointed feasts of the Lord that were consecrated and those of everyone who willingly offered a freewill offering to the Lord” (5)*

**“And afterwards”**; From that day on, they offered the daily burnt offerings, those of the new moons and of all the appointed feasts of the Lord.

*“From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord had not yet been laid” (6)*

### **3- LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE:**

*“They also gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre to bring cedar logs from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission which they had from Cyrus king of Persia” (7)*

**“According to the permission which they had from Cyrus king of Persia”**. Although Cyrus had no authority over Lebanon, yet he allowed the Israelites to negotiate with them to get the wood for building the temple.

*“Now in the second month of the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, Zerubbabel the son of Shaltiel, Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come out of the captivity to Jerusalem, began work and appointed the Levites from twenty years old and above to oversee the work of the house of the Lord” (8)*

According to what was written in the book of Numbers 4: 3, 23 30, 35, 39, 43, 47, the Levite had to be at least 30 years old, and not older than 50 years; Then it came in Numbers 8: 24-25, that he should be from 25 to 50 years ; and in 1 Chronicles 23: 24, 27; 2 Chronicles 31: 17; and Ezra 3: 8, that he should be at least 20 years, with no maximum age. This discrepancy refers to the variation of the existing circumstances. When there is need for more Levites, and the number available is not enough, the minimum age is reduced and the maximum age is increased for those who are capable to work.

*“Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers, Kadmiel with his sons, and the sons of Judah, arose as one to oversee those working in the house of God: the sons of Hanadad with their sons and their brethren the Levites” (9)*

Here we notice the good planning, and the assignment of the families responsible to oversee the work.

**“In the house of God”**, Namely at the site where the house of God will be built.

**“Hanadad”**; He was not mentioned in chapter 2; He probably came from somewhere else other than Babylon, or he was all the time in Israel and was not taken into captivity.

### **3- CELEBRATING THE RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE:**

*“When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the elaborate ordinance put ahead by David king of Israel” (10)*

*"And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord: 'For He is good, For His mercies endure forever toward Israel'. Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid" (11)*

The building was done amid the praise of thanksgiving, and of hope that God will bless and consummate the work.

#### **5- TEARS OF HOPE AND TEARS OF SORROW:**

*"But many of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, who were old men, who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes; yet many shouted aloud for joy" (12)*

As there was about 50 years between the desolation of the temple on the hands of the Babylonians, and its restoration now, there were certainly some elders who remember the old temple; and when they saw that the new temple was not as magnificent as the old one, they mourned their lost old glory; and with despair of the possibility of building a similar one. But their attitude was not acceptable, nor reasonable, for God who built the old temple, is capable of building a similar or a better one; and we should not despair however great the work is before us, for it is God who helps, It is our duty just to begin, and God will be pleased however small is our endeavor. . We should rejoice, praise, and give God thanks for His work with us; for once He starts He will consummate; And if there had to be grief and weeping, let it be on our sins; for then *"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning"* (Psalm 30: 5). Those who wept would rather weep on their sins that caused the desolation of the first temple.

*"So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off" (13)*

+ O God, I shall not cease praising You, even after my death  
For whoever live for and by You, will never die, and death would not be able to silence him;  
I shall, therefore, speak by my mouth, what will be preached in the future.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

+ The quiet praises will bring the mind to a state of joy and peace.

+ Praising God is a kind of work concerning the angels

(St. Basil the Great)

+ To praise is to raise a double prayer.

(St. Augustine)

+ Turn the night into a musical. Praise by the spirit and by the mind; Use the songs of David, the blessed psalmist.

(St. Jerome)

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## AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 3

### NAIL YOUR CROSS IN ME

- + Carry me with You to Mount Calvary;  
There, to gather together with my brethren with one spirit;  
Around You, O the Great High Priest, and the Unique Sacrifice;  
Intercede for us before Your Father;  
Acquire us by Your precious blood.
  
- + We are in no more need for animal sacrifices;  
For Your cross is the power of God for salvation;  
Your cross takes away from us the spirit of animosity;  
And present us to Your Father, as His children.
  
- + Let us then plant Your cross in our hearts;  
To become truly a holy temple for You;  
Where You Dwell together with Your Father and the Holy Spirit;  
No enemy can terrify us;  
Nor any trap can catch us;  
As long as we are hidden in You, and You dwell in us.
  
- + With every breath, we remember that we are sojourners;  
But our sojourn motivates us to celebrate an unceasing feast;  
We Sojourn as strangers to the love of the world;  
And our souls will cling to Your heavens  
Our life will turn into an unceasing feast;  
For You are our perpetual feast.

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### AN ANNEX TO EZRA 3

#### A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TEMPLE OF SOLOMON AND THAT OF ZERUBBABEL

THE TEMPE OF SOLOMON	THE TEMPLE OF ZERUBBABEL
It took seven years to build it (1 kings 6: 38)	It took four years to build it (Ezra 6: 5)
King David prepared much of its need for gold, silver and bronze beforehand (1 Chronicles 22: 1 – 5)	Most of its building materials were of the ruins of Solomon's temple
It was 60 cubits long and 20 cubits wide (1 kings 6: 2)	They were committed to the same dimensions of Solomon's temple
It was a wonder in magnificence, adorned with huge quantities of	"Who is left among you who saw this temple in its

gold, silver, bronze, and precious kinds of wood	former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing?" (Haggai 2: 3)
On the days of its dedication the glory of God filled the house (1 Kings 8: 11)	On the days of its dedication, It did not happen that way
They brought the ark of the covenant up to the temple with great glory and offered uncountable sacrifices (1 Kings 8: 5)	The ark of the covenant was most probably not present in the temple of the Lord
With many buildings annexed to it, It overlooked a living city	With no annexed buildings, it overlooked a desolate city with no walls, and burnt up gates
On the day of its dedication they sacrificed 22,000 bulls and 120,000 sheep	On the day of its dedication they sacrificed 100 bulls and 400 sheep
Solomon king of Israel was the greatest, the wisest, and the richest king of his time	Israel had no more kings, but was under the authority of foreign nations until the coming of the King of kings
On the day of its dedication, Israel was a united, great, and strong kingdom	There were a few remnant of those returning from captivity from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; together with poor people from other countries

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# CHAPTER 4

## A VIOLENT OPPOSITION

It was not expected from the devil to stand motionless before such a magnificent scene: The altar of the Lord is built; the priests together with the leaders and the people are exultant, even though their exuberant shouts of joy mixed with the tears of those who compared between the old and the new temples. The devil therefore, stirred up the people of Samaria to oppose them with every possible means.

The good hand of God which allowed for them to return from captivity, also allowed for the opposition against them to flare up; for without it we shall not discover our inner corruption, to return and be worthy of such heavenly conquests and crowns.

- 1- **The Samaritans** who resisted them, a mixture of the Jews and the Gentiles, sought to partake of the work, claiming that they, as well, worship the God of Israel, even though as one of several gods. Their goal was not a fellowship in work as much as it was an attempt to destroy it from within.
- 2- The adversary Samaritans were called “**the people of the land**” (4), not “**the people of God**”, having been bound to the earthlies and not the heavenlies. The “people of the land” who put their heart in the temporal things, would never endure to see “the people of God” dedicate their hearts to God.
- 3- The adversaries presented complaints to Cambyses the son of Cyrus, full of false claims.
- 4- Through using some counselors in the court of the Persian king, the adversaries got their hearts’ desire – a royal decree to stop the work.

We should not fear the outer opposition, however deceptive or violent they are, but count it as a call to reconsider our souls, and to fear the outcome of our sins, the actual cause of failure.

1- Rejecting the fellowship with the unfaithful	1 - 5
2- Vain accusations	6 - 10
3- False claims	11 - 13
4- Complimenting the authorities	14
5- A rebellious city from the old	15 - 16
6- A royal decree to stop work	17 – 24

### 1- REJECTING THE FELLOWSHIP WITH THE UNFAITHFUL:

*“Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the Lord God of Israel...” (1)*

“**The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin**”: the Samaritans, were a mixture of the ten tribes and the peoples whom the Assyrian kings brought over and planted in Israel. The worship of the people of Samaria, being a mixture of the worship of the living God and that of the idols, was therefore more dangerous than idol-worship, and they bore more animosity against Judah and Benjamin.

That mixture between the truth and vanity corrupts the heart, and destroys the faith, through some kind of licentiousness and lack of seriousness. As according to the apostle Paul: "*What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what Communion has light with darkness? And what Accord has Christ with Belial? And what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?*" (2 Corinthians 6: 14-16).

- + Can't you see that "evil company corrupts good habits?" (1 Corinthians 15: 33) By it we cannot utter the gospel, but hear the words of the idols; By it we lose the truth that Christ is God; and what we drink there, we vomit in the church.

(St. Augustine)

- + A young man in the company of another young man for evil; Let those dedicated mourn them.

- + O Lover of God, when you see the hypocrites use the words and expressions of cheating and deception, flee from there, lest their deadly words may cling to your ears.

(The spiritual elder)

- + According to the apostle, "*What communion has light with darkness?*" Between them there is a distinct contradiction that cancels any possibility of reconciliation. Whoever combines the two together, his faith would provide the aspect of light; yet, his dark habits would put off the lamp of the mind.

As there is no possibility nor reason for the light to conform to darkness, whoever has both combined, will become his own enemy, being divided into two ways between virtue and evil. He sets within himself a battle, which could not end up in the victory of any of them (for the conquest of one would mean the death of the other); Hence life would be utterly confused.

Virtue will not have the conquest on evil, except when the latter utterly clears the way, through the unity of the reasonable elements against the unreasonable ones ... Goodness would never be able to exist in me except through the death of my enemy.

It is not possible for us to hold fast to adversaries by both hands; for both could never coexist in the same being. In case we acquire evil, we would lose the possibility to acquire the virtue.

(St. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa)

**Judah and Benjamin**; were the majority of those who returned and could identify their real genealogy.

**"The descendants of captivity were building the temple"**; they were so called because they have been negligent of the temple in the past.

*"They came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' houses, and said to them, 'Let us build with you for we seek your God as you do, and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Ezarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here'" (2)*

They came with sweet words that bore hidden deadly poison, to proclaim their desire to have a fellowship in building the house of the Lord, for no other goal other than to stop the work, and to bring forth the idol worship into it.

"For we seek God as you do". They imagine that they worship God; yet their religion had just a few of the worship of God, and much of idol worship.

**Why was the request of those who sacrificed to God in the days of Ezarhaddon king of Assyria, to partake of building the house of God, denied?**

Those of the region of Samaria, who bore animosity against Judah and Benjamin, were descendants of the peoples whom the kings of Assyria brought forth from different regions, to settle down in the Northern kingdom of Israel, after taking the Jews captives to Babylon in the year 722 BC. There they mixed with the Jews, and mixed the worship of the living God with idol-worship. As it came in the second book of the kings: "*Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamth, ; and from Sepharvaim and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities And it was so, at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they did not fear the Lord; therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them; ... Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying: 'Send there one of the priests whom you brought from there; let him go and dwell there, and let him teach them the rituals of the God of the land. Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel and taught them how they should fear the Lord. However, every nation continued to make gods of its own, and put them in the houses of the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities where they dwelt'*" (2 Kings 17: 24-29) .

Their request to partake of the building of the house of God, seemed apparently faithful, yet they did not bear the same conviction, nor the loyalty to the whole Holy Book, nor the bond to Jehovah alone; They wished to partake of the work, but to remain worshipping idols, and rejecting all the other Holy Books except the five books of Moses. Zerubbabel doubted the faithfulness of the Samaritans concerning worshipping the living God with purity; and that their offer to partake of the work bore ulterior political motives. They intended to partake of the work, being a sanctuary of one of the gods which they worshipped. Yet this mixing between the worship of the living God and the pagan worship had caused the desolation before the captivity, and both Zerubbabel and Jeshua did not want that tragedy to happen again. The world's help to the church often has a very high price (Revelation 2: 20); even though rejecting that help may, at the same time, cause fierce opposition against the church.

They were the descendants of those brought forth by Esarhaddon (2) and Osnapper (10); whose religion was a mixture of some godliness to the Lord, but most of it were pagan vanities; hence they wiped out the identity of Israel (Isaiah 8: 7); and their animosity against the people of God was traditional, that had its origin since the animosity came between the seed of woman and the seed of the serpent (Genesis 3: 15). The devil would no doubt oppose the building of the temple, and any building for the body of Christ.

*"But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, 'You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God, but we alone will build to the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us'" (3)*

The response was firm; as the command to build was issued by the king of Persia specifically to the Jewish people. If therefore, the Samaritans or any others, wanted to partake of the work, they had to refer to the King of Persia. It was not possible to accept that fellowship which carried no kind of holiness nor faithfulness, for "*What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?"* (Corinthians 6: 14 – 16). And as the apostle Peter said to Simon the Sorcerer: "*You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God*" (Acts 8: 21).



"You may do nothing with us" Although the Jews responded negatively, for they perceived their goal, yet they could not tell them the true reason of rejecting their offer for fear of them; they only said that the command of king Cyrus was issued specifically to the Jews and no others. They therefore had to commit themselves to it alone.

*"Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building"*  
(4)

They started to exhibit their real intentions, that they neither seek the Lord, nor building His house. As the response of Zerubbabel exposed the real deception of "the people of the land", they became fierce opponents, sometimes by scoffing the builders, and other times by intimidating them. If the believers are called "The people of God", the wicked are called "The people of the land", on account of that their hearts and minds are bound to the earthlies; and the heavenlies have no place in their life.

*"and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia"* (5)

**"They hired counselors against them"** in the king's court and palace, Giving them bribes; they could, in the days of Cambyses the son of Cyrus, convince him to issue a decree to stop the building until the reign of Darius.

If those people were faithful in their intention to partake of building the house of God, they would never pay bribes to stop the building.

King "Darius" was 'Darius Hestaseb', who reigned after Artaxerxes, issued a decree to restart the building.

## 2- VAIN ACCUSATIONS:

*"Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem"* (6)

According to some, the words: 'Ahasuerus' and 'Artaxerxes' were titles of the kings of Persia, the way the kings of ancient Egypt were called 'Pharaohs'; and 'Ahasuerus' mentioned here is Cambyses the son of Cyrus 9529 – 522 BC.

The word '**accusation**' in Hebrew is 'Satna' or 'Shatna', derived from 'Satan' or the (accuser).

It is obvious that verse 6 here was put by Ezra as another example of the persistent opposition of the enemies against the work of God, through which they managed to stop building the walls, until Nehemiah got a decree from the successor of Ahasuerus: "Artaxerxes Longimanus" to resume the building.

*"In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia, and the letter was written in Aramic script, and translated into the Aramaic language"* (7)

Most of the names mentioned here, like Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel, are foreign and not Jewish names, of the peoples who were brought forth to dwell in Israel.

There were most probably two messages in the early days of the king, from Bishlam and his companions, which was not recorded; and another from Rehum and his companions.

'**Tabeel**' was probably 'Tobiah' the Ammonite slave who opposed the building of the wall on the hand of Nehemiah.

Starting by verse 8 to 16, the letters to the king of Persia were written in the Aramic script and language and not in Persian. The Aramic was the language of the government, of the foreign commerce, and of the 'Tergom'. Ezzra used the Aramic language here, for he provides letters he preferred to quote as it was written, and not translated.

*"Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to king Artaxerxes in this fashion: (8)*

That was a third letter written and sent in the name of those brought by king of Assyria to dwell in the cities of Samaria, by 'Rehum' the commander of the land, and Shimshai his scribe.

*"From Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions – representatives of the Dinaites, the Apharsathehites, and the Tarpelites, the people of Persia and Erech and Babylon and Shushan, the Dehavites, the Elamites" (9)*

Those were different tribes brought by the kings of Assyria to dwell in Israel.... Notice how the people of Samaria were formed of diverse races.

**The Dinaites:** This name came in the version within our hands as being the name of a tribe brought forth to dwell instead of the Israelites who were carried into captivity. But in most of the recent versions, beside the Septuagint version, it came to refer to 'judges' (the way the Arabic name indicate). According to others they were residents of 'Dayen', a country that was often referred to in the Assyrian inscriptions, as being located on the border of Celicia and Cappaducia. According to others, they were people sent by king 'Osnapper' (Ashurbanipal) to occupy the land of Samaria. And still according to others, they probably were of the Armenian peoples, identified by the Assyrians as 'Dayani'.

**The Apharsathehites:** There is a wide controversy concerning these people:

- a- According to some they were a mountainous people or tribe who dwelt between Media and Persia.
- b- According to some they were the inhabitants of one of two cities in Media, referred to in the inscriptions of Ezarhaddon as: Partakka and Partukka.
- c- According to some, they were a specific tribe, but a group of citizens under the leadership of Dariun.
- d- According to some it is an old Persian word (Sparasarka) meaning (a minor governor).

**The Tarpelites:** Were set by the Assyrian king in Samaria, thought to be a Medianite tribe called 'Tapyri' east of 'Elymais'. According to 'Rawlinson', it is the tribe of 'Tuplai' that came in the inscriptions as analogous to the Greek word 'Tibarenoi'; a tribe on the coast of 'Pontes'; And according to 'Hitzig', it is in Tripolis north of Phoenicia. According to some, this word carries no racial meaning, but it is a name of some Persian officers in Saaria; while according to others, it is an Assyrian word, meaning (scribes of tablets).

**The Aphorsites:** According to some it is a tribe in Media, mentioned in the inscriptions of Sennecharib, as inhabitants of the province of 'Barstow'; And according to some it means 'Persians'.

**The Elamites:** The inhabitants of the province of Elam (Genesis 10: 22)

**The Archevites:** The inhabitants of Erec (Genesis 10: 10)

**The Susanchites:** The people of 'Susan' the capital of Elam, south-west of Persia, close to the River Olai, called nowadays the River Qarun.

**The Dehavites:** Among the peoples captivated by 'Osnapper' (Achurbanipal), king of Assyria, and made them dwell in the cities of Samaria.

*"and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapper took captive and settled in the cities of Samaria and the rest of the region beyond the river – and so forth" (10)*

'**Osnapper**'; (Most probably 'Assurbanipal) who reigned in Assyria in the year 668 – 626 BC; a great king well known for his might; fought against his own brother, the governor of Bablylon who rebelled against him, and fought against Elam. He was probably the king who exiled some Bablylonians and Susanchites (the people of Susan) and brought them forth to dwell in the cities of Samaria.; And he probably was Ezarhaddon himself, or a leader deputized to carry out that mission.

### 3- FALSE CLAIMS:

*"This is a copy of the letter that they sent to him – To king Artaxerxes from your servants the men of the region beyond the River, and so forth:" (11)*

*"Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing its walls and repairing the foundations" (12)*

**The Jews:** This name was first called on the people of the southern kingdom, namely Judah and Benjamin; But after the return from captivity it became the name of all the Jews from all tribes. **The Jews who came up from you:** Namely those who returned from captivity.

**The first false claim** was that, in their message they disregarded the decree issued by king Cyrus allowing the building of the house of the Lord; and counted those who returned from captivity as disobedient rebels who came to build "*the rebellious and evil city*". (referring to the history of Jerusalem that rebelled against the kings of Assyria and Babylon in the old days).

**The second false claim** was their claim that those returning from captivity have finished building the walls and repairing its foundations, when all what they did was laying some foundations.

*"Let it now be known to the king that, if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished" (13)*

**The third false claim** was that the Jews were building the walls of the city to stop paying taxes to the king; when they were building the temple now and not the walls; and they had no intention to stop paying tax, tribute, or custom (13). The **tax** is what is paid to the king; the **tribute** is the fees on trade, and the produce of the land; to spend on the local services; and the **custom** is the fees put on the users of highways to spend on their repair and to pay the wages of the security men who guard them...

Notice how the enemies of the Jews exaggerate things in their message, to stir up the king against them; on account of that the Persians were mostly interested in collecting taxes and tributes to spend on their huge armed forces.

The enemies perpetually kept on telling many false claims against the believers; to stir up the kings against the church and against the people of God. The Jews did the same against the Lord Christ, when they accused him of being an enemy of Caesar.

#### **4- COMPLIMENTING THE AUTHORITES:**

*"Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king's dishonor; therefore we have sent and informed the king" (14)*

By such pretense of being faithful to the king who supports them, they attempted to cover up their real intention. At the same time, they presented a false interpretation of the actions of those who returned from captivity, that they are causing harm to the king, which could not be disregarded. It is amazing how this same accusation is perpetually directed along the eras against the church; that her care for worship cause harm to the state, and a rebellion against the authorities; And was the same accusations declared by the Jews when they said to Pilate, the governor about the Lord Christ: *"If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend"* (John 19: 12).

If whoever *"receives support from the palace"* is committed to be faithful to the king; How we, who have got all our good things from God, are committed to have the glory of God as our goal?!

#### **5- A REBELLIOUS CITY FROM THE OLD:**

*"that search may be made in the book and records of your fathers, and you will find in the books of the records and know that this city is a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and they have incited sedition within the city in former times, for which cause this city was destroyed" (15)*

The enemies used some past events like the rebellion of king Jehoiakin against Nebuchadnezzar, that ended up in taking the later shackled in chains to Babylon; to portray the situation in Jerusalem as a rebellion against Persia; in an attempt to set a kingdom of Israel that could have dominion upon the whole region, denying Persia of any authority over all the nations beyond the River. It is as though those who are building the house of God had the intention to enjoy worldly authority and not to enjoy just the worship of God.

**The books of the records**, namely the governmental archives of the kings and countries that were under the authority of king Artaxerxus.

*"We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the result will be that you have no dominion over the region beyond the River" (16)*

That is the craftiness of the serpent, said to stir up the Persian king against the Jews. For, if the Jews supposedly built the walls of Jerusalem, would that cause all the countries west of the Euphrates to stop paying taxes to Persia? That would be possible only if a Jewish kingdom is established, great and powerful enough to have dominion over the whole region beyond the River.

#### **1- A ROYAL DECREE TO STOP THE WORK:**

*"Then the king sent an answer: To Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, to the rest of their companions who dwelt in Samaria, and to the rest in the region beyond*

*the River: Peace and so forth" (17)*

The evil king sent a letter to Rehum, to Shimshai, and the rest of their companions, to investigate the matter, to confirm what came in their message to him, and gave them the authority to stop the work. The king trusted in his unfaithful servants, and made the adversaries judges and executioners of the verdicts; as according to the sage: "*If a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked*" (Proverb 29: 12). The evil ruler represents a focal point of evil around which the wicked gather to partake of his evil; and by their evil counsel they push him further to more evil. When Jeroboam and all Israel sought from Rehoboam the son of Solomon to lighten their yoke, he, according to the counsel of the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him, answered those who appealed to him, saying: "*My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to it; My father chastised you with whips, but I shall chastise you with scourges*" (2 Chronicles 10: 10-11). As a result of that foolish counsel, the kingdom was divided, and ten tribes separated from him.

+ The foolish counselor is a blind guard; and the wise counselor is a stronghold of trust.

(St. (Mar) Isaac the Syrian)

*"The letter which you sent to us has been clearly read before me"* (18)

*"And I gave the command, and a search has been made, and it was found that this city (Jerusalem) in former times has made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been fostered in it"* (19)

*"There have also been mighty kings over Jerusalem, who have ruled over all the provinces beyond the River; and tax, tribute, and custom were paid to them"* (20)

*"Now give the command to make these men cease, that this city may not be built until the command is given by me"* (21)

We cannot deny that there are some good sides in that message, which are actually a gift from the good hand of God to His people; which are:

- a- The command was issued to stop the building and not to demolish what was already built.
- b- It was only a temporary stoppage.
- c- He did not give the command to bring those who returned back into captivity.
- d- Saying, "*Until the command is given by me*", he did not utterly close the door; for after him came another king who gave the command to resume the building. It is the hand of God working.

Although by what he did, that king altered "*the law of the Medes and Persians which does not alter*" (Daniel 6: 8); and did not honor king Cyrus' decree; Yet, that stoppage was a chastisement by God because of the un-holiness of the people, or on account of that they cared for their own houses more than for building the house of the Lord, as it is clear in the next chapter.

+ Calling the devil 'strong', is not because he is so by nature, but in reference to his authority he has got because of our weakness.

(St. John Chrusostom)

*"Take heed now that you do not fail to do this. Why should damage increase to the hurt of the kings?"*

(22)

King Artaxerxes , as a representative of the devil , the enemy of believers, seeks from his servants “*not to fail to do this*”; namely to oppose them; counting every slothfulness on their part, a great damage to his kingdom. The war of the devil against man will never stop.

- + The way the Lord casts His net and catch a multitude of fish; and His fishermen disciples gather together those who believe in Him through them, and bring them forth to Him; So the devil does through his demons submitted to him, who cast their nets to catch men and bring them forth to him.

(St. Jerome)

- + The evil spirits envy us for knowing that we attempt to recognize our shame and reproach, that we are looking for ways to reject their evil counsels they plant in us; and that many of us scoff their tricks. The devils know that the Creator of this world, has condemned them to death, and prepared for them Hades to inherit.

(St. Anthony the Great)

*“Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum, Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem against the Jews, and by force of arms made them cease” (23)*

Why did the work stop? Was it because of the fierce opposition? No! It was rather for the shameful slothfulness of the builders, who neither prayed nor fasted; until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Eddo came and firmly rebuked them.

Before the amazing work of God, the psalmist stood in awe. In the midst of the battle between God and the devil, he saw himself like a helpless bird that cannot escape the snare of the fowlers, namely the devil and his angels. But, when the Almighty God helped him, broke the snare and set him free, he sang saying: “*Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers. The snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth*” (Psalm 124: 7, 8).

- + What is the snare that was broken? The apostle says: “*The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly*” (Romans 16: 20); “*that you may come to your senses, and escape the snare of the devil*” (2 Timothy 2: 26). Behold, you can see Satan as the hunter who longs to catch our souls for perdition. He is a master of every kind of snares, and of every kind of deception ... When we are in a condition of grace, our souls would be secure; but once we start playing with sin, our souls would be disturbed, and come to be like a boat struck by mighty waves.

(St. Jerome)

*“Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (24)*

The work stopped, yet for some time. If the real cause was the inner corruption; God, the Grantor of conquest, allows for temporary wounds and defeat, to provoke His children to return to Him, to give them victory.

While we are in the midst of the battle, fighting and getting wounded, we would ask ourselves: Who will prevail?! ... It will be, brethren, he, who trusts in God who supports him while fighting, and does not trust in his own strength. The devil has his experience in war; but if God is on our side, we shall prevail against him. The devil fights by himself; but if we do the same, he will prevail against us, for he is an experienced warrior; We therefore should resort to the Almighty God to stand against him.

Let Him dwell in you, He who would never be defeated, to prevail against him who is used to prevail against those whose hearts are empty of God.

+ God, who knows your effort and your good will, anticipates your strife, supports your weakness, and will crown your conquest.

(St. Augustine)

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## **AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 4**

### **SCATTER THE CLOUD, AND SHINE YOUR LIGHT ON US**

+ The devil, our enemy, will never cease to oppose us;  
Will pour on us accusations without limit;  
Will raise against us false claims;  
Will use every way to destroy our work in Your kingdom;  
His violence and cruelty are indescribable.

+ In the midst of this battle, even if the enemy think he has prevailed,  
The secret of his conquest is not his strength, but our weakness.  
Our sin is the way of his success;  
Let Your grace work in us;  
And Your light shine over us;  
Sanctifying us, we would enjoy Your strength;  
Hidden in You, we would prevail.

+ Glory be to You, who allows our defeat for a limited time;  
Glory be to You, who calls us to eternal conquest;  
You are Good, O Holy One;  
You are the secret of our conquest and victory.

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# CHAPTER 5

## AN INNER REFORM, AND A RESUMPTION OF BUILDING

In the third chapter, the foundations of the temple were laid, and the people were joyful for it; Yet it so seems that many of them were so preoccupied with their own affairs, that once the enemies started their opposition, and the king's letter came to stop the work, an inner response came conforming to that command from some rich people. It might seem that the stoppage of the building was caused by the outer opposition, the false accusations, and by the evil counsel of those who stirred up the king; but it was actually the corruption of the hearts of the leaders of the Jews. God, therefore, sent the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah to put things in order. Those who returned from captivity got slothful, and their hearts got preoccupied with building and adorning their own houses instead of rebuilding the house of the Lord. Then came the word of God saying: *"Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?"* (Haggai 1: 4)

Motivated by the two prophets, and their hearts moving to work with faithfulness, the Lord gave them grace in the sight of all, like 'Tattenai' the governor of the region beyond the River, to whom all the governors of the regions submitted, including Judah; and 'Shethar-Bozenai' his scribe, and their companions, ... beside 'Darius Hestasis' king of Persia.

Encouraged by the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel and Jeshua started building anew. That caused 'Tattenai' and the others to move as well, but with a new spirit, not to oppose, but even to support in secret. For, in his message to king Darius, Tattenai so reported:

- 1- "They are building a house for the Great God (7)
- 2- Having the hand of God work with them; they work fast and with success.
- 3- He included a list of names, so as not to seem as though collaborating with them, or slothful to investigate.
- 4- He gave the answer of the Jews, that they are building the house by the command of king Cyrus.
- 5- He intentionally disregarded the decree issued by king Cambyses to stop the work.
- 6- He sought from king Darius to search for the royal decree issued by king Cyrus.

The message of 'Tattenai' was therefore not an accusation, but rather a report of what was going on, with a spirit of godliness and support! It is the work of God in the repentant hearts; that makes the enemies turn to support. It is amazing that the governor did not seek the stoppage of the work until the king's response comes from king Darius.

Reconcile with God, to get reconciled with yourself and your brethren; For then, even your enemies will work to your account.

- |                                                    |        |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------|
| 1- The coming of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah | 1 - 2  |
| 2- The eye of their God was upon them              | 3 - 7  |
| 3- 'Tattenai's' letter to king Darius              | 8 - 17 |

### 1- THE COMING OF THE PROPHETS HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH:

*"Then the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of God of Israel, who was over them" (1)*

In the last verses of chapter 4, we saw how the devil stood strongly against the building, and how he actually managed to stop the work. ... Has the devil the power to stop the work of God? Certainly not, unless we give him the chance to do.



According to the prophecy of the prophet Haggai (1: 3), we see how that the people have been slothful to build the house of the Lord, and everyone of them cared for building his own house, and even to panel it, namely to adorn it in an extravagant way. The outer stoppage by king Artaxerxes would, therefore, never happen unless there was slothfulness by the people; for then, the outer attack would conform to the inner slothfulness. ... Yet God did not forsake His work.

God sent His two prophets to prophesy strongly "*in the name of God of Israel who was over them*". The Spirit of God stirs up for work, "*Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts*" (Zechariah 4: 6). The two prophets had authority and strength from the Spirit of God; for their goal was the glory of His name; Therefore their words had a strong impact to strengthen the slothful hands.

According to St. Augustine, the two prophets here, even though they encouraged the people to resume building the temple that was left in ruins, Yet what actually preoccupied them was setting the temple of God in the life of man. He also says: [He who builds the house of the Lord in his depths, will praise the Lord, not with his tongue, as much as with his life itself].

- + Get out of the adorned houses hewn with evil; Ascend to the mountain of the heavenly Holy Scripture; Take wood from the tree of wisdom, the tree of life, and the tree of knowledge; Make your ways straightforward; and let your works be befitting, and of benefit to building the house of the Lord.

(St. Ambrose)

*"So Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build the house of God which is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them helping them" (2)*

Zerubbabel and Jeshua might be discouraged before the inner pressure of the rich and the poor; the rich who, despising the building of the house of the Lord, gave the priority to building their own houses; and the poor because of the material anguish and the injustice of the rich; And before the opposition of the outer enemies. But God would never forsake His faithful servants; He sent two great prophets to support those two leaders and those who were with them for the divine work.

Zerubbabel listened to the divine voice on the tongue of the prophet Zechariah, saying: "*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it'*" (Zechariah 4: 6-7). Zerubbabel was called to consummate the building; as while he was doing it, by the inspiration of God, he saw the new building – the church of the new covenant with all its beauty and splendor, which the divine "Cornerstone" sets, amid the shouts of the fathers and the prophets, and even of all the heavenlies: "*Grace, grace be to it*"; namely, (grace to men of the old covenant who for long, have waited for its coming; and grace to men of the new covenant who enjoy what the fathers and prophets have longed to see).

The work in the temple was resumed under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Here we notice those were engaged in it:

- 1- The two prophets: Haggai and Zechariah.
- 2- A governor – Zerubbabel the son of David.
- 3- A high priest – Jeshua.

Are those not the tasks of the Lord Christ, the true builder of the temple; namely His body, greater than the temples of Solomon and of Zerubbabel (Haggai 2: 9)?

Notice that the goal of Haggai's prophecy was to rebuke the people on their slothfulness to build the house of the Lord, and to encourage them to resume the work; to which Zerubbabel and Jeshua have already responded.

Many fathers often spoke of Zerubbabel as a symbol of the Lord Christ. According to Jusabius the Ceaserian, the Lord Christ is the new Zerubbabel, who established the church, the temple of God. And according to St. Ambrose, Zerubbabel whom God made "a signet ring" (Haggai 2: 23), refers to the Lord Christ – the King of peace -- who seals His divine image upon the human soul, to become 'Shulamite' (feminine of Solomon).

+ It was said to him in a sacramental way: "*I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and will make you a signet ring, for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts*" (Haggai 2: 23). For, when our soul come to be in peace, it will be said to her: "*Return, return, O Shulamite*" (Song 6: 13); namely, return to peace; ... for then, she would receive the Lord Christ as a signet ring on her; by which she becomes according to the image of God, as man would become heavenly.

(St. Ambrose)

## 2- THE EYE OF THEIR GOD WAS UPON THEM:

*"At the same time Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River and Shethar-Bozenai and their companions came to them and spoke thus to them: 'Who has commanded you to build this temple and to finish this wall' (3)*

As the ministry of those two prophets started to give fruit, the hearts of all were kindled to resume work, and the eye of God was upon them; There came Tattenai, Shethar-Bozenai his scribe and their companions to inquire from them about what they were doing; Yet with a new spirit, not that of opposition or animosity, but of inquiry and support. They could have stopped the work according to the message that was previously sent by Artaxerxes; but they let them go on working, and sent a message to king Darius that bore a good spirit.

**"Tattenai"**; A Persian name, meaning (a gift), a governor on the provinces under the dominion of Persia, west of the River Euphrates, in the days of king Darius, including Syria, **Kilikia**, the Arabian desert, Samaria, and Phoenecia. .... Zerubbabel, as well, was under him.

**Shethar-Bozenai**; A Persian name meaning (a glittering star), he probably was a scribe, or a Persian officer under the governor.

*"Who has commanded you?"*; indicates that the inhabitants of the land made a complaint against the Jews; and the governor came to investigate the matter.

*"Then accordingly, we told them the names of the men who were constructing this building" (4)*

With prudence and wisdom the governor and his companions asked for the names of those engaged in the work, lest the king would probably accuse them of slothfulness of taking sides with the elders of Israel. At the same time, the way the governor and his companions behaved, motivated the workers, not to fear to provide them with the names, to tell them about the work of God with them, and to assure them of their submission to the authorities; on account of that the work to build the temple was according to a written decree by king Cyrus (11-13).

*"But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this matter" (5)*

Beyond those events: *"The eye of their God was upon them" (5)*; as according to the psalmist: *"Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him; on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their souls from death, and to keep them alive in famine" (Psalm 33: 18-19)*; And, *"My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with Me" (Psalm 101: 6)*; as it is also said: *"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him" (2 Chronicles 16: 9)*

**"The eyes of their God"**. If the eyes of our God are on us, whom shall we fear? ... Pleased for the way of man, God surrounds him with His care; and would turn even the hearts of the non-believer rulers to work conforming to His purposes.

- + *"My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land, that they dwell with Me" (Psalm 101: 6)*. The psalmist did not say: 'My eyes shall be on the rich, the emperors, the bishops, the priests, or the deacons, but *"on the faithful"*; He would say about a saintly bishop: 'I have not set him a priest on account of that he humiliate himself before Me, nor of that he is close to me, but because he is faithful ... ; for *"He who tells lies shall not continue in My presence"* (Psalm 101: 7).

(St. Jerome)

- + The saints actually, never said that their own works and efforts guaranteed the way they are taking to reach progress and perfection in virtue; but they have rather prayed for them before the Lord, saying with David: *"Lead me in truth, and teach me" (Psalm 25: 5)*. Another saint proclaims that he discovered that same truth, not only by faith, but also through experiencing the depth of the nature of things: *"O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps" (Jeremiah 10: 23)*; And the Lord Himself says to Israel: *"I am like a green cypress tree; Your fruit is found in Me" (Hosea 14: 8)*.

(Father Pavnotius)

- + The grace and mercy of God perpetually work for our good; and once they forsake us, man's works and efforts would all become useless; However hard man would strive, he will never manage to resume his early state, without the help of God; and in us the words of the blessed Paul: *"It is not him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Romans 9: 16)* would apply..

(Father Daniel)

- + God's care is daily with us, on the collective level of the whole congregation, as well as on the individual level, publicly or secretly; even though we know nothing about His judgments.

- + All things were initially created for the sake of the rational being .... God, not as 'Celsus' assumes, only cares for the universe as a whole; but He, also specifically cares for every individual rational human being. Nevertheless, His care for the universe as a whole does not fail; for, even if a part of the whole got loose because of sin by the rational being, God would seek his purification and the resumption of the universe to Himself.

(The scholar Origen)

*"This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai sent: 'The governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and his companions, the Persians who were in the region beyond the River, to Darius the king'" (8, 7)*

The message of Tattenai was truly impartial; having investigated the accusations he received, he did not come against the Jews.

### **3- TATTENAI'S LETTER TO KING DARIUS:**

The good hand of God is apparent in that message to Darius king of Persia, in which Tattenai and his companions did not refer to the command of Artaxexes to stop the work, but only to that of Cyrus to build the house of the Lord.

*"They sent a letter to him, in which was written thus – To Darius the king: All peace. Let it be known to the king that we went into the province of Judea, to the temple of the great God, which is being built with heavy stones, and timber is being laid in the walls, and this work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands" (8)*

It was God's hand that brought forth awe upon Tattenai and his companion; to write in a respectable way about what the Jewish elders were doing; Although they were pagans, yet they said *"We went to the temple of the Great God" (8)*.

Even though the house was being built by stones salvaged from the ruins of Solomon's temple, yet they wrote: *"It is being built with heavy stones"*;

It came in the first book of the chronicles: *"David appointed masons to cut hewn stones to build the house of God" (1 Chronicles 22: 2)*. What are these great stones but the believers of the new covenant by whom the temple of the Lord is built, according to the words of St. Peter: *"You also as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2: 5)*. For the Lord Christ is the living rock on whom we are built as living stones. As He is living, we, as well live by Him (John 14: 19). *"He made us a spiritual house, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2: 18-21)*.

+ Do you think you are able to hold fast and to live, if you draw back to set for yourselves (spiritual) houses and different places? It was said to Rahab in the old: *"Bring your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your father's household to your own home. So it shall be that whoever goes outside the door of your house into the street, his blood shall be on his own head, and we will be guiltless" (Joshua 2: 18, 19)*

(Cyprian the martyr)

+ The goal of building the temple is for God to dwell in.. Each of you is a temple; and all of you together are a temple, in which God dwells, being the body of Christ and a spiritual building. He did not say that we, ourselves come to God, but said that God will bring us forth to Himself. We did not come on our own, but it is God who brought us close to Himself; according to the words of the Lord Himself, saying: *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the life; No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14: 6)*.

(St. John Chrysostom)

It was not possible for Tattenai and his companions to deny the testimony to the work of God, saying: *"It goes on diligently, and prospers in their hands"* (8)

**"The temple of the Great God"**. Even though Tattenai did not know the true God, but because the hand of God was upon him, he felt awe and fear before God, and hence he did not dare to stop the work himself, but left it to the king to decide. Being pagan, Tattenai believed in the existence of many gods, but because of the awe and fear he felt, he said about the true God "the Great God". As the people started to work diligently, the devil had no more authority to stop the work. Whatever great are the difficulties, they become exceedingly little before the work of the hand of God. Yet God would not intervene to work with Zerubbabel and the people, unless the themselves move to work (Zechariah 7: 4). If the problems created by the enemies are huge like a mountain, with the intervention of God, they become a plain.

"Then we asked those elders, and spoke thus to them: 'Who commanded you to build this temple and to finish these walls?'" (9)

*"We also asked them their names to inform you, that we might write the names of the men who were chiefs among them"* (10)

When they were asked who commanded them to build the temple; and to provide the names of the builders, they were not confused, but with courage and decency they responded.

When man or a congregation fear God, they fear no one, for God Himself is on their side, all around them, and grants them prosperity and grace before all. The fear of God drives away from us the fear of men, and even that of the devil himself.

- + Fear God and keep His commandments that strengthens you in all your affairs. And in case you fear God, do not fear the devil; for fearing God will give you the authority over the devil.

(Hermas)

- + I wish we fear God, and build houses for ourselves, to find refuge in winter with its rain and thunderstorms; for without a house, we will face great dangers in the time of winter.

(Father Dorotheos)

- + God's will is not to save you from fears, but will exhort you to despise them, which is greater than ridding us of them.
- + No one could be harmed, unless he sins against himself
- + If you are true with yourself, no one can harm you.

(St. John Chrysostom)

*"And thus they returned us an answer, saying: 'We are the servant of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and completed'"* (11)

The elders of Israel did not fear to refer to that the command to build the temple before it was destroyed, several centuries ago, was issued by the God of heaven and earth; and did not deny the favor of king Solomon in building it; saying: "*which a great king of Israel built and completed*" (11). It was built by Solomon 500 years before the time of Darius.

*"But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and carried the people away to Babylon"* (12)

With courage and the spirit of openness, they confessed that their captivation in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, was not due to the power of that king, as much as because their fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath; the wrath portrayed before by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 16: 35-43). ... It was therefore due to the wrath of God who delivered His own people into the hand of the king of Babylon, to chastise them; and not due to the victory of the gods of Babylon on the God of heaven,

*"However, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to build this house of God"* (13)

Here he calls him "*Cyrus, king of Babylon*", although he was the king of Persia, into whose hands Babylon has fallen.

*"Also the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple that was in Jerusalem and carried in the temple of Babylon – those king Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor"* (14)

*"And he said to him: 'Take these articles, go, carry them to the temple site that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its former site"* (15)

*"Then the same Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and from that time even until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet finished"* (16)

*"Now therefore, if it seems good to the king, let a search be made in the king's treasure house which is there in Babylon, whether it is so that a decree was issued by king Cyrus to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure concerning the matter"* (17)

After such a true and faithful report, Tattenai and his companions sought from king Darius to search the treasure of the king's house to know from the records, whether it is so that a decree was issued by king Cyrus to build this house of God in Jerusalem; leaving it to the king to decide what is right in his sight; and they were ready to abide to whatever he decides.

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## AN INSPIRATION FROM EZZRA 5

## YOUR WORD IS MY SUPPORT

- + You sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to support the leaders and the people;  
All of them were filled with the spirit of strength;  
And all set forth to work with the spirit of courage;  
When shall I see Your Holy house set in my depths?  
Your word is my strong support to start building it;  
Your divine promises are my deposit.
  
- + With fear, I deliver to You all my affairs;  
For then, my soul would find rest and peace;  
You move all my energies for the edification of my soul;  
You work in all to the account of Your kingdom inside them.
  
- + Your hand moved Tattenai the governor and his companions;  
And Your hand directed the heart of king Darius;  
All of them testified that they are Yours;  
And even the foreigners rejoiced in Your work in us.
  
- + We confess to You;  
That every failure that ever dwelt upon us was caused by our sins;  
And every prosperity that comes to us is through the riches of Your love;  
You are the secret of our success and edification.

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# CHAPTER 6

## THE PAGAN KING DARIUS EXHORTS THE JEWISH PEOPLE TO BUILD THE HOUSE OF GOD

In the last two chapters we noticed that we can draw benefit even from the persecution of the world against us; and we should not marvel to find help and sympathy even from non-believers, if we return to God with repentance. When the hearts of the Jews moved with repentance, the care of God moved to direct the heart of Tattenai and his companions to inquire about what they were doing, yet with a good spirit; to send a message to the king that bore a good intention; and did not ask them to stop the work. Now we shall see the work of the divine care in the heart of king Darius himself

- 1- The king gave the command to search the state records for the decree issued by king Cyrus. Although that could have taken several years to do, yet king Darius did not seek to stop the work (1 – 5)
  - a- The king sought from the governor Tattenai and his men to keep away from the city, until the house of the Lord is built (6 – 7)
  - b- The king commanded giving a quick material help out of the king's taxes so that the work would not stop (8)
  - c- The way king Cyrus got to know the existence of Jehovah (1: 3); Now we see king Darius seeks from the Jews to pray to Jehovah, and to offer sacrifices for his sake (9).
  - d- Darius sought from the Jews to pray for the sake of the life of the king and his children (10)
  - e- He issued a command to crucify whomever oppose the work (11).
- 2- The governor and his companions diligently did according to what king Darius has commanded(13)
- 3- The Jews continued building; and in the year 516 BC, namely after four years from the start of the work (4: 24), the temple was finished (15); and they dedicated it with amazing joy, together with the celebration of the feast of Passover with great exultation (14 – 22); for *“the Lord made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hand in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel”* (22).

- |                                                  |         |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------|
| 1- The writing of king Cyrus and the divine care | 1 - 5   |
| 2- King Darius fears the Lord                    | 6 - 12  |
| 3- The joy of the captives                       | 13 – 22 |

### 1- THE WRITING OF KING CYRUS AND THE DIVINE CARE:

*“Then king Darius issued a decree, and a search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon”* (1)

The king issued a decree to search in the royal archives for a scroll claimed by the Jews to include a command by king Cyrus to build the house of the Lord. Such a scroll was actually found in the archives in the city of 'Achemetha' the royal summer resort. And according to what came in it, king Darius sent a command to his officers in Judea to *“keep themselves far from the Jews who are building the temple”*. He even issues a command to pay a sum of money out of the king's taxes as a contribution to cover the expenses of the building, and of the animals which are offered as sacrifices in it.



Tattenai and his companion actually did according to the king's command; and the temple was built and was dedicated with great joy.

**The archives** are the place where the important documents of the state are kept.

*"And at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found, and in it a record was written thus" (2)*

'**Achmetha**' an Aramite name derived from an ancient Persian name 'Hagmethata' of the capital of Media; its location nowadays is 'Hamdan', a royal summer resort. It so appear that either the important old documents were moved there, or the bribed counselors of the king (5: 4) intentionally did it to hide the decree issued by king Cyrus in which he gave the command to build the house of the Lord; but God revealed it in the proper time to complete the building. In the region of 'Achmatha', many documents inscribed on clay tablets and papyrus, were discovered in which commercial deals and historical events were recorded.

**A scroll**; in the old they used to write on sheets of linen or papyrus, that had at both ends a wooden bar on which the scroll is rolled.

*"In the first year of king Cyrus, king Cyrus issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem: 'Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices, and the foundations of it be firmly laid, its height sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits" (3)*

*"Its height sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits"*, Those were the height and width of the holy, and the most holy places. But giving such measurements does not imply an interference in the details of the work, but it gives an indication of the maximum height of the buildings within the temple.

King Cyrus who called the Jews to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem, will judge us if we do not care to build a temple of the Lord in our hearts, according to the call of God, who presents to us every possibility to realize that.

+ It is obvious that we are temples of God, if we do good. And if man is a temple of God, what are in this temple would necessarily be concerning God; ... For there could not be a temple of God in which there are a multitude of abominations.

(Father Valerian)

+ Speaking about the temple, I may tell you that those lost wicked men who had their hope confined in the building itself, and not in God who created them; in which they likened the pagans who had their hope confined in the idol. ... Learn this: *"Who had measured the waters in the hollow of the hand; measured heaven with a span, and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure?... Is it not Me?, says the Lord; Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest?"* (Isaiah 40: 12; 66: 1)... Before we had faith in the Lord, when we were doing what contradict with the commands of the Lord, we were lowly and corrupt within, like a temple built by a human hand; a temple full of idols, and a dwelling place for Satan. ... Now, take heed, so that the building would be great, for it is built in the name of the Lord; built after we are forgiven our sins, after our hope is put in the Lord, after we are renewed and rebuilt, and the Lord comes to dwell in us.

How could this be realized? When His word prophesies in us -- the goal of our faith, the call of His promise, and the wisdom of His commandments and teachings -- opens before us the door of the temple, namely opens our mouth by prayer, after being prepared to die, grants us the forgiveness of our sins, and brings us forth into the non-corrupt temple. He who intends to be saved, should not look into himself as man, but to the Lord dwelling in him ... That is what the spiritual temple built by God means.

(Barnabas)

+ Let us do what we are committed to do; believing that He dwells in us, that we are His temple, and that He is our God who dwells in us; That will all appear to us clearly, if we love Him with uprightness.

+ You considered yourselves stones set aside to build the building of God, lifted up by the tool of Jesus Christ, namely by the cross, and the rope of the Holy Spirit. Your faith draws you up; and love is the way that brings you forth to God.

You are therefore the road companions; bearers of God (Theophoroi); of the temple (Naophoroi); of Christ (Christophoroi); and of the sanctuaries (Agiaphoroi).

(St. Agnatus the Theophorus)

*"with three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber. Let the expenses be paid from the king's treasury" (4)*

+ John the evangelist saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God; ... the foundations of its walls were adorned with all kinds of precious stones; and had 'twelve gates' (Revelation 21: 10-21)... In this city the Lord Christ dwells; its inhabitants are, themselves, inhabitants and gates; inhabitants and houses;; *"Christ dwell in them, and moves in them"*.

Just imagine how the holy soul could be holier beyond description, for it embraces Christ, whom the heaven is not wide enough to accommodate! ... "Moving in it" implies that it is wide enough for him to do.

It is written: *"You are the temples of God, and the Holy Spirit dwells in you"* (1 Corinthians 3: 16). Let us then prepare our temple, that Christ would come and make His dwelling place in us; that our souls would come to be Zion, to be a tower pointing upwards and not downwards.

(St. Jerome)

*"Also let the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and taken*

*back to the temple which is in Jerusalem, each to its place, and deposit them in the house of God"*

(5)

## 2- KING DARIUS FEARS THE LORD:

God turned the situation to the benefit of His people; Finding a scroll written by king Cyrus; it so seems that king Darius was so impressed by the way the creed was written, beside the good hand of the Lord that works in the hearts of the

kings (Psalm 21: 1) and rulers to the account of His people. In his message to the governor of the region beyond the River we find a living portrait of that. He says:

*"Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Persians who are beyond the River keep yourselves far from there" (6)*

That decree reveals Darius' honorable personality. He did not give the command to stop the work until he finds the decree issued by king Cyrus. And when he found it, he honored it according to the law of the Medes and the Persians which does not alter (Daniel 6: 8)

*"Let the work of this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build the house of God on its site" (7)*

Indeed *"The heart of the king is in the hand of God"* (Proverb 21: 1); Here we see how the king commands the governor of the region to consummate the building of the temple.

*"Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered" (8)*

It did not stop at commanding the governor and his companions not to stand against those who were building the temple, but the king gave from what is his of taxes as a contribution, fast and urgent, to consummate the work.

*"And whatever they need – young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem – let it be given them day by day without fail" (9)*  
*"that they may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons" (10)*

It is clear that king Darius honored the living God, and sought His blessings; and asked the men of God to pray for the sake of his life and that of his children; which shows that he believed in the power of prayer of the people of God for his sake. ... We hear that *"the eye of God is upon His people"*; ... Shall we, after seeing what we saw, have fear of the enemies of the church?. Here we see how God can stop the work of the devil, if He so chooses; if there are faithful people who diligently work.... The devil was stirred up and managed to stop the work; but it so happen that the work was resumed with more blessings than before.

The way some non-believers, recognizing God, seek prayers for their own sake; it is therefore befitting of the believers to pray for the sake of all men, particularly for the kings and rulers and those of authority (1 Timothy 2: 1-3).

*"And also I issue a decree that whoever alters this edict, let a timber be pulled from his house and erected, and let him be hanged on it; and let his house be made a refuse heap because of this" (11)*

*"And may the God who causes His name to dwell there destroy any king or people who put their hand to alter it, or to destroy this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I Darius issue the decree; let it be done diligently" (12)*

How amazing! The pagan king bears such an awe toward the house of God, to condemn anyone who does not care for building it, to be crucified on a timber pulled from his own house; as though he has condemned himself by himself, on account of his care for his own house more than for the house of God. Sin bears in itself death and corruption for whoever commits it.

### 3- THE JOY OF THE CAPTIVES:

*“Then Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-Boznai, and their companions, diligently did according to what king Darius had sent” (13)*

Tattenai did not try to find an excuse to postpone or to delay the execution of the king’s command, but diligently did according to what King Darius has sent. That pagan governor certainly bore no hatred toward the believers, nor opposition against God.

**“diligently did”**, They feared the command of the king; and the Spirit of God was moving everyone.

*“So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it, according to commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commands of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia” (14)*

The secret of their prosperity was listening to the divine voice, and binding to the word of God.

*“They built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel”*. The command of God, to which the king responded; then the governors in their turn did. But the initiation was God’s, He who motivated the hearts of people to diligently work.

*“Now the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of king Darius” (15)*

The building took four years to finish, with persistent effort and flaring heart with the love of God.

**“Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes”**; . Cyrus and Darius Hestasis have issued decrees for the building; whereas Artaxerxes (xxxx) issued an order to stop the work; even though the building continued for months until the command reached the site of building. Or it could probably be that Artaxerxes here is ‘Ataxerxes Longimanus’; who would be mentioned here to honor him, for he was the one who issued a command to build the wall.

*“Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy: (16)*

The celebration was so great that it poured joy over all; for the temple came back after being absent for decades; and they came to be able to offer sacrifices, to practice the rituals of the temple, and to celebrate the feasts.

The church is called **“the house of praise”**; as in the dedication of the first house of the Lord, king Solomon blessed and praised the Lord. According to the enlightened St. Agnacios [You should care to gather together more densely to present thanksgiving and glory to God. When you often gather together in the Eucharistic assembly, the power of Satan collapses before the splendor of your faith].

*“And they offered sacrifices at the dedication of the house of God: one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel” (17)*

The church is also called **“the house of sacrifice”**; as in the dedication of the first house of the Lord, king Solomon and the people offered a multitude of sacrifices, for “without shedding of blood shed there is no remission(Hebrew 9: 22)). according to the enlightened St. Agnatio, the church is **“the place of the sacrifice”**; as in the church we encounter the Lord Christ, the true Sacrifice; and unite with Him, so that our life would become an exalted sacrifice of love.

Although that last celebration was greatly joyful, yet the offerings and the sacrifices were far less than those offered by king Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30: 24), or by the good king Josiah (2 Chronicles 35: 7). On account of that, being a few coming back from captivity, their possibilities were weak.

**“Twelve male goats”**. The figure 12 indicates the presence of representatives of the twelve tribes who united again through chastisement. In verse 16, Ezzeas said: “The *children of Israel*”, seeing them as one people; and that the priests and the Levites were for all.

*“They assigned the priests to their divisions, and the Levites to their divisions over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses” (18)*

**“The children of captivity”** was a term that stuck to them, on account of that, despite the freedom to worship and to build the house of the Lord, yet they were still under the authority of the king of Persia, with no king of their own who has his independent political power. On another aspect, this title would remind them of their sin and those of their father, because of which they have fallen into captivity.

*“And the descendants of the captivity kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month” (19)*

They kept the Passover through which they were relieved of their bondage to Pharaoh to cross over to the wilderness, on their way to the promised land. Now, while keeping the Passover, they remember God’s salvation work, and that what has been accomplished by their hands was a gift from God their Savior.

The Old Testament mentions five Passover feasts:

- 1- At Mount Saini (Numbers 5: 9)
- 2- At the Gilgal (Joshua 10: 5)
- 3- In the days of Hezekiah.
- 4- In the days of Josiah.
- 5- And now in the days of Zerubbabel.

Keeping all those feasts indicate the reform of worship, and the renewal of the covenant between God and His people. Father Milito bishop of Sardes tells us about the connection of the feast of Passover to the altar of the new covenant:

- + The secret of the Passover is realized in the body of the Lord.  
As He was led as a lamb, and slaughtered as a she-goat, to save us from the bondage of the world (Egypt), and to liberate us from the servitude to the devil (Pharaoh), sealing our souls by His Spirit, and our bodily members by His precious blood.

He who rid us from bondage to freedom, from darkness to light, from death to life, and from oppression to the eternal kingdom.

He who is the Passover of our salvation.

He is the silent lamb, ... who was taken out of the flock, led to the slaughter in the evening, and buried at night.

That is why the feast of Passover was bitter, as according to the Holy Book: "*You will eat unleavened bread with bitter herbs*" (Exodus 12: 8)

Bitter for you, were the nails used;

Bitter, was the tongue that blasphemed;

Bitter, was the false testimony uttered against Him.

Contemplate, beloved brother, how the secret of Passover is both new and old; eternal and mortal, corruptible and non-corruptible;

According to the law, it is old; and according to the Logos (the divine Word) it is new;

Mortal according to the expressions of the symbol; and eternal according to those of grace;

Corruptible through the death of the lambs, and non-corruptible through the life of the Lord;

So are the sacrifice of the lambs, the rite of the Passover, and the letter of the law, which were all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Instead of the law, the Logos came, and the old became new; the commandment became a grace, and the symbol a fact.

(Milito bishop of Sardes)

+ Now, while you celebrate the holy Bascha, you are committed, brethren, to know what is the Bascha? ...  
"Bascha" means (Passover), therefore that feast was so called; on account of that in that feast, the Son of God passed over from this world to His Father.

What would be your benefit, celebrating this feast of Passover, if you do not liken Him whom you worship? To cross over from the darkness of the evil doings to the light of virtue?, and from the love of this world to that of the heavenly house? ... Many are those who celebrate this holy feast, and honor it, yet they do all that with no worthiness, because of their evil, and because they did not cross over from this world to their Father; Namely because they do not cross over from the covetousness of this world, and the carnal desires to the love of heaven. They are miserable Christians, still under the authority of the devil, content with this evil.

For this, O brethren, I warn you to celebrate this feast as you should, namely, you have to pass over. Who among you is still in sin, let him be sanctified in this feast, pass over from the evil deeds to virtue. And he who walks in a holy life, let him pass over from a virtue to another; There should be no one among you who does not pass over.

(St. Ambrose)

*"For the priests and the Levites have purified themselves; all of them were ritually clean. And they slaughtered the Passover lambs for all the descendants of the captivity, for their brethren the priests, and for themselves" (20)*

It was not possible for anyone to eat the Passover, even the Levites and the priests, ministers of the temple, unless they purify themselves.

- + The deceitful man, not pure in heart, would most certainly be a foreigner to the saints, and unworthy to eat the Passover; a foreigner should not partake of it; Hence, when Judas assumed that he kept the Passover while he was plotting against the Savior, he became a foreigner from the city high up, and far from the apostolic fellowship. As according to the law, the Passover should be eaten with befitting care; while Judas, the traitor was eating it "Satan entered into him" (John 13: 27).

(Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

*"Then the children of Israel who had returned from the captivity ate together with all who had separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land, in order to seek the Lord God of Israel" (21)*

*Ate together* with those who, although they remained in the land all the time of captivity, yet they separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land; most probably of the Samaritans or the pagans who repented, separated themselves from their gods, and converted to Judaism.

*"And they kept the feast of the unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (22)*

In the dedication of the first temple, Solomon, all the leaders, and the people, celebrated it all along seven days, followed by other seven days celebrating the feast of tabernacles. And in the eighth day, Solomon blessed the people, and sent them away exultant with joy. The people find their exalted joy, not only in the house of the Lord, but carried it with them to their homes to practice it all the days of their life. Here as well, they ate the Passover with the spirit of joy and praise, giving thanks to God who brought joy into their hearts, and worked in the heart of the pagan king of Assyria to support their work to build the house of God.

Here we notice his saying, "**with joy**"; as Joy always goes hand in hand with the renewal of the covenant with God by repentance. We rejoice in nothing but the sacrifice of the cross, our true Passover.

"**The king of Assyria**" was actually Darius the king of Persia, under whom Assyria submitted; hence called "King of Assyria", as he was also called "king of Babylon".. Here Ezra calls him "king of Assyria", to remind the reader that what the king of Assyria in the past did of scattering the people, was corrected here by the king of Persia. ... Here they gather together in joy, and rejoice as well in that God stirred up the heart of the king of Assyria to support them in building the house of the Lord. The old Assyria captivated Israel in the past, and behold, the new Assyria exhorts all to support the divine work and to build the house of the Lord, to worship Him in it.

#### **The true repentance is the practical way to have prosperity in life:**

What we wish to make clear here, is that the feast of the Unleavened Bread was called "the *bread of affliction*" (Deuteronomy 16: 3), as it symbolized the bitterness through which the people lived under the bondage of Pharaoh, before the affliction turned into joy and gladness, and became one of the most joyful of the feasts. And after refraining from eating the leaven, as a reference to their exodus in haste from Egypt (Exodus 12: 33, 39; Deuteronomy 16: 3); it came to be a reference to forsaking the old life, and enjoying the new life (Isaiah 52: 11-12), that has no bond to the leaven of the past.

In the title of psalm 112 in the Volgata version: "the change of course by Haggai and Zechariah"; It is a joyful psalm that starts by the verse: "*Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who delights greatly in His commandments*". Commenting on

that title, St. Augustine says: [*“For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are”* (1 Corinthians 3: 17). Hence, he who changes his course by partaking of this collective building, in the hope of the abiding holy building, will be as a living stone taken out of the ruins of this miserable world .... Let him sing this psalm, not with the sound of his tongue, but with that of his life; for the consummation of building is through the inexpressible peace of wisdom].

So, we are invited by St. Augustine to be holy living stones in the house of the Lord, to enjoy the blessed life, and be filled with the great gladness of the Lord; and our whole life would turn into praise and joyful singing.

**A remark:**

In the last six chapters, Ezra the scribe, portrayed for us the procession of the first **batch** under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, who managed at last to build the house of the Lord. The king gave Zerubbabel the name “Sheshbazzar”, meaning (Joy in the midst of troubles); on account of that he saw him always joyful, and admired him for that. For there is no stronger testimony to our true faith than our perpetual joy in the Lord.

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**AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 6**

**SET YOUR KINGDOM IN ME, O GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE**

+ How amazing is Your exultant love, O God of the impossible!  
You turn all events to the account of Your kingdom inside me;  
You set out of my corrupt heart a holy temple of Yours;  
You perform wonders in me;  
And smell sacrifices of love, praise, and pleasure.

+ Behold, my depths are in Your hands;  
Let Your Holy Spirit work in them;  
To purify and sanctify them;  
To set in them a joyful heavenly banquet;  
To be Yourself, the secret of my joy, and my perpetual feast.

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# THE SECOND DIVISION

## THE SECOND BATCH TO RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY

(EZRA 7 to 10)

There was an interval of 58 years between the events in the sixth chapter and those in the seventh chapter (between 516 and 458 BC); during which the events of the book of Esther with king Ahasuerus the Great took place. Certain parts of the book of Zechariah, and probably of Malachi and Joel as well, were written.

And during that interval some of those returning from captivity got married to pagan wives, and could have embraced idol-worship through them, if God with His love, did not send to them Ezra the priest and scribe, leading a new batch, to take over the inner reform, and in particular sending the pagan wives and their children away.

With the beginning of the present division, we hear no more of Zerubbabel, Jeshua the priest, and Haggai and Zechariah the prophets.

The author started by parading a short account of the events; then got back to deal with them in some detail.

## CHAPTER 7

### EZRA, THE MAN OF THE LAW, SENT TO REFORM

#### A NEW SPIRITUAL PROCESSION

Now, the talk begins about a new spiritual procession, the second **batch** of those returning from captivity under the leadership of the man of the law and of the spiritual reform, Ezra himself.

After 80 years since the call of God to Cyrus; the Persian king, 58 years since the building of the temple; and after the Jews were saved from the evil plot of Haman, that came in the book of Esther, in the days of king Ahasuerus (also called Exerxes the Great), the good hand of God stretched to work through king Artaxerxes the first -- Longimanus (son of king Ahasuerus), to whom He gave grace toward Ezra, to give him an open authority to work in Jerusalem.

Ezra was a great scholar of the Law (6), a descendant of Aaron; who obviously got a prominent position in the Persian royal court, probably a kind of a state scribe for the Jewish affairs. Being at the same time a practical man (6 – 10), who had pleasure in the study of the Holy Book, he was sent by the king to study the situation in Jerusalem, and to commit the Jews there to keep the Law (25 – 26). There are other evidences that the kings of Persia cared for making the peoples under them practice their worships, as is obvious from a papyrus sent to a Jewish colony in the island of Elephantine at Aswan in Egypt.

- |                                      |         |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1- The good hand of God              | 1 - 10  |
| 2- The king's letter to Ezra         | 11 - 26 |
| 3- Blessed be the God of our fathers | 27 - 28 |

## 1- THE GOOD HAND OF GOD:

*"Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah" (1)*

**"After these things"**. The book, here, starts a new epoch. The six first chapters were in the days of Darius Hystaspes, Artaxerxes, and Cyrus. Cyrus gave the permission to build the temple in the year 536 BC, which was completed in the days of Darius Hystaspes in the year 515 BC. Now Ezra ascends from Babylon to Jerusalem in the year 458 BC., namely after building the temple, and the opposition they faced

He starts his talk with proclaiming his descent from Aaron, the first high priest; and confirming that what has been realized, was through the good hand of God upon him, giving him grace in the eyes of king Artaxerxes; to lead a new spiritual procession from Babylon to Jerusalem..

*"Ezra the son of Seraiah":* **Ezra** a Hebrew name, meaning (help); God sent him to help His people; yet they have to return to the divine law, and get purified of the sins in which they have fallen.

**Seraiah** was not Ezra's father, but his grandfather. What actually preoccupied Ezra's mind, beside mentioning the prominent persons, was to reach up with his genealogy to Aaron the high priest. He cared to confirm his priesthood genealogy, which was very important for him to practice his task as a priest. . Seraiah was the high priest at the time of the desolation of the temple in the year 588 BC; was arrested by Nebuzradan, the captain of the guard, together with Zephaniah the priest, and 70 persons, took them over to Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, who had them killed in the land of Hamath (2 Kings 25: 18-21).

**Hilkiah** was the high priest in the days of Josiah the good king, who found the book of the law, delivered it to Shaphan, the scribe who read it before the king (2 Kings 22: 13).

*"the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub" (2)*

*"the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth" (3)*

*"the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki" (4)*

*"the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest" (5)*

**Phinehas**, the priest, by whose zeal he appeased the wrath of God, when he killed the Israeli man who committed adultery with a Moabite woman (Numbers 25: 8)

**Aaron**; The first high priest, brother of the prophet Moses.

*"This Ezra came up from Babylon, and he was a skilled scribe on the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him" (6)*

**"A skilled scribe"**; Ezra, an employee in the Persian court, and a counselor to king Artaxerxes; was called **'a scribe'**, because of his job; who used his knowledge, skill, and talent, to study, understand, and teach the law of God to the people, and to walk according to its statutes; according to the words of the psalmist: *"My tongue is the pen of a ready writer"* (Psalm 45: 1).

**"On the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given"** He so says to confirm that the secret of having got such a skill and knowledge is holding fast to the divine law, granted by God as a gift to the people. The secret of his great knowledge and high position is having the word of God; to be called by the people: "the second Moses".

**“The hand of the Lord”**; Ezra counts all the graces enjoyed by the people in that time as “gifts from the good hand of God”. He repeated this expression and the like, six times in the two chapters 7 and 8 (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8: 18, 22, 31). The hand of God helps, protects, and guides.

Ezra the scribe followed the lead of David the prophet, the king, and the psalmist, who, although he had so great reputation, possibilities, and experience, yet, counted himself a stranger on the earth in need of the God’s commandments, to lead, guide, and comfort him in his sojourn, crying out: *“I am a stranger on the earth; do not hide your commandments from me”* (Psalm 119: 19). Feeling sojourn motivates him to attach himself to the divine commandment to support him all the time, to grant him prosperity in the Lord, and lifts him up to the heavenly life.

- + The sojourners on earth need the commandments of God to protect them against the works of the body and the love of money. Whoever follows these commandments, the world would not be able to prevail upon him.  
But there are commandments written in symbols, whose meaning is not obvious, like: *“Let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of the house”* (Matthew 24: 17; Mark 13:15; Luke 17: 31); And, *“Let the dead bury their own dead”* (Matthew 8: 22); etc. ... together with the commandments concerning the sacrifices, the feasts, the clean and unclean animals ... That is why, it is befitting of the sojourner on earth to seek from the Lord to reveal the meaning of His commandments, and not to hide them from him, to keep and to love, to become blameless..

(St. Josabius the Caesarian)

- + Being a sojourner on earth, he prayed to God not to hide his commandments from him, to enjoy love as a unique and principal thing; Now he desires to have love for the sake of His judgments, a desire that is worthy of commendation and not condemnation.

(St. Augustine)

*“Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of king Artaxerxes”*(7)

*“And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king”* (8)

*“On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him”* (9)

*“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel”* (10)

He started by keeping the Law, sought it in his heart, and hid it wherever he went to live by it, whether in the royal palace in Babylon, or during the journey to Jerusalem.. The next stage was to turn the divine commandment into work and behavior that touch his feelings, words, and deeds; and finally to preach and teach it to others; As according to the Lord Christ: *“Whoever does and teaches these commandments is called great in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5: 19).

- + It is not enough for us to acquire these commandments, but we need as well to keep them diligently and faithfully.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- + He who the truth, will say: *“I delight in your commands which I dearly love”* (See Psalm 119: 93). ;  
The goal of being delighted in the commandments of God, is to put them to work.

How wonderful to delight in the commandments and to understand their meanings, then to lift our arms up to do the works that conform to those commandments.

We should not keep these commandments "*grudgingly or of necessity*" ((2 Corinthians 9: 7), but with joy.

And while having delight in them, and keeping them, we are committed to utter them (Deuteronomy 6: 7); hence he adds: "*I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart*" (Psalm 119: 69) ;For the sake of my love for Your commandments, I do not cease to talk about them; *I recite them while greatly delight..*

(The scholar Origen)

- + Whoever has my commandments in his memory, and persistently keeps them in his life, on his lips, in his ears, and in his behavior and works; such a man loves Me, and by his deeds he proclaims this love. Whereas by applying it, yet without fruition, love would become no more than a meaningless word.

(St. Augustine)

- + To be far from doing according to the commandments of God, is to be far from God. This is the essence of the sin of being separated from God, and not being united to Him.

(St. Basil the Great)

- + The secret teachings and knowledge, I hid in my heart. But the judgments, I revealed to all, for all humanity to perceive and understand; "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 5: 10).

(Josabius the Caesarian)

## **2- THE KING'S LETTER TO EZRA:**

The king's letter to Ezra reveals the hand of God and His Spirit working to the account of His people.

- a- The pagan king exhorted the priests and the Levites to go to Jerusalem to restore the worship of God, and to reform the people (13)
- b- He called Ezra "the scribe of the law of the God of heaven" (21); for he saw in him a unique heavenly feature.
- c- The king and his counselors gave gifts and articles, (other than the articles of the house of the Lord that Cyrus sent back to Jerusalem)
- d- The pagan king exhorted the Jewish people and their priests to offer freely to the house of their God (16)
- e- He gave Ezra the authority to make decisions according to the law of his God (25); and to appoint magistrates and judges for all the people wherever they are in the region beyond the River.
- f- He gave him the authority to issue verdicts unto those who do not observe the law of God and of the king, whether it be death, banishment, confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.

*"Now this is a copy of the letter that king Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel" (11)*

*"Artaxerxes king of kings, to Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: perfect peace and so forth" (12)*

In that letter the good hand of God is revealed about the spiritual impact of Ezra upon the king, who saw Ezra, not as a regular scribe working for him, in the royal court, but as “A scribe or the law of the perfect God of heaven”. We never heard that a king in Israel called a scribe or even a prophet by such an amazing title. Artaxerxes counted the God of Ezra the Perfect God of heaven.

*“I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you” (13)*

*“And whereas you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard to the Law of your God which is in your hand” (14)*

The seven counselors were heads of their fathers’ houses in the kingdom of Persia, mentioned in the book of Esther as closest to the king: “Crshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan; seven princes of Persia and Media” (Esther 1: 14); who represented a counseling body for the king; The figure 7 had its consideration with the Gentiles as it did with the Jews.

**“To inquire concerning the spiritual conditions of the Jews”**. It so appears in the letter that Ezra was authorized, not only to inquire about issues concerning the law, but he had the authority to punish those who do not observe them.

*“And whereas you are to carry the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem” (15)*

It is amazing to see how the kings of Judah made the temple poor, while the pagan kings of Persia have freely offered to it (Isaiah 49: 23; 60: 4-16).

*And whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem” (16)*

There were freewill offerings from the king, his counselors, the people of Babylon friendly with the Jews, and the Jews who chose to remain in Babylon. Those offerings were to buy the animals to be offered on the altar, beside the grain and drink offerings, and the rest of the aspects of ministry. Those offerings of gold and silver was a sign of submission of the king and his seven counselors to the God of heaven, and of their care that worship in Jerusalem would not be hindered.

*“now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem” (17)*

*“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” (18)*

The pagan king in the fifth century BC, exhorts the man of God, and his brethren, “whatever seems good to them to do with the rest of the silver and gold, according to the will of their God” (18).

*“Also the articles that are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem” (19)*

**“The articles that are given to you”**. Those articles are not those taken from the house of the Lord by Nebuchadnezzar, that were already sent to Jerusalem by king Cyrus, but were gifts from king Artaxerxes and his counselors and from all the people (of Babylon and Israel).

**“The God of Jerusalem”**, Namely, the God of Israel who dwells in Jerusalem.

*“And whatever more may be needed for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide, pay for it from the king’s treasury” (20)*

*“And I, even I, Artaxerxes the king do issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the region beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the*

*God of heaven, may require of you, let it be done diligently” (21)*

*“Up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cores of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribed limit” (22)*

100 cores of wheat are equal to 150,000 kilogram; and 100 baths of wine equal to about 3500 liters.

*“Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it diligently be done for the house of the God of heaven; for why should be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?”(23)*

While the Jewish people in Jerusalem, not fearing the wrath of God, broke the law for the sake of the evil desires of their bodies; and while some of them even got married to pagan women; the pagan king in Babylon was keen not to have the wrath of God dwell on his kingdom and on his household; saying: *“Why should be wrath of God against the realm of the king and his sons?” (23)*. ... This was obviously the hand of God!

Here, the pagan king judges the believers and the ministers in all times, who are slothful in the work of God, and seeks from them to practice it with due diligence.

Solomon the sage says: *“He who deals with a slack hand, becomes poor; but the hand of the diligent makes one rich” (Proverb 10: 4)*; and,

*“The way of the slothful man is like a hedge of thorns; but the way of the upright is a highway” (Proverb 15: 19)*

+ The good worker daringly asks for his wages; whereas the lazy and slothful worker does not dare to look into the eyes of his employer.

(St. Clement the Roman)

+ Those called slothful in the book of wisdom, cover their way with thorns, and count the zeal in keeping the commandments of the Lord harmful to the soul. Those who act against the apostolic commandments, who do not eat their bread with labor, but make slothfulness their way of life, are like the dreamers who trust in their dreams rather than the teachings of the gospel; count the fantasies as visions.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

*“Also we inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute, or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers gatekeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God” (24)*

The Persian king exempted all those working in the house of God of all kinds of taxes, tributes and customs, so as to be only preoccupied with serving the Lord.

*“And you Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws*

*of your God, and teach those who do not know them” (25)*

**“According to your God-given wisdom”**; Ezra, being a faithful man, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, is committed to apply the law of God by wisdom and not by force.

**“all such as know the laws of your God, and reach those who do not know them”**; While there was a governor appointed by the king of Persia for the civil aspects of the province beyond the River, Ezra’s authority, on the other hand was only over the Jewish people in that region, those who follow the law of Moses; Namely, his responsibility was confined to the spiritual aspects concerning religion; his mission was to teach it to the people, and to put their spiritual things in order.

*“Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment” (26)*

Perceiving the greatness of the law of the God of heaven, from Ezra’s life and behavior, the king of Persia gave it priority over his own law. ... How amazing! ... The pagan king exhorts the man of God to teach the people the law of the God of heaven, diligently and with firmness.

### **3- BLESSED BE THE GOD OF OUR FATHERS:**

*“Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem” (27)*

Before such exalted and amazing divine work in the heart of the pagan king, toward the people of God, Ezra could only praise God and give Him thanks. He had no other way to express the good and amazing hand of God, that moved the pagan king to work with every material possibility and authority to the account of the kingdom of God, with such great generosity, and trust in God, together with humility; other than to raise this praise.

**“To beautify the house of the Lord”**; It was not the goal of Ezra to beautify the temple with more buildings and adornments, but to adorn it with more care for the sanctity of the house, and that of the people and the priests.

*“and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s princes” (28)*  
*“So I was encouraged, as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered chief men of Israel to go up with me” (29)*

Before such a letter from the king, revealing the future mission of Ezra; the later perceived that the good hand of God was upon him; (an expression he repeated six times in chapters 7 and 8) and referred every achievement to God and not to himself.

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## **AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 7**

### **LET MY HEART SEEK YOUR COMMANDMENT**

+ In the land of captivity You shone the light of Your law over Ezra;  
You made him a skillful scribe;  
Whose heart seeks Your commandment, and in it finds his delight;

He kept it in his heart, and made it his guide in his sojourn;  
Its splendor reflected on him;  
To find grace in the eyes of the king and his counselors.

+ By Your commandment, he became the leader of a new procession;  
To cross over from the land of captivity to the city of Jerusalem;  
Carrying a multitude of offerings;  
As well as leading human vessels, very precious in Your eyes;  
Your commandment provided him with enough possibilities.

+ In amazement he stood wondering, what could he present to You in return,  
For the sake of the multitude of Your goodness on him!  
He could only present a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise;  
He could only proclaim Your love and Your exalted mercies;  
Blessed be You, O Beneficent!





# CHAPTER 8

## THE SECOND BATCH SET FORTH AND ARRIVE AT JERUSALEM

In the depths of the heart of everyone, there is a hidden or manifest desire to perceive how to walk in this world to cross over to the other life; where he would wrestle no more, nor fear death. The true believer perceives that the High Jerusalem anticipates his arrival, and that the heavenlies are prepared to receive him, not as a guest, but as one of the household who partake of their eternity. By such feeling, the true believer sees his life as a journey, although tough, yet secret and enjoyable.

Amid the troubles, his eyes look up toward the divine throne, and to the bosom of the Father.

This chapter bears a symbol of this journey; when Ezra set forth together with about 8,000 people from Babylon to Jerusalem; which although seemingly long, yet joyful

Ezra has already referred to the good hand of God that worked in the heart of the king of Persia and his counselors for the good of the people of God. Now he seeks it, to work in the hearts of those whom he asks to accompany him in this journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. It was not easy to persuade one of the leaders or the people to forsake his work and his business to start anew in a land of ruins, surrounded by enemies on all sides; beside the toughness of the journey along 1400 km, on foot, for about as long as four months.

Having found no Levites to accompany him together with the leaders and the people in this journey (15), Ezra sent to seek some Levites and their assistants (the Nethinims); Here as well the good hand of God was obviously apparent, as some of them consented to accompany him (18).

He started the journey by fasting and praying for three days; and at its end he kept for as long as three days offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to God who accompanied them and protected them against the dangers along the way.

After reaching to the River Euphrates, the procession crossed through Palestine from the North. Although they carried treasures of about one million pounds (26-27), yet Ezra did not ask the king to provide them with a military escort (22); as he delivered the task utterly in the hand of God. That does not imply that every believer should commit himself to the same line of thinking; for Nehemiah, a man of faith on the same level of Ezra did not object to have captains of the army and horsemen to guard the procession (Nehemiah 7-9).

Ezra, a man of Great wisdom; knowing how men could be easily offended; and lest the enemies would attempt to distort his image, by claiming that he took gold and silver for himself from what was entrusted to his care, he weighed the treasures and elaborately recorded their weights before and after the journey (24-34); the same way followed by the apostle Paul when he carried the contributions of the churches to the saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8: 20-21).

The offerings and the animals for sacrifice in the temple of God were in the name of the twelve tribes of Israel, for all became one people, being a symbol of the one church returning from the captivity of the devil (Ephesians 4: 3-4).

### **Why did God allow for the return from Babylon to Jerusalem in three stages?**

Was it not possible for God to let king Cyrus issue a decree for all the Jews in captivity to return together in one batch under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua? Was it necessary for a second batch under the leadership of Ezra, and a third batch under the leadership of Nehemiah?

- 1- God who granted man the freedom of will, did not intend for the return to be mandatory, but He left for everyone the full freedom, to earn the reward of his optional return.
- 2- The three stages symbolized the journey of humanity from the captivity of the devil to the glorious liberty of the children of God. Those who hastened to respond to the call, are counted as those of the first hour. Then the door stays open from the third hour until the last moment of the day, namely until the response of those of the eleventh hour, at the sunset of this world. All of them enjoy the entrance into the high Jerusalem.
- 3- God chose diverse leaders: For the first batch, there was Zerubbabel of the descendants of king David, as a symbol of Christ the King of kings. For the second batch there was Ezra the priest, as a symbol of the Word of God, the Greatest High Priest; And for the third and last batch, there was the faithful Nehemiah, as a symbol of the Lord Christ, called "The Faithful". It is as though God intends for all believers to become spiritual leaders, whether they are of royal descent, or priesthood descent, or of the regular people.
- 4- Although the three batches partook of their spiritual feature, and being all under the leadership of God Himself, who works in the human leaders, as well as in the people; yet each journey had its unique feature. As an example, Ezra did not seek military escort for protection, for fear that such a request might cause an offense to the pagan king, thinking that God is unable to protect them; While Nehemiah did not reject the protection provided by the king for them. That does not imply that Ezra had a stronger faith; for both trusted wholly in God's protection, despite the difference in the circumstances.
- 5- Arriving at Jerusalem, each of the three batches had its own role to achieve, but each was in need of the other two. The goal of the first batch was to build the altar and the temple; That of the second batch was to practice the rituals, the sacrifices, and the celebration of the feast; And that of the third batch was to build the city walls. But the three batches were committed, as well, to the internal reform.

1- The heads of the fathers' houses	1 - 14
2- Preparations for the departure of the second batch of captives	15 - 30
3- The journey from Ahava to Jerusalem	31
4- Thanksgiving to God	32 - 35
5- Delivering the royal commands to the king's satraps and the governors	36

**1- THE HEADS OF THE FATHERS' HOUSES:**

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

Here we see a list of those who went up with Ezra; a list different than that in the second chapter, (with 80 years interval between the two). The first batch went up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua in the year 536 BC. ... This second batch -- considered as those of the sixth hour -- went up with Ezra in the year 538 BC; whereas the third batch who will set forth later under the leadership of Nehemiah, could be considered those of the eleventh hour. All are well received by God, and have a portion in the heavenly Jerusalem; For the gates of heaven are open, anticipating to receive every man, even in his last breath, without admonishment on his delay.

Ezra made a call to the heads of the fathers' houses, and those in turn called the families, of whom 1496 men responded to his call -- the number of individuals was estimated as 8000 -- the second batch of those who returned from captivity; who were worthy to

have their names registered as faithful men. They preferred the edification of the kingdom of God over their personal temporal interests.

The faithful God so cherishes the names of his loyal faithful servants, who loved Him, in their service in His vineyard, and their work to the account of His kingdom, to register them in the perpetual book of life.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard to the account of the kingdom (Matthew 20: 1-16), presented to us by the Lord Christ, we see God promises to give every worker a denarius a day. But that does not imply that man may postpone his repentance and obedience to work in the vineyard of the Lord. According to St. Augustine: [Did those to whom the owner come to hire to work in his vineyard, at the third hour of the day, say to him; No! We shall not go to work before the ninth hour? As long as you are giving all the same wages, why should we go and labor more than we have to?! For he would send them away if they so did.... But he would answer them, saying: You do not want to go now, although you do not know if you are going to live one hour from now. If you are called at the sixth hour of the day. Come at once; Yes indeed, the owner of the vineyard promised to give you a denarius if you came at the eleventh hour, but he did not guarantee that you are going to live until then, not even until the seventh hour, let alone the eleventh hour. Therefore, do not postpone, for He who called you guarantees your wages, but the days are not predictable].

St. Augustine also says: [In this parable, the Lord opened the door before all, to let no one despair, and He repeats the call to receive all. But let us start right away lest we would be destroyed by the corrupt hope through postponement.... Do not postpone; Do not close the door opened by the Grantor of forgiveness before you..... Rejoice; ... The door is open, without even knocking on it; .... But it may not stay open forever?... You do not know what will happen tomorrow].

*"Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; Of the sons of David, Hattush" (2)*

Ezra mentioned the sons of the priests first: Gershom the son of Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron; and Daniel of the sons of Ithamar the son of Aaron. Some of the priests were of the sons of Phinehas, and some were of the sons of Ithamar, the younger brother of Eleazar.

*"Of the sons of Shecaniah, of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, and registered with him were one hundred and fifty males" (3)*

Then, of the household of king David: Hattush , of the sons of Shecaniah; and of those of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah.

*"Of the sons of Pahath-Moab, Elihoenai the son of Zeraiah, and with him two hundred males" (4)*

*"Of the sons of Shechaniah, Ben-Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males" (5)*

Shecaniah in verse 5 is different from Shecaniah in verse 3.

*"Of the sons of Adin, Ehed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males" (6)*

*"Of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males" (7)*

*"Of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him eighty males" (8)*

*"Of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males" (9)*

*"Of the sons of Shelomith, Ben-Josiphiah, and with him one hundred and sixty males" (10)*

*"Of the sons of Bedai, Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males" (11)*

*"Of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred and ten males" (12)*

*"Of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names are these – Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with him sixty males" (13)*

**“Of the last sons of Adonikam”**; This most probably means that most of them went up with Zerubbabel in the first **batch**, and the few left went up with Ezra.

*“Also the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud, and with him seventy males” (14)*

## 2- PREPARATION FOR DEPARTURE OF THE SECOND BATCH OF CAPTIVES:

“Now I gathered them by the River that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked upon the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there” (15)

**Provision for the journey (15 to 30):** Those returning to Jerusalem gathered together by the running River Ahava to stay there three days. ... So the procession of the church setting forth to the high Jerusalem gather together as though by the water of baptism, where they get, by the Holy Spirit, the grace of adoption, and experience the resurrected life with Christ who was buried for three days. That is the deposit of the whole church, and even that of every believer that supports him all the days of his sojourn on earth, until the day he crosses over to Christ, risen from the dead, and ascended to heaven.

Our sonhood to God, our enjoyment of the resurrection, and the renewal of our life by the Holy Spirit; these are our provisions amid the persistent battles of the enemy, during our crossing over from this world, until we reach paradise safely and in peace.

- + We have two births: one earthly, and the other heavenly;  
The first from the body, and the second from the Spirit;  
The first based upon a mortal principle, and the second upon an eternal principle;  
The first by a man and a woman, and the second by God and the church;  
The first makes us the children of the body, and the second the children of the Spirit;  
The first makes us the children of death, and the second the children of the resurrection;  
The first makes us the children of the time, and the second the children of God;  
The first makes us the children of the curse and the wrath, and the second looses us from the bonds of every sin.

(St. Augustine)

**Ahava:** The name of a river, most probably a branch of the river Euphrates near Babylon, by which the whole region was named. There, many Jewish families dwelt, for it was always the tendency of the Jews to dwell close to running water for their need of a plenty of water for the many cleansing rites they practiced. The psalmist says: *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down”* (Psalm 137: 1); and the prophet Ezekiel says: *“I was among the captives by the river Chebar”* (Ezekiel 1: 1). The running water refers to the work of the Holy Spirit, as well as to the grace of God working in the believers, About the believer it is said: *“He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water”* (Psalm 1: 3).

Camping there for three days refers to their enjoyment, through baptism, of the resurrection together with the Lord Christ in the third day..

- + Great is baptism granting to you: liberation from captivity, forgiveness of sins, death of sin, a second birth of the soul, a mantle of light, a steadfast holy seal, a chariot to heaven, the joy of paradise, the cause of the kingdom, and the gift of sonhood.
- + In baptism, you are born at the same moment you die; The water of salvation to you are both a grave and a mother.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

As he quietly sat by the river, Ezra realized that there were no Levites, among the group. It was actually a sorrowful situation, that the Levites, the servants of the Lord, having been preoccupied with the temporal things of this world; did not care to set forth to the joyful paradisiacal life; when many of the people, old and young, and even those who came from the Gentiles to receive faith with intense joy, preceded them. . . . 74 of them went up together with the first batch; but now, there was none of them. Ezra then sent a message to Iddo the chief man, which had its impact, not on account of its eloquent words rebuking them, as much as of the good hand of God upon them (18). . . . About 40 Levites joined them.

#### **Why were the Levites reluctant to go up to Jerusalem?**

- 1- The main reason was because they have got prominent jobs and positions in Babylon, that they looked down at their tasks in the temple.
- 2- Some of them probably have never seen Jerusalem, but only heard about it from their fathers, and having not tasted the sweetness of the service of God, they, therefore, had no enthusiasm to see it.
- 3- They heard from their fathers and their grandfathers the Levites, how exalted were the rites in the temple in its great glorious days; and now, there is no comparison between the temple of Solomon and that of Zerubbabel.
- 4- Going up to Jerusalem would cost them much, for forsaking their prosperous business, and leaving back their possessions in Babylon, with no right to purchase fields nor land in Jerusalem or Israel.
- 5- They probably feared the dangers and toughness of the journey, having heard about the enemies who lie in wait for them on the road.

*“Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leaders: also for Joiarib and Elnathan, men of understanding” (16)*

*“And I gave them a command for Iddo the chief man at the palace Casiphia, and I told them what they should say to Iddo and his brethren, the Nethinim at the palace Casiphia – that they should bring us servants for the house of our God” (17)*

“**Iddo**” was most probably the chief of the school of the Levites and the Nethinim in Casiphia.

Concerning the word “**Casiphia**” there are two views:

- a- As it is a word that refers to (silver) It is claimed by some that those Levites worked in the mines of silver in the province of Media.
- b- According to the symbolic interpretation, Casiphia was a school run by Iddo, where they taught the word of God, which is like silver.

Notice how some of the Levites and the Nethinim consented to go up to Jerusalem, only after being pushed by Ezra and Iddo their chief. . . . Many of us need a push to walk along the way of God. Yes, they seek God, yet they are slow to move, and in need for an encouragement..

*“Then by the good hand of our God upon us, , they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and brothers, eighteen men” (18)*

*“and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty men” (19)*

*“Also of the Nethinim, whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinim; all of them were designated by name” (20)*

Such readiness of the Nethinim, namely the assistants of the Levites, would put the Levites to shame; for of the former 220 persons went up, while only 40 Levites did, after several calls. We have already spoken of the Nethinim as we commented on the first procession under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2: 43).

**“all of them were designated by name”**; namely they called their names to compare them with what came in the lists; Ezra probably meant not to mention their names because they did not readily come on their own.

*“Then I proclaimed a fast there at the River of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions” (21)*

**I proclaimed a fast**; For repentance and humiliation before God, to help them to overcome the difficulties of the way, and to make it straight without obstacles (Isaiah 4); 3). On our way to the kingdom of heaven, there would be many difficulties that need prayer and fasting to overcome, which Ezra sought as a divine escort, he did not seek from the king.

Knowing that there were enemies who hate the Jews, lying in wait for them on the way, that the journey would be tough on all aspects, particularly on women and children, who had to walk for as long as four months on foot; Ezra raised his heart to God seeking help, support, and protection; and proclaimed a fast, an exalted weapon in their burdensome journey.

If gathering together by the River Ahava refers to the need for the grace of baptism; having already enjoyed baptism, exhorts us much more to fast and humiliate ourselves in our strife, leaning upon the grace of God. The soul, exultant by the grace of God, strives to be qualified to have the divine protection, as a free gift from God.

“  
Fast is a guard for the soul, and a faithful companion of the body;  
Fast is the weapon of the brave, and the trainer of the hermits;  
Fast stands guard against the temptations, and paves the way to godliness;  
Fast is the maker of chastity;  
Fast does wonders in battles;  
Fast teaches tranquility in the time of peace;  
Fast sanctifies the Nazirite, and consummates the priest;  
Fast makes the barren woman a mother of many children;  
Fast creates the strong, and gives wisdom to the law-makers;  
How could a priest pray without fasting?  
Practicing fast has been important, not only in the worship according to the law in the old covenant,,  
but in the sacramental worship of the new covenant, as well

+  
Fast brings prayer up to heaven, as though a feather flying high;;  
Fast is the cause of the progress of peoples;  
Fast is the origin of good health;  
Fast is the coach of the youth, the adornment of the elders, and a good company of the travelers;  
Fast is a safe tent for those who seek a refuge;  
The married man will not doubt his wife, if he sees her always fasting;  
So is a married woman, she will trust her husband, and will never have jealousy, if she see him always fasting.

(St. Basil the Great)

*"For I was ashamed to request an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying: 'The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake him'"*  
(22)

Here Ezra's living faith is apparent. Believing in the Lord of hosts who could protect him, it was not befitting of him to seek a human military escort from the pagan king.

**"Soldiers and horsemen"**, Having talked to the king that His God is capable of protecting His people, How could he now seek soldiers and horsemen to protect him? ... Nehemiah, on the other hand, even though; he did not seek it, he consented to have them; For why should he refuse; when he believes that God had many ways to protect His children?!

*"So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayers" (23)*

**"He answered our prayers"**; For He is the mighty God of the impossible; He longs to see our hearts seek from Him with purity, what conform to His will; Then, in compassionate fatherhood He would respond to our prayers..... By prayer and fasting, together with the purity of heart, God responded to the request of Ezra and those who were with him.

+ **I wish my supplication come before the Lord;** for if they do, my enemies will perish ; *"The righteous will stand with great confidence"* (Wisdom 5: 1); *"Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers the snare is broken, and we have escaped"* (Psalm 124: 7); *"The persecutors would bow their heads, and the persecuted would rejoice"* (See Matthew 5: 10-12).

(Father Hesichius of Jerusalem)

+ The pure prayer will find its way to God, will talk to Him, will listen to Him, and will trust in Him.

+ Don't be discouraged when your prayer is not instantly heard; ... Don't assume that it is rejected; ... Don't say: I often requested, but in vain; and I may never get.

(St. (Mar) Jacob El-Serougi)

+ God will not help him, if he does nothing himself; He will help him if he prays.

+ The perfect impact of faith is this: It makes us *"ask to be given; and seek to find"* (Luke 11: 9). Whereas he who tends to debate, closes the door of God's mercy before his own face.

(St. Augustine)

+ Let us believe that whatever we seek from the Father, in the name of the Son, we shall get; for it is the Father's will to seek through the Son; and it is the will of the Son to seek from the Father in His name.... This does not imply that the Father is not able to do otherwise; but it is one will that is revealed.

(St. Ambrose)

*"Then I separated twelve of the leaders of the priests –Sherabiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them – " (24)*

Being extremely rich, the Persian king offered to the house of the Great God, an abundance of gold and silver, and even bronze of high caliber *"polished and precious as gold"* (27). Ezra delivered those treasures into the hand of faithful men to carry to Jerusalem..

*"and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offerings for our the house of our God, which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel who were present, had offered"* (25)

Although he trusted the faithfulness of the high priests, the priests, and the Levites, yet Ezra delivered to them everything by weight, to avoid any possibility of doubts on the part of others, and to cut off the way of those who may try to revile them. The apostle says: *"providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men"* (2 Corinthians 8: 21)

*"I even weighed into their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, silver articles weighing one hundred talents, one hundred talents of gold"* (26)

*"twenty gold basins worth a thousand drachmas, and two vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold"* (27)

*"And I said to them, 'You are holy to the Lord; the articles are holy also, and the silver and gold are a freewill offering to the Lord God of your fathers'"* (28)

With confidence, Ezra says that *"they are holy to the Lord, and the articles are holy also"* (28). Caring for those articles as holy to the Lord, yet, as those articles were meant for the sake of sanctifying the people, Ezra says: *"You are holy to the Lord, and the articles are holy also"*; giving to the souls precedence over the gold and silver articles.

*"Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' houses of Israel in Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord"* (29)

Ezra seeks from them to lead a life of watching and faithfulness. If the Lord Christ is called "The Faithful"; it is befitting of His members to partake of His faithfulness. For on the great day of the Lord, it will be said to the faithful believer: *"Well done good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things"* (Matthew 25: 21).

Faithfulness is important in all aspects, particularly in things pertaining to the Lord; hence Ezra delivered the precious articles to the priests and the Levites by weight, to deliver them in turn to the house of the Lord by weight. ... More precious than the articles are the souls of men, that are entrusted to the faithfulness of the priests and the Levites.

*"So the priests and the Levites received the silver and the gold and the articles by weight, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God"* (30)

The way they received everything by weight, it is befitting of them to deliver them by weight; to avoid any probable doubt in their faithfulness.

### **3- THE JOURNEY FROM AHAVA TO JERUSALEM:**

*"Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem, and the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of*



*the enemy and from ambush along the road” (31)*

The journey set forth, that which was seen by Isaiah by the spirit of prophecy, saying: *“Depart! Depart! Go out from there. Touch no unclean thing. Go out from the midst of her. Be clean. You who bear the vessels of the Lord. For you shall not go out in haste, nor go by flight; For the Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rear Guard”* (Isaiah 52: 11-12).

Ezra the scribe did not mention how God saved them against the enemies on their way; for he experienced what the psalm says: *“Let God arise; Let His enemies be scattered; Let also those who hate Him flee before Him”* (Psalm 68: 1; etc.)

**“God delivered us”**; He who will keep our procession toward the High Jerusalem, Here He delivers them from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road. He drove the robbers away from them.

Arriving safe to Jerusalem, they started by camping for three days, thanking the Lord who granted them the resurrected life; and on the fourth day they delivered the treasures and the offering to the house of the Lord; and delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps and the governors in the region beyond the river.

In one sentence, Ezra gave an account of the journey that took them four months to complete. He did not say who were the enemies, nor what the people suffered from the robbers; He only said that *“God delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road”* (31).

Once we reach paradise we look back at all the years of our life as though moments that passed by; All we remember is God's work with us, we shall never remember those who afflicted us, nor the bitterness of affliction. The exalted glories will swallow our minds, and we shall only be preoccupied with our longing for the salvation of the whole world, and our work will be to praise the Lord together with the heavenly hosts. That will be what we shall do on the day of our departure from the body, and our entrance into the paradise. I wish we would enjoy a little deposit while we are still in the body.

#### **4- THANKSGIVING TO GOD:**

*“So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days”* (32)

We most probably imagine the great reception by their relatives and acquaintances; But what is most amazing is that, the way they stayed together three days by the River Ahava, fasting and praying to God to start the journey together with them, and to precede them on their way; Now, having arrived safe to Jerusalem, they did not instantly disperse, no one of them went to the house of a relative to have rest; but they all stayed three days together, as though the journey has not yet come to an end; they stayed to offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God who accompanied them on the road and protected them.

Those who spent four tough months on the road from Babylon to Jerusalem, were not preoccupied with getting acquainted with their relatives, nor with looking for a place to settle down and find rest; but stayed together three days, as though living together in a magnificent glorious portrait of the resurrection of Christ.

*“Now on the fourth day, the silver, the gold, and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui”*  
(33)

**“On the fourth day, the silver, the gold, and the articles were weighed”**. In the days of Cyrus those treasures were delivered in number; but here they are delivered in number and weight. This indicates God's care for His children; and that those who minister to

God are committed to be faithful on every soul; as the children of God are His holy vessels, entrusted to His servants (2 Timothy 2: 2).

Two priest and two Levites received the gold and the silver, and conformed the things sent from Babylon to those they received in Jerusalem. On the fourth day, the stewards gave the account of their stewardship, and delivered them in number and weight to the house of the Lord; and all the weight was written in records.

*“with the number and weight of everything, all the weight was written at that time” (34)*

*“The children of those who had been carried away captives, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord” (35)*

**“The children who had come from captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel”**, to thank God for keeping them safe on the road; to dedicate themselves to Him. They also offered sin offerings to atone for their own sins. Notice how the figure 12 is repeated; for all the tribes became now one people.

#### **5- DELIVERING THE KING’S COMMANDS TO THE KING’S SATRAPS AND THE GOVERNORS:**

*“And they delivered the king’s orders to the king’s satraps and the governors in the region beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God” (36)*

Ezra did not hasten to deliver the king’s orders to the king’s satraps and the governors, but waited for the people to spend three days giving thanks to God; and for the stewards to give an account of their stewardship; And to offer burnt offerings and sin offerings to God. God had the priority in the life of Ezra, and in that of all the people accompanying him.

**“So they gave support to the people and the house of God”**. The good hand of God was upon His people, and worked in the hearts of the kings and rulers.. It is a portrait of what will happen on the great day of the Lord, when the heavenlies will exult in the fulfillment of the exalted divine promises to men; When they see the beautiful church, adorned with the eternal glories, and praise God for His work with mankind; When they see in humanity enjoying the glories, fellows and partners with them; When the heavenlies, together with the earthlies become a heavenly church.

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## **AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 8**

### **COUNT ME OF THE FELLOWS OF THE ELEVENTH HOUR**

- + Many have gone ahead of me to the processions of conquest;  
My soul moans because of my slothfulness and negligence;  
Let Your Holy Spirit work in me;  
Count me of the fellows of the eleventh hour.
  
- + You have chosen me a son of Yours, O who desire the salvation of all;  
Let my name be inscribed on Your palm, and not to be wiped off the book of the eternal life.
  
- + You opened before me the door of baptism, as by the River of Ahava;

You granted me to be buried; to be risen together with You;  
 Grant me to enjoy the resurrected life all the days of my sojourn;  
 Let me fast and humiliate myself before You, together with Ezra the scribe;  
 Let my depths cry out, saying; My sojourn on earth became too long;  
 Many are those who cause me grief;  
*"Many are they who say to me: 'There is no help for him in God'"* (Psalm 3: 1)  
 But You are the stronghold of my life;  
 Your hand stretches to surround me, and to keep the enemies away from me.

+ My journey in the world is an unceasing battle;  
 But by You, it turns into a joyful banquet;  
 With every day You present to my soul new conquests;  
 You let the eyes of my heart see the crowns You prepare for Your children.

+ When shall I, together with Your people, reach the High Jerusalem?  
 There I shall no more remember the troubles of the road;  
 But my heart will be filled with joy, and my tongue with exultation;  
 I shall partake of the exultation of the heavenlies;  
 There, I would experience the resurrection on an exalted level;  
 I shall present to you an account of my stewardship;  
 I have nothing to justify myself;  
 But it is Your grace that is my support all the days of my sojourn;  
 There, with joy and exultation, I shall sing, saying:  
*"Here am I and the children whom the Lord has given me"* (Isaiah 8: 18)

+ There, before us, the image of the cross will transfigure;  
 And the sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise will be offered;  
 There, Your exalted promises will be fulfilled;  
 There I shall enjoy *"what eye has not seen, nor ear heard  
 Nor have entered into the heart of man"* (1 Corinthians 2: 9).  
 Glory be to You, O Faithful in Your promises.

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**A COMPARISON BETWEEN EZRA'S JOURNEY  
 AND OUR JOURNEY TO THE HIGH JERUSALEM**

	<b>EZRA'S JOURNEY</b>	<b>OUR JOURNEY TO THE HIGH JERUSALEM</b>
<b>1</b>	It started by writing the names of the heads of the fathers' houses; and those who wish to return	God chose us, wrote our names in the book of life; and inscribed them on His palm
<b>2</b>	The assembly was by the River Ahava	The beginning is by baptism, and the enjoyment of the sonhood to God
<b>3</b>	The people stayed three days by the River Ahava	The enjoyment of the resurrection with the Lord Christ who was buried for three days
<b>4</b>	Fast and humiliation before God who will	Diligent spiritual strife, and faith in God the Guard of souls

	protect them	
5	He described the journey in one phrase (31); but did not say what the enemies have done against them	We shall only be preoccupied in our journey by the High Jerusalem; We shall not fear neither the devil nor the sin; ...Our God is our Savior
6	They stayed three days in Jerusalem; and did not go to houses nor to tents	In heaven, we shall only be preoccupied with the bosom of the Father, the dwelling place of all
7	They offered sacrifices and offerings on all Israel	Those in paradise are only preoccupied with supplication for the sake of all humanity before the crucified Christ
8	They delivered the golden and silver gifts to the house of the Lord	We shall deliver the account of our stewardship, and the fruition of our testimony to the Lord Christ
9	They delivered the king's commands to the satraps and the governors	We shall enjoy the divine promises concerning the eternal life and its glories

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# CHAPTER 9

## REPENTANCE AND CONTRITION OF EZRA

### IN THE NAME OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE

The second batch of those returning from captivity arrived under the leadership of Ezra to Jerusalem.. And four months later, the leaders came to tell him that some of the men have married pagan women (1-2). Here, Ezra's joy turned into sorrow and bitterness of the soul. He could not endure hearing this, on account of that, it would be counted as treason against the Holy God, because of which God allowed for the captivity of the people to Babylon, that lasted for 70 years. Such mixed marriages with pagans was the cause of the perversion of many from faith.

Yet Ezra did not take the position of a judge, which has been in his authority given to him by the Persian king; but he tore his garment and his robe, and plucked out some of the hair of his head and beard, and sat down astonished all the day long (3-5). Many men, women, and children assembled around him, but no one dared to utter a word. And when it was time for the evening sacrifice, Ezea raised a strong prayer of confession that had its great impact upon the people.

Ezra assembled the people to offer the evening sacrifice; and poured his heart before the Lord, confessing the sin of the people; counting what they did as though his own deeds. In the name of the people he confessed that all have previously sinned; for which God chastised them for a little while by captivation. And now God liberated them and extended mercy to them in the sight of the king of Persia; but, having sinned again, they are worthy of perdition, and are ashamed to stand before God.

- |                                        |        |
|----------------------------------------|--------|
| 1- The news of the treason against God | 1 - 2  |
| 2- The contrition of Ezra              | 3 - 5  |
| 3- A prayer and a confession           | 6 – 15 |

#### 1- THE NEWS OF THE TREASON AGAINST GOD:

*"When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, 'The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites,, the Egyptians, and the Amorites'" (1)*

**"When these things were done"**; Namely after their arrival to Jerusalem, offered burnt offerings and sin sacrifices, delivered the king's commands to the satraps and the governors; and the articles of the house of the Lord; the leaders came to Ezra four months after their arrival.-- He arrived in the fifth month (7-9), and his meeting with the leaders was in the ninth month (10: 9)

*"For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is intermingled with the peoples of those lands. Indeed the hand of the leaders and the rulers have been foremost in this trespass" (2)*

Among those who came in the first batch under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, some of their children have already forgotten the humiliation of captivity; And instead of caring to sanctify their life to become a holy leaven for the people who have lost their freedom, land, and authority, disregarding the divine statute, they were preoccupied with their carnal desires, and got married to

pagan women or girls,. And unfortunately, some rulers, priests, and Levites fell as well in this treason; Instead of being good leaders and good role models to their people, who should exhort them to holy life, and to keeping the covenant of God, they became an offense to them.

Now, they are in their holy land, in love and unity, and no sign of idol worship; but the leaders, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discovered those mixed marriages; which would probably lead to the apostasy of the people to idol worship; something that happened to Solomon himself; and which was the cause for the wrath of God, for which He previously sent them into captivity.

**“The holy seed is intermingled”**; Namely the husbands together with the children would learn from the pagan women their abominable ways of idol-worship. There was indeed certain exception to this in ‘Ruth’ the Moabite; but the exception should not become the rule; for the people of God should be holy., namely consecrated and dedicated to God, and pure in their life. Having been the only people on earth who worshipped the living God, they were committed to separate themselves from the pagan peoples, to preserve their purity, and not to intermingle with the Gentiles, and be lost, the way it happened to the people of Samaria.

This serious strike goes back to the days of Noah, when it is written: *“When the people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that (the daughters of men) were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose”* (Genesis 6: 1-2).

In his book “The City of God”, St. Augustine talks about two cities: one earthly, and the other heavenly; the former represents the wicked people bonded to the earthlies, and the later to the believers bonded to the heavenlies. Hence he saw in the inter-marriage between the sons of God to the daughters of men, a mixture between the two cities, which will corrupt the citizens of the heavenly city; against which the apostle Paul warned us, saying: *“For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness; and what communion has light with darkness; and what accord has Christ with Belial?”* (2 Corinthians 6: 14-15).

And for the sake of keeping the covenant with God, and not falling into idol-worship, the divine commandment came, saying: *“Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods, and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice; and you take of his daughters for your sons, and their daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods”* (Exodus 34: 15-16); And, *“Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; so the anger of God will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly”* Deuteronomy 7: 3-4).

The goal of this commandment is the purity; For God does not intend to separate the nations from one another; but He rather longs for all to be one in Him. He wishes to have a royal generation, and His own people, renewable humanity, under the leadership of the New Adam, as one Head, for all the believers in the world. And as humanity was not yet ready for such a holy union, He separated the believers from the pagans, and put limitations on the freedom of their marriage.

+ The sons of the believers were in some sense meant for holiness and salvation; and with the deposit of this hope; Paul supports the marriages which he wishes to uphold.

(The scholar Tertullian)

+ Marriage, being a spiritual gift, will not be as such if made with non-believers. The Spirit of God will not be given to dwell in non-believers.

+ The sacrament of matrimony should be consummated with sanctity, and not in haste nor in a distorted atmosphere.

(The scholar Origen)

- + Marriage is greater than to be human; It is a minor kingdom; a little house for the Lord.
- + Our Savior attended a wedding to sanctify the origin of human life.
- + Who are these two or three assembled in the name of Christ, among whom the Lord will dwell? Are they not the husband, the wife, and their child; for the man and the woman are being united by God.
- + By the counsel of the saints, the nations and the homes are well ordained.
- + Marriage is a holy image that should be kept pure of any defilement. It is befitting of us to wake up together with Christ from our slumber; then go back to sleep with thanksgiving and peace.
- + The hearts of lovers have wings ... But love can turn into hate, if causes of mutual lack of respect crawl into it,
- + Whoever seeks only the carnal pleasure will turn marriage into adultery.

(St. Clement of  
Alexandria)

## 2- THE CONTRITION OF EZRA:

*“So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished” (3)*

Before Ezra, we have not heard of anyone who came to be in astonishment by such a kind of treason; for all would look at it as a regular matter, not serious enough to shake anyone. But Ezra, once he heard of it, he tore his garment and his robe, and plucked out some of the hair of his head and beard, and sat down astonished. In spite of the authority he has from the king, yet such a kind of treason is not to be dealt by commands, but by the repentance from the heart. Now, who will exhort those fallen people to repent?

On another aspect, those fallen people were new as far as spiritual knowledge and experience are concerned. As their fathers and mothers lived in captivity in intense spiritual draught, he feared to use cruel words and chastisement, that they might not endure. He was confused, as well, for such a people who could be counted as novices in their practice of worship in Jerusalem, have not benefited from what happened to their grandfathers who fell into the Babylonian captivity because of sin. ....Ezra feared of the probable wrath of God upon the whole congregation.

Tearing the garments and robes, and plucking hair from the head and beard, were a Jewish custom, a sign of intense grief and disgust.

- + Such contrition of the heart is spiritually of benefit; contrary to another kind of contrition that may cause anxiety, and may lead to despair.

(St. Mark the hermit)

*“Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captives, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice” (4)*

The news soon spread to the people and leaders; some of whom did not take it seriously, and even counted Ezra's reaction as not befitting of him. Whereas some others were impressed by such a reaction of the man of God who has forsaken his high position in Babylon to go through such a disappointment. There was a third category who had the fear of God, shared with Ezra his confusion and the bitterness of soul, and silently joined him, waiting for any word or command he might give them to execute or help him to do.

+ Whoever intend to get the love of God, let him have the fear of God; for fear may give rise to weeping, then to strength; and in case all these are consummated in the soul. It will start giving fruition in everything. And when God sees those good fruition in the soul, He smells them a sweet fragrance, and, together with His angels He will rejoice, satiate it with joy, and keep it in all its ways, until it reaches to the place of its rest without harm.

Seeing the Great Exalted Guardian protecting the soul, the devil will fear approaching or attacking it because of that great power surrounding it..

You should, therefore, acquire such a power to make the demons terrified before you, to have your things become easy for you, and to find pleasure in the divine work, for God's love is sweeter than honey.

Many monks and virgins who haven't tasted this divine sweetness, nor acquired this divine power, think that they have got them, despite their lack of strife. But whoever strive for their sake will certainly get them through the divine mercies; for "*God shows favoritism to no man*" (Galatians 2: 6)..

Whoever intend to have God's light and power, is committed to despise the honors and defilement of this world, and its carnal pleasures, to purify his heart of all the evil thoughts, and to present to God fasts and tears day and night as pure prayers; Then God will pour over him such a power.

Diligently seek this power, to be able to do all things with ease, and to have great daring before God, who will grant you all your requests.

(St. Anthony the Great)

**"Until the evening sacrifice";** Once it was time for the evening sacrifice, Ezra arose from his sorrowful depression, hastened to the service, and raised his heart by prayer. The evening sacrifice, being a symbol of the sacrifice of the Lord Christ who carries our sins; Ezra's insight was probably on the Savior Messiah.

*"At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting, and having torn by garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God" (5)*

Most probably all those assembled around him remained silent until it was the time for the evening sacrifice, when Ezra arose from his humiliation, bowed down on his knees, in his torn off clothes, and stretched his hands in prayer.

**"I fell on my knees";** So the prayer should be, either standing up or kneeling down.

### 3- A PRAYER AND A CONFESSION:

*'and said, 'O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens" (6)*

He started his prayer, counting all what was done by those traitors as though he himself has done.



Their sin became so great to reach up to heaven, like the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18: 20), because of which God sent fire and brimstone.

We see here Ezra's prayer, not a prayer of requests, but of a confession of guilt from a heart pure with the love of God; who puts himself with his people, and confesses his sins together with theirs, saying: "*our iniquities, our guilt*". Although he himself did not partake of those things; yet he does not blame the others and justifies himself; but, being a priest who loves his people, like the prophet Moses and the apostle Paul (Exodus 32: 32; Romans 3: 9); he puts himself forth on the same level. That was done by the Lord Christ who carried our sins. That prayer and those tears, and his love for his people, had their impact on his people, that they forsook their pagan wives.

***Our guilt has grown up to the heaven***"; Namely it was as high as the tower of Babel that had its top in heaven (Genesis 11: 4); and like the outcries against Sodom and Gomorrah that has come up to (Genesis 18: 21)

- + "Whoever is disgusted of his sins, is committed to talk about them with bitterness; that would be punishment for the accusations by which his tongue justifies his consciousness. But we are committed to put in our consideration that they bring forth a kind of relief from the sufferings of remorse that strike itself; for then, it will arise in more confidence to confront the judgment of the heavenly Judge.

(St. Gregory the Great)

- + What sins are there, that remorse cannot cleanse? What tough stains are there, that tears cannot wash? By Peter's triple confession, he wiped out his triple denial.

(St. Jerome)

- + The extended prayer and the abundant tears, draw the mercy of God.
- + Intending to show all the beatitudes in Himself, having said: "*Blessed are those who mourn (weep)*". Jesus wept.

*"Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered to the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day" (7)*

***"Our kings and our priests"***; namely our civil and spiritual leaders.

***"Kings of the lands"***; kings of Assyria and Babylon in particular.

Ezra confessed that sin is not new in the life of his people, but its roots run deep since the days of their fathers to this day; they, therefore are worthy of being chastised by the sword, captivity, plunder, and humiliation.

- + Be of good cheer while under scourges, for the inheritance is kept for you; God does not forsake His people; He chastises for a little while, and not forever.

(St. Augustine)

- + God endures all the weaknesses of mankind, but He will not leave the man who keeps grumbling, without chastisement.

(St. (Mar) Isaac the Syrian)

*“And now for a little while grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage” (8)*

Even though we are worthy of His anger because of our sins, yet God' anger is *“for a little while”*, then He pours His mercy, and holds us fast, as though by a peg in His sanctuary, the way a tent is held fast in the ground by a peg.. By His mercies He enlightens our eyes.

**“For a little while”**; The seventy years of captivity, although dark, yet they were like a little while in the sight of God.

**“To leave us a remnant to escape”**; from the desolation of Jerusalem, and from Babylon and its evils.

**“That our God may enlighten our eyes”**, The days of captivity were days of darkness; while those of return were days of light. The days of captivity were like death; whereas those of the return were like a revival.

+ *“You struck me”*, but not as a Judge, but as a Father to correct my ways.

+ Who can lift up the rod of God, namely of His divine wrath; so that man would no more be terrified from Him? No one but our Lord Jesus Christ on whom our iniquity was put; and who brought us forth into the divine love, to become, by His Holy Spirit, children of God, who have daring on Him.

*“Let Him lift His rod up from me”*; for having incarnated and come to be one like us, He would never strike us with the rod, nor with fear; provided that we would escape to His grace and to faith; escape to Him who resurrected from the dead, who said to the women: *“Do not be afraid”* (Matthew 28: 5, 10); And when He appeared to His disciples He uttered the same words ... St. John the Evangelist says: *“Perfect love casts out fear”* (1 John 4: 18).

(Father Hesichius of Jerusalem)

+ Paul, calls our punishment 'chastisement', for it is meant to be more as a warning rather than as a condemnation; It is for healing rather than for avenging; to reform rather than to punish.

(St. John Chrysostom)

*“For we were slaves, yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage, but 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” (9)*

Ezra would not forget that God who allowed for His people to fall into captivity, is He who stirred up the hearts of the kings of Persia to build His house, and to send His people back to Jerusalem.

**“For we are slaves”** They were slaves in Babylon, and were still slaves to the king of Persia.

**“To give us a wall”**; God's pleasure and protection was for them like a wall; *“I will be a wall of fire all around her”* (Zechariah 2: 5). But God has His tools, who were here, the king of Persia whose heart He stirred up to protect the people of Israel.

*“And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments” (10)*

**“After this”**; After all God's mercies they betrayed Him.

*“which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity’” (11)*

**“By Your servants the prophets”**; There is no prophecy in these words; but the prophet Moses in Deuteronomy 7: 1-3 forbade marriage to pagans women. What Ezra mentions here is the spirit of the law, the same thought proclaimed by the prophets, namely to separate ourselves from evil.

*“Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever” (12)*

**“Never seek their peace”**; Namely do not make with them treaties of peace and security, nor political or military alliances, so as not to fall into the snares of their idol-worship.

*“And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this” (13)*

Ezra confesses that, God has punished them less than what their iniquities deserve; and it was befitting of them to put the divine mercies into their consideration.

*“should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people of these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed us, so that there would be no remnant or survivor?” (14)*

Having broken the divine commandment, they lost their relationship with the divine truth; For Adam, by breaking the commandment lost the concept of the commandment; And by breaking it, the Pharisees lost their ability to recognize God and His love. The Lord therefore confirms: *“If you abide in My word you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (John 8: 31-32); And, *“The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”* (John 6: 63); *“For the word of God is living and powerful”* (Hebrew 4: 12).

+ Whoever does not keep the divine commandments has not the love of God in him.

(St. Dedymus the blind)

+ God hides in His commandments; Whoever seeks Him will find Him in them (by putting them into practice). Do not ever say: I kept all the commandments, yet I did not find the Lord in them For whoever search for Him in truth will find peace.

+ Some may think that they truly believe in God while not keeping His commandments; And others, while keeping the commandments, expect the kingdom as a just reward (for their self-worthiness). They both err against the truth.

(St. Mark the Hermit)

- + The proof of love is to proclaim it through work. That is why, St. John says in his epistle: "*He who says 'I know Him', and does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him*" (1 John 2: 4). Our true love will be, if we make our will in harmony with His commandments. But he, who wanders to and fro through his evil desires, would not love God in truth; for he acts against His will.

(Pope Gregory the Great)

- + It is not enough to acquire the commandments, but we need an elaborate observation of them.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- + He who has My commandments in his memory, and observe them in his life; he who has them on his lips and in his ears, and behave according to them; he who persistently observe them in his work; Such a man loves Me. ... By work, love is proclaimed, and through their application yet without fruition, love will be only by name.

(St. Augustine)

*"O Lord God of Israel You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day. Here we are before You in our guilt, though no one can stand before You because of this"* (15)

Ashamed to seek forgiveness for sins unbecoming to fall into, Ezra seeks from God help to lift them up from sin.

**"You are righteous, for we are left as a remnant, as it is this day:** By His mercy, God kept them safe, even though they were worthy of death, For without His mercy, there would be no remnant left to escape..

**"Here we are before You";** He delivered the whole situation to the Lord, and had nothing more to say before His mercy.

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## AN INSPIRATION FROM EZRA 9

### GRANT ME, O LORD, A SPACIOUS HEART TO ACCOMMODATE THE WHOLE WORLD

- + You shone with Your law upon Your servant Ezra;  
You made him a skillful scribe who adores Your commandment;  
His heart was on fire with Your love;  
And was spacious to embrace all his brethren;  
  
Grant me a spacious heart to accommodate the whole world;  
To love in truth all Your creatures;  
I desire the holiness of all mankind;  
And anticipate the day of their eternal wedding.
- + Ezra could not endure to hear about the treason of his brethren against you;  
He counted himself the traitor;

His soul was contrite within him;  
He kept weeping before You;  
He tore his garment and robe, and plucked hair from his head and beard;  
He cried out and sat in astonishment.

+ It was within his authority to issue harsh verdicts;  
He could rebuke with violence;  
But he trembled within himself, for he had Your fear in his heart;  
His heart could not endure breaking the divine commandment;  
And his love for his brethren could not endure their perdition for breaking the commandment.

+ Like Moses, he stood interceding for his brethren, who said:  
*"Forgive their sin – but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written"* (Exodus 32: 33)  
And partaking of the apostle's compassionate fatherhood, he said:  
*"Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation"* (1 Corinthians 11: 29)

+ In the evening sacrifice, he raised his face toward You;  
He kneeled down and cried out to You;  
He looked up, as though to the sacrifice of the cross, and said:  
Our trespasses have increased over our heads;  
And our iniquities have reached up to heaven.

+ He blamed himself together with his brethren;  
And counted Your chastisement on the people as though for a little while;  
He confessed that without Your mercy, no remnant of Your people would escape;  
He confessed that he, together with the people have broken Your commandment, the grantor of life;  
He had no more daring to stand before You;  
He therefore became great in Your sight;  
For You are the forgiver of sins;  
You have no pleasure at all that the wicked should die, and not that he should turn from ways and live.  
Grant me Ezra's repentance and His love for You;  
Grant me his humility before You;  
Fill my heart with love for You and my brethren.

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# CHAPTER 10

## A PRACTICAL REPENTANCE

### THE ACTIVITY OF A CONTRITE PRAYER

The last chapter of the book of Ezra came to reveal the magnificence of his person as a wise shepherd, loving, yet firm. If the book started with the fulfillment of God's promise by the return of the people after seventy years in captivity, in the days of Cyrus the king of Persia; What preoccupied Ezra's heart was the holiness of Israel, priests and people, to return to the goodness of the Holy God' and to have a portion in the high Jerusalem in which no unclean thing would enter.

The book ended by showing the activity of the contrite prayer; as the Holy Spirit of the Lord moved the souls to practical repentance.

- 1- Even the children partook of the great mourning together with the whole people.
- 2- Sheshaniah, came and confessed on behalf of the fallen people, and on that of his father 'Jehiel' who was among those who married pagan wives; yet with a spirit of hope in God, the Forgiver of sins (Ezra 10: 2),
- 3- The brave Ezra was in need of the encouragement of some of the people (4)
- 4- The priests and the Levites partook of the attempts to put things in order; namely by putting away the pagan wives together with their children, as long as they did not forsake their idol-worship, nor made a covenant with God, and obeyed His commandment.
- 5- Ezra kept fasting, even after making the leaders swear to reform the situation; and entered mourning before the Lord (6)
- 6- Ezra called for an urgent assembly of the whole people within three days (8); and whoever abstain would be severely punished.
- 7- Rain heavily poured; as though heaven partook of the tears of Ezra and the people (13)
- 8- He issued an order to form committees to examine the case of every individual with care.
- 9- The names of the repentant were mentioned as a practical lesson for all; proclaiming that some of the descendants of Jeshua the great high priest, and the leader of the first **batch** were among those who got married to pagan wives (18).

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|----------------------------------------------------|---------|
| 1- The Leader, repentant in the name of his people | 1 – 6   |
| 2- Heaven weeps, and the whole people move         | 7 – 17  |
| 3- The names of the repentant                      | 18 – 44 |

#### 1- THE LEADER, REPENTANT IN THE NAME OF HIS PEOPLE:

*"Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large congregation of men, women, and children assembled to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly" (1)*

Ezra is called "the second Moses", not only on account of that he led a new exodus, but also of having the heart of Moses full of love for the salvation of his people. According to St. John Chrysostom, the most prominent portrait of the personality of Moses is not in performing exalted miracles in the name of the Lord, but in standing interceding for his people, saying: "*Forgive their sin – but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written*" (Exodus 32: 33). That magnificent portrait of the great prophet is repeated in

Ezra the skilful scribe, as we see it in this chapter: *"While Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God"* (1). He went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, *"He ate no bread, and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity"* (6); And in the great apostle Paul who said: *"I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh"* (Romans 9: 3); and, *"Who is weak, and I am not weak Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?"* (2 Corinthians 11: 29)

Those three persons: Moses the prophet, Ezra the scribe, and Paul the apostle, have all bore the image of the Lord Christ , the Good Shepherd who gives Himself up for his flock of sheep, and desires to die for the sake of the salvation of His brethren.

- + The captivation of our brethren, we should count as our own captivation; and the sorrows of those in danger as our own sorrows. We have to be sure that there is one body of our unity; Not only our love, but our religious principles, motivate and encourage us to save the members of our household.

(St. Cyprian)

- + What a great feeling in a shepherd! .... Others fall, and he says: *Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?"*

I wish all who are entrusted to lead the rational herd to follow lead; not to appear less compassionate than the shepherd who spent many years caring for an irrational herd.

In case of an irrational herd, no serious damage will happen in case of negligence of the shepherd; whereas in our case, namely in shepherding a rational herd, if a single sheep perish or devoured by the enemy, the damage will be horrible, and the punishment on the shepherd will be unutterable. What excuse can someone give for neglecting him for whose sake the Lord shed His precious blood?!

(St. John Chrysostom)

Ezra's soul suffered when he knew that among those who came back from captivity, instead of thanksgiving to the Holy God, and of their commitment to the holy life, there were many who mixed with the peoples of the land, and married pagan women. Hearing of such a high treason, Ezra said: *"When I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished"* (9: 3).

Ezra raised a prayer with a loud voice, so that all the people who came for the evening service, would hear him. To see that priest fallen on his knees before the house of the Lord, weeping on the sins of his people, have shook the hearts of men and women, and even of little children, for all bitterly wept. The true love coming from a humble heart, has a stronger and more active impact than eloquent sermons and threats. Ezra did not take into consideration that falling on his knees and weeping would make him lose his reverence as a priest and a leader, because they are, on the contrary, features of the true and loving leader.

*"And Sheshaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra: 'We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in spite of this'"* (2)

**"Sheshaniah"**; is a Hebrew name, meaning (Jehovah dwells); and **"Jehiel"** means (The Lord make alive). Sheshaniah the son of Jehiel is not Seshaniah who is mentioned in Ezra 8: 3; in Ezra 8: 5, and in Ezra 10: 26.

'Jehiel', was mentioned as one of the sons of Elam, who married pagan women; and if so, Sheshanaiah would be his son who suffered from his pagan step-mother, and God used that personal suffering for the good of the whole congregation; For it was his conviction that the whole people have to get rid of the pagan wives.

On behalf of the whole congregation Sheshaniah came forward to confess the sin of marrying pagan wives, even though he himself did not fall in such a sin, but his father did (26). He did not complement his own father; for he in whom God dwells will take the side of no one at the expense of the divine truth.

The whole people wept bitterly, but that man did not stop at weeping, but came forward in the name of his father and of all who have fallen in that treason. Yet his heart, as well as his words were full of hope in God, the Forgiver of the sins of the repentant.

**“Yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of all this”** (2). There is hope if they present a true repentance (Deuteronomy 1). Sheshaniah's hope was based on the promises of God.

It is befitting of a leader to be filled with hope; for in the midst of all the tough situations he would see the bosoms of God wide open in anticipation of the fallen souls to return and to repent. Here, we see Sheshaniah support the great leader Ezra with the spirit of hope. As the believers need the support of their leader; the leader, as well, being human, needs the spiritual support of the believers. That is what motivates the church to pray in all her liturgies for the sake of the Pope, the bishops, the priests, the deacons, and all the ministers; and exhorts the congregation to pray for them in their personal prayers.

+ The shepherds, as well, ask the people to pray for their sake; the apostle Paul says to the church: *“Meanwhile, praying also for us”* (Colossians 4: 3)

The apostle prays for the people's sake, and the people pray for the apostle's sake.

Brethren; we pray for your sake; do you pray for ours?

If we pray for one another; the Lord Christ, the Head of the church, will pray for all (an atonement intercession)

+ As the priest (Boniface), I shall not say to you ‘Do not pray for his sake’; for how could we not grieve for someone who lost the love of Christ, and has pleasure in the deceptions of the devil? You should mourn for him; yet your sorrow should not bring you forth to coolness of love and slothfulness of the holy life.... Strive to save your priest through your prayers to God. For even if he is guilty, God will hasten to reform him to resume his shepherding mission in a holy life.

+ You care for your personal affairs; and if you do well, you will not be responsible for the affairs of others. But, as far as the priest is concerned, in case he does well in his personal life, but did not care for your life and those of the other members of his flock, he will be driven out together with the wicked one to Hades. If he is not condemned because of his personal conduct, he will perish because of yours.

Now, knowing the extent of danger they are facing; provide them with an abundant portion of peace ... *“for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account”* (Hebrew 13: 17). It is, therefore befitting to have your care; For if you, like the others, revile them (by judging them), your affairs will not be well managed. For if the skipper of a ship is encouraged by his crew, all of them will be safe; but if they revile him, and make his life miserable, that will reflect on the way he steers the ship, and using his skill as he should.

The same with the priest; if you honor him (obey him), he will be able to manage your affairs well; whereas if you lead him to despair, you will weaken his hands, and will make him, and yourselves under the mercy of violent waves.

(St. Augustine)

*“Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all those wives, and those who have been born to them, according to the counsel of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law”* (3)



**“according to the counsel of my master”**; namely it is up to the wisdom and counsel of Ezra.

**“according to the law”**; Namely according to what came in the book of Deuteronomy 7: 1-3.

If marrying pagan wives is a treason against the Holy God, a disobedience and breaking of the divine covenant; the sign of true repentance will be to make a covenant with God to correct the situation, by submitting to the commandment and the law; and putting away the pagan wives, together with their children.

With wisdom and humility, Sheshaniah says to Ezra: *“According to the counsel of my master”*; he presents due respect to Ezra, fallen and weeping before the house of the Lord.

**What will be the situation of those foreign women? What does he mean by saying: “to put away all those wives, and those who have been born to them”?**

**Would that be considered as a divorce?**

**Were they given a chance to receive faith in the living God?**

We know for sure that *“the Lord God hates divorce”* (Malachi 2: 16).

And we know that some of those who got married to pagan wives, among those returning from captivity, were priests, Levites, and regular people.

And we know that, according to the law, it is forbidden to marry pagan foreign wives (Exodus 34: 11-16; Deuteronomy 7: 1-5).

And we know that there were certain exceptions in the Holy Scripture, like ‘Ruth’ the Moabite, ‘Rahab’ the harlot, the Ethiopian second wife of Moses; and that the three of them have received faith in the living God, and surpassed in it many of the Jewish women..

But those pagan women to whom some of those returning from captivity married, having not received faith in the living God, represented, therefore, danger through the probable infiltration of the idol-worship into the new society..

According to some, the expression *“to put away all those wives” here*, is a unique situation: It is not ‘divorce’, on account of that no lawful and religious marriage has been conducted; nor the relationship with them is counted as adultery; because that surely was not the intention of those who did it; yet it is ‘spiritual adultery’, a treason against God.

*“Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also will be with you. Be of good courage, and do it” (4)*

The brave Ezra who did not seek from the king of Persia a military escort for his journey to Jerusalem, collapses before the sin by which his people committed treason against God.

Sheshaniah encourages the weeping Ezra, saying to him that it is time for reform and work: *“Arise, for this matter is your responsibility”*; as though he says to him ‘Your tears and contrition will not relieve you of your commitment to act, for no one can do it but you. As for us, *“we shall also be with you; Be of good courage, and do it” (4)*

All of us need to hear words of encouragement and support. Joshua the son of Nun heard the divine voice, saying: *“Be strong, and be of good courage”* (Joshua 1: 6); And Solomon was in need for the words of his father David, saying: *“Be strong and of good courage, and do it, do not fear nor be dismayed, for the Lord God – my God – will be with you”* (1 Chronicles 28: 20)

Even though Ezra has got full authority from the king; yet it was not an easy matter, we, therefore find the people support and encourage him to act.

*“Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders, the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath” (5)*

Counting the words said by Sheshaniah as though from God who supports in the time of weakness, and raises from the dead, “Ezra arose” (5). And in the midst of the bitter weeping of the people, “he made the leaders, the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word, So they did”

Ezra so made all of them swear lest they would probably, later on, cast the responsibility on him. He was keen to let the decision be collective, for all to be committed to execute.

*“Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he ate no bread, and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity” (6)*

Although the crisis started to ease through the vow sworn by the high priests, the priests, the Levites, and all Israel to be committed to correct the situation; Yet Ezra kept fasting, and entered into the chamber of Jehohanan, weeping and mourning before the Lord; for his soul could not endure to see his people commit such a treason against God.

## **2- HEAVEN WEEPS AND THE WHOLE PEOPLE MOVE:**

*“And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem” (7)*

If Ezra, weeping and mourning, fell to the ground in contrition before the house of God, the people who assembled did the same, all came weeping, trembling and with fear before God; and rain heavily poured, as though heaven partake of their tears.

Even though Ezra had full authority to issue a decree that would be committing to everyone, according to the command of the king of Persia, saying “Whoever will not observe the law of your God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment” (7: 26); Yet, believing that reform would not be fulfilled through issuing a firm command, but rather through the movement of the whole congregation with conviction of the importance of sanctification in the Lord; a proclamation was issued by the leaders together to all those who came from captivity, to assemble in Jerusalem.

*“And that whoever do not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the congregation of those from the captivity” (8)*

The figure 3 in the two testaments of the Holy Book often refers to the resurrection of the Lord Christ on the third day. According to the scholar Origen, Abraham walked three days following the sign of resurrection, to offer his own son Isaac a sacrifice to God, in full belief that God will raise him up from the dead. And the person baptized plunges three times in the water of baptism, to enjoy the new life, resurrected together with Christ, And here came the call for assembly together after three days, to bear the strength of the resurrection of Christ, capable to raise from the death of sin, and to bring us forth to the righteousness of Christ.

The call came with a firm warning of punishment, that “whoever do not come within three days, ... all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the congregation of those from the captivity” (8)... Why?!

- 1- That assembly, referred to the enjoyment of the holy church membership, without which man would lose his possessions, particularly the land – the promised land -- he has got as a gift from God, lest he would probably deliver to the pagan wives

and their children. So it is with whoever does not keep his membership in the church of Christ by the holy life, he will be denied the eternal inheritance, and will have no portion in the heavenly Canaan.

- 2- Separating him from the congregation; he will have no more right to belong to the people of God, to the sonhood to Abraham, and the enjoyment of the divine promises. etc. He would become a stranger from the Lord, and a foreigner of the household of God (Ephesians 2: 19)

**“Within three days”**; As the land of the Jews was not large, they could come from the farthest location to Jerusalem within three days.

**“his property would be confiscated”**; So as not to let the wealth and inheritance of Israel go to the pagans.

**“would be separated from the congregation of those from the captivity”**; meaning, would be cut off, or be counted as a foreigner and a pagan, who has no right in the promises, and the privileges of the people of God; and will have no relationship with the temple.

*“So all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain” (9)*

So all the people sat in the open square of the house of God; probably a square closer to the temple; before the open square that was in front of the Water Gate (Nehemiah 8: 1) where the people later assembled with Nehemiah and Ezra to hear the words of the law.

**“All came “trembling”**, for sin stirs up trembling and fear, and make man lose his inner peace.

**“Judah and Benjamin”**; for the majority of the people from the captivity belonged to these two tribes.

**“the ninth month”**; a season of heavy rain.

**“In the open square of the house of God”**; Let us notice how serious the matter was. They did not postpone the reform, and the repentance until the spring, after the season of the heavy rain; a sign of true repentance.

*“Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, ‘You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel” (10)*

He did not enter into the details and the negative aspects of their treason against God.

*“Now therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will, separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives” (11)*

Here Ezra provided them with the treatment of that serious wound; namely, the repentance and confession to God; together with taking a practical stand by separating themselves from the sin, and doing what brings pleasure to God, to return to the Lord God of their fathers, who is no stranger to them, nor they to Him.

**“To separate themselves from the peoples of the land”**; For by taking pagan wives, they united with the peoples of the land in their lives, works, pleasures, and ugly customs; And by separating themselves from their pagan wives, they would be separated from all those abominable practices.

*“Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, ‘Yes, as you have said, so we must do” (12)*

The response from the whole congregation quickly came; for Ezra's tears, contrition, love for the salvation of his brethren, and his trust in the work of God, had their profound impact upon the hearts of the congregation, to obey God and His priest.

*"But there are many people, it is the season of heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside; nor it is the work of one or two days, for there are many of us who have transgressed in this matter" (13)*

Although the whole congregation positively responded to Ezra's words, yet they requested from him to take into consideration that they were many who have transgressed, that the matter will not be reformed while standing under the heavy rain. Moreover, as it was not the work of one or two days; let the leaders of their entire congregation and the elders of the cities, look into all the cases concerning that matter.

*"Please let the leaders of our entire congregation stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter" (14)*

**"For our entire congregation"**; As the work is huge and needs a long time, they suggested assigning leaders with the elders of every city to investigate, judge, and execute; and their decisions would be as though made by the entire congregation. They requested forming committees to investigate every case in all the cities of Israel, led by the rulers, elders, and judges, and proclaiming appointed times to issue their judgments, elaborately, yet with no haste.

**"Let those who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times"**. The rulers in Jerusalem formed a kind of tribunal; and appointed a specific time for every city, for those who took pagan wives to come, together with the elders and judges of their cities.

**"Until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter"**; Until then, although nothing bad happened to them yet they perceived that unless they return to God with repentance, the wrath of God is sure to come upon them.

*"Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support" (15)*

The whole congregation was in one accord concerning that issue, except for four men who opposed it: Jonathan the son of Asahel, Jahaziah the son of Tikvah, and the two Levites: Meshullam, and Shabbethai, who, most probably had relatives among those who committed that treason against God; Yet their opposition was to no avail.

*"Then the descendants of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest with certain heads of the fathers' households, were set apart by the fathers' households, each of them by name, and they sat down on the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter"(16)*  
*"By the first day of the first month they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives" (17)*

The whole issue was elaborately done within three months, starting from the first day of the tenth month, and ending on the first day of the first month..

## **2- THE NAMES OF THE REPENTANT:**

The book ended with a list of the names of the repentant, in which we notice the following:

1- With no favoritism toward his brethren the priests, Ezra the priest and scribe mentioned their names first.

2- Every priest offered a trespass offering (19), counting his sin as done *“out of ignorance in which he erred and did not know it”* (Leviticus 5: 15-16).

3- Unfortunately, some of the descendants of Jeshua the high priest, who, together with Zerubbabel, led the first batch to Jerusalem, got married to pagan wives; who were included at the top of the list.

4- Mentioning and recording the names of those who committed this treason against God, was a kind of chastisement, to become an example before the generations to come.

As there was a record of the names of those who returned to Jerusalem, as a list of honor, there is another list of the names of those who committed that treason against the Lord. Every sin without repentance *“treasures us for ourselves wrath in the day of wrath”* (Romans 2: 5), and will be recorded against us.

113 betrayed the Lord; among whom were 17 priests, 10 Levites, gatekeepers, and singers, and 86 of the commons.

*“And among the sons of priests who had taken pagan wives the following were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah”* (18)

*“And they gave their promise that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they presented a ram of the flock as their trespass offering”* (19)

*“Also the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zabadiah”* (20)

*“Of the sons of Harim: Maasieh, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah”* (21)

*“Of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maasiah, Ishmael, Nehaneel, Jozabad, and Elasa”* (22)

*“Also of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah, (the same is Kelita), Pethahaiah, Judah, and Eliezer”* (23)

*“Also of the singers: Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri”* (24)

*“And others of Israel: Of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, Jeziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah, and Benaiah”* (25)

**“and others of Israel”**, meaning of the common people..

*“Of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Eliah”* (26)

*“Of the sons of Zattu: Eleonai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza”* (27)

*“Of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai”* (28)

*“Of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malush, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Ramoth”* (29)

*“Of the sons of Pahath-Moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maasiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, Binnui, and Manasseh”* (30)

*“Of the sons of Harim; E;eazer, Ishijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon”* (31)

*“Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah”* (32)

*“Of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei”* (33)

*“Of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel”* (34)

*“Bananiah, Bedeiah, Cheluh”* (35)

*“Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib”* (36)

*“Matthaniah, Mattaenai, Jaasai”* (37)

*“Bani, Binnui, Shime”* (38)

*“Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah”* (39)

*“Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai”* (40)

*“Azareel, Shelemiah, Shemariah”* (41)

*“Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph”* (42)

*“Of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, and Benaiah”* (43)

*“All these have taken pagan wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children”* (44)

They most probably sent the pagan women and their children away, with gifts; although that was not mentioned here, on account of that this book is a book of repentance; and the talk here concerns repentance. The same thing was done by Abraham to Hagar and her son Ishmael when he sent them away with gifts.

#### **Ezra as a leader and a reformer:**

In his reforms, Ezra followed a scriptural and spiritual program:

- 1- **The Word of God or His commandment** was the constitution of the leadership in the spiritual work of the church. Ezra loved the divine books, being the treasure of the divine promises, and believed in the power of the Word in his life, as well as in his ministry.
- 2- **He never trusted in a human arm.** He did not request a military escort from the king of Persia to guard his procession; And God protected them.
- 3- **Fast and prayers,** so that God would listen and respond to their voice, Ezra called for a fast, despite the long and tough travel before them, together with showing humility before God; for which God had mercy upon them and kept them safe. So we should do before starting any project.
- 4- **Showing humiliation before God, and returning to Him with repentance and confession of sins.** Ezra wept, prayed, and confessed that he sinned, counting the sins of the people as his own sins against God. ... Do we pray for the sake of our brethren who sin, and do we confess as though we are the sinners? Or we justify ourselves, and cast the blame upon others?.
- 5- **Separation of evil:** By sending the pagan wives and children away. For the true faith in the Lord would be affected by the intense mixing, like marrying a non-believing spouse. A believer should separate himself from evil and sin.
- 6- **Ezra's prayer, humility, love for his people, and confessing their sins,** have moved the hearts of the people, to present repentance, and to weep with bitterness. We should notice that if Ezra sought from the people to separate themselves from their pagan wives, without praying and humiliating himself before God, they would probably refuse and rebel against him, and the joy of returning to Jerusalem would have turned into dissensions. The way God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to move the hearts of the people to build the temple; He sent to them Ezra to move their hearts to repentance, and to correct their ways spiritually.
- 7- The king of Persia trusted in Ezra and gave him the authority to execute punishment on those who oppose him; But once Nehemiah came as a governor on the Jews, Ezra **was not offended** that the authority was taken away from him, but got preoccupied with a new task, namely gathering together the Holy Book. It is befitting of every minister, in case he is denied a specific ministry, to perceive that God assigns him to perform some other task. He should not feel jealousy against any other fellow minister, but care for the new task entrusted to him by God.

## LEAD US ALONG THE COLLECTIVE PROCESSION OF REPENTANCE

- + Who among us can be justified before You?  
For if we are weighed in the balances, we are altogether lighter than vapor.  
The bishop together with the priest, the ministers, and all the people;  
All of us contrite ourselves before you;  
Men, women, and children;  
For the enemy casts nets before them all;  
Intending to mix the holy seed with tares.
  
- + In Your fatherhood, You allow for us to be chastised, yet for a little while;  
Feeling Your compassion, we return to You;  
We beat our chests before you;  
We return to You, for sin corrupted our life.  
Our return to you will bring the joy of Your salvation back to us.  
Our return with repentance will let us enjoy the paradisiacal life.
  
- + Let us return to You, to see You run to cover us with Your kisses;  
Let us return to you, so that heaven will rejoice on us;  
Let us return to You, yet not just with words;  
But with behavior, according to Your holy will;  
Let us enjoy work according to Your commandment;  
Let us separate ourselves from evil, and do good.
  
- + Let us, leaders and people, support one another;  
Let us arise and work together by Your Holy Spirit;  
Let us be encouraged by You, and practice Your work.
  
- + Let us separate ourselves from every corruption;  
Let us cry out for the sake of the sanctification of sinners;  
Let us work all together for the sake of edifying Your holy church.

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