

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL EXILE and RETURN GOD THE PROVIDER *Ezra Reads the Law*

The great and awesome God of heaven had provided a wall for the physical safety of His children through the efforts of Nehemiah after their return from Babylon to Jerusalem. However, something was still lacking in the lives of His children – they needed a spiritual foundation. Before and during the building of the wall, the Word of God had not been the center of the lives of the people. Because of their captivity, I believe it is very likely many of them had not even read the Word for themselves. They had been back in the Promised Land for 13 years but there was no mention of their dependence upon God's Holy Word.

Nehemiah did not move back to Susa when he finished the wall and secured the city. This shows that his concern was not primarily physical building projects. He recognized the bigger picture of reestablishing the Jews in the land to which God had told them to return following the exile. *Isaiah 48:20 (ESV)*²⁰ *Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!"* The time had come for Nehemiah to decrease and a priest and scribe named Ezra to take the lead in the true rebuilding project.

Ezra came to Jerusalem about 14 years before Nehemiah. King Artaxerxes had sent him there. According to the Jeremiah Study Bible, the king sent Ezra for the purpose of making sure that the Jews were interceding to their God on behalf of the empire. This was required of all religions under Persian rule. We read of Ezra in *Ezra 7:10 (ESV)*¹⁰ *For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.*

It would be Ezra who led the spiritual revival of the nation. Ezra was probably much older than Nehemiah. Nehemiah, as governor, was the political leader. Ezra, as priest and scribe, was the religious leader. A scribe in these days was a combination lawyer, notary public, scholar, and consultant. Scribes were among the most educated people, so they were teachers. Perhaps Ezra's greatest work for the LORD began in his senior years as he led God's people to be centered on the proclamation of God's Word.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-2 (ESV)¹ *And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.*² *So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.*

The seventh month (Tishri) was when the Jews celebrated the Feast of Trumpets on the first, the Day of Atonement on the tenth, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) from the 15th to the 21st. ***Deuteronomy***

31:10-11 (ESV) ¹⁰ *And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths,* ¹¹ *when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.*

They had been in captivity for 70 years and most probably were unfamiliar with the Word of God. Ezra, on the other hand, had been educated to be an expert in God’s written word, copying, preserving, and teaching it. Ezra’s life was devoted to the Holy Scriptures in order that they might be in good condition to interpret and for edification – just another reminder of how God preserves His Holy Word for every generation.

The people gathered as one man at the Water Gate. The gathering at the Water Gate is a reminder of the cleansing and refreshing power of the Word of God. Jesus said in **John 15:3 (ESV)** ³ *Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.*

Let’s look in on how God’s people revered God’s Word together.

Read Nehemiah 8:3-6 (ESV) ³ *And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.* ⁴ *And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood ... [six men] on his right hand, and ... [seven men] on his left hand.* ⁵ *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.* ⁶ *And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

It was early morning and it was about to be a glorious day in the Lord! The children weren’t left out – if they could understand, they were present with the entire congregation.

The people’s response to hearing the Word at the Water Gate reminds me of the words of Jesus in the New Testament in **Matthew 5:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.* Nehemiah tells us: *And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.* Unless we are attentive we will never hear a Word from the Lord. Scripture says they stood when Ezra began to read. There is no mention of them ever sitting down! Their standing exhibits their reverence for the Word of God.

Since the scripture says that Ezra read from the Book of the Law, most likely he read from the first five books of what is our Bible today. They called it the Torah – the very foundation of the Jewish faith and civil law. We are not told from which portions Ezra read. It does say that Ezra read from early morning – some think this possibly was from around our 9 a.m. until midday, With avid listeners, there is little doubt that Ezra could have covered a lot of ‘territory’ in God’s Word during that time period.

Ezra stood on a platform. This naturally aided in people seeing and hearing but it is also an outward picture of how we need to elevate God's Word in our lives.

Spiritual renewal and worship are connected to the reading of God's Word. The people said: *Amen, Amen*. Amen means so be it – a solemn word by which someone confirms a statement, an oath, or a covenant. Did you know that Jesus is our Amen? **Revelation 3:14 (ESV)**¹⁴ *“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. So be it! Jesus being The Amen means that Jesus Himself is the reliable and true witness of God!*

The lifting of hands expressed their openness to what God was going to do. **Lamentations 3:41 (ESV)**⁴¹ *Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven. 1 Timothy 2:8 (ESV)*⁸ *I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling. God’s people respond in repentance and accountability.*

Read Nehemiah 8:7-12 (ESV)⁷ *Also ... the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.*⁸ *They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*⁹ *And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.*¹⁰ *Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”*¹¹ *So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.”*¹² *And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

Levites were assistants to the priests. Why did the people need help in understanding the Word? The need for help may not be exactly what you might think. The scroll of the Law was written in the Hebrew language. The common language of the Persian Empire was Aramaic; therefore, the new inhabitants of Jerusalem were most likely not fluent in Hebrew. Hebrew, as a spoken language, had largely been displaced by Aramaic.

Jesus most likely spoke Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. Some Jewish Palestinian Aramaic words and phrases remain in most New Testament, translations such as: *Abba* meaning father (**Mark 14:36**), *talitha, qumi* meaning maiden, arise (Mark 5:41), *lama sabachthani* meaning why hast thou forsaken me (Mark 15:34). The written translation of the Old Testament into Aramaic with comments added. is called the Targum. The word Targum is related to a Hebrew term meaning translation. Translations were sometimes literal and exact, but often were paraphrased. In **Philippians 3:5**, Paul referred to himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews. This meant that he was a Jew who could read the Hebrew Bible in the original Hebrew language, not just Aramaic.

On this special day of Holy Scripture reading, Ezra and the Levites would have translated the words of the Law from Hebrew to Aramaic when needed. Then they would explain how those words applied to everyday life. Nelson's Bible Dictionary says that, "By the time of Christ, Aramaic was the common language in Israel. During a synagogue service, one verse of the Hebrew text was read, followed by a translation and explanation in Aramaic. By the second or third century A.D., the common practice was to read only the Aramaic translation."

Remember that Ezra and the Levites were commentators who could be trusted. Since we have had prime access to God's Word in our lifetime, we are able to study the Word for ourselves. Yes, commentaries are of great assistance but this should not replace our own actual reading of the Word. You might be amazed how much you will actually learn by just reading the Bible and nothing more – no commentaries, no devotional books – just God's Word!

The Israelites mourning and weeping upon hearing the Word reminds me of when King Josiah was 18 years old. A Book of the Law was found by Hilkiah, the high priest, when repairs were being made to the Temple. He gave it to Shaphan, the scribe, who read it to King Josiah. Upon hearing the message of the book, Josiah tore his clothes, a sign of repentance, and humbled himself before God.

As Ezra read and explained the Word, the assembly's first response was one of conviction and grief. They mourned over their sins. **Romans 3:20 (ESV)** ²⁰ *For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.* The Word of God brings conviction and leads to repentance, but it also brings us joy; for the same Word that wounds also heals. **Psalms 119:111 (ESV)** ¹¹¹ *Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart.*

Nehemiah, the Levites and Ezra told them to stop mourning and start celebrating. The forgiven child of God has no reason for mourning. It was time to celebrate and to give gifts to those in need. **Acts 20:35 (ESV)** ³⁵ *... remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* Long before New Testament times, Ezra understood blessing comes from giving. In a large group not everyone would have had the means of celebrating or possibly they came unprepared – *people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing.* Possibly celebrating with food during church fellowships is more biblical than we might have thought!

Even in the 20th century, not everyone has had God's Word in their own language. Such was the case with the Kimyal people of New Guinea. In 1968, work on the translation of the Kimyal Bible was abruptly halted when two missionaries to the Kimyals, Phil Masters and Stan Dale, were martyred by a neighbouring tribe. The work lay dormant until 1995 when a translation team took it up again. When the New Testament in their own language was put into their hands in 2010, the Kimyals were jubilant. Should we any less thrilled with God's Word? Rejoice! The Bible is God's Love Letter to You!