



Ezra and Nehemiah Judaism

Ezra and the Chronicles

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

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

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

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

Ezra and Nehemiah

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

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

The Stages of the Rebuilding of a People

The year 538 B.C. decree of Cyrus was a sign of his benevolence with the different cultures and religions of the peoples that he had gathered in his immense empire

although his intentions were also political. Be that as it may, he was not mistaken in trusting the Jews. The Jews who had already emigrated to many regions of the Middle East had acquired the reputation of being more trustworthy. Therefore, the rebuilding of the people of God would be the result of God's teaching in previous centuries as well as the product of the circumstances that God had foreseen in the history of the world.

Zerubbabel

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

Nehemiah

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

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

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

Ezra

Ezra arrived twenty years after Nehemiah. The Great King wanted all people to have a code of written laws. This is why he relied on a teacher of the law for the Jews. The law of the Jewish people was contained, in its entirety, in the Sacred Books. Although we do not know clearly if Ezra personally participated in the writing of the Sacred Books, we do owe their compilation to him (Ne 8:1). It was Ezra who really established "Judaism" by making the reading and the practical

application of that law into the supreme rule of the community. The document that we read in Ne 10 (the name of Nehemiah in verse 2 is an anachronistic insertion) confirms what Ezra had undertaken.

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

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

Cyrus helps the Jews return to Jerusalem

1 ^{36:22-23; Jer 25:11; 29:10; Is 44:28} ¹In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, Yahweh willed to fulfill the word he had said through the prophet Jeremiah. So he moved the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, to issue the following command and send it out in writing to be read aloud everywhere in his kingdom: ²“Thus speaks Cyrus, king of Persia: Yahweh, the God of heavens, who has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, has ordered me to build him a temple in Jerusalem, in the land of Judah. ³To everyone belonging to his people, may his God be with him! Let them go up to Jerusalem with the help of their God and, there, build the house of Yahweh, the God of Israel; the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴In every place where the rest of the people of Yahweh live, let the people of those places help them for their journey with silver, gold and all kinds of goods and livestock. Let them also give them voluntary offerings for the house of Yahweh which is in Jerusalem.”

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

⁷King Cyrus also brought out the vessels of the house of Yahweh which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ⁸Cyrus, the king,

gave them into the hands of Mithredath, the treasurer, who counted them and turned them over to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

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

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

The list of the returning exiles

2 ¹These were the people of the province ^{Ne 7:6-72} who returned from captivity and exile. After being deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, they returned to Jerusalem and to Judah, each to his own town. ²They arrived with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah.

The list of the clans of the people of Israel: ³the clan of Parosh, two thousand one hundred and seventy-two; ⁴the clan of Sehphatiah, three hundred and seventy-two; ⁵the clan of Arah, seven hundred and seventy-five; ⁶the clan of Pahath-moab, that is to say the sons of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve; ⁷the clan of Elam, one thousand two hundred and fifty-four; ⁸the clan of Zattu, nine hundred and forty-five; ⁹the clan of Zaccai, seven hundred and sixty; ¹⁰the clan of Bani, six hundred and forty-two; ¹¹the clan of Bebai, six hundred and twenty-three; ¹²the clan of Azgad, one thousand two hundred and twenty-two; ¹³the clan of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-six; ¹⁴the clan of Bigvai, two thousand and fifty-six; ¹⁵the clan of Adin, four hundred and fifty-four; ¹⁶the clan of Ater, that is to say of Hezekiah, ninety-eight; ¹⁷the clan of Bezai, three hundred and twenty-three; ¹⁸the clan of Jorah, one hundred and twelve; ¹⁹the clan of Hashum, two hundred and twenty-three; ²⁰the clan of Gibbar, ninety-five; ²¹people of Bethlehem, one hundred and twenty-three; ²²people of Netophah, fifty-six; ²³people of

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

We note that only those who accept “being liberated” will be sent home. There can be no

liberation or external help for the indifferent.

Those who return are *those whose spirit has been aroused by God* (cf. v. 5).

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁵The clans of Solomon's slaves: Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda, ⁵⁶Jaalah, Darkon, Giddel, ⁵⁷Shephatiah, Hattil, Pochereth-hazzebaim, Ami. ⁵⁸The total of the helpers and the sons of Solomon's slaves: three hundred and ninety-two.

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

Lev
22:10;
28:30

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

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

25:2;
Num 7:1

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

Rebuilding the altar

3 ¹By the seventh month, the Israelites were already settled in their cities. Then all the people gathered in Jerusalem.

Ne
7:72-
8:1

²Joshua, son of Jozadak, with his fellow-priests, and Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, with his brothers, began rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel, to offer the sacrifices

5:16

• **3.1** For the Jews, the restoration of the temple became an opportunity to rediscover how different they were from all the other nations, in that, they served the only God. It also allowed them to affirm their identity as Jews among the people of the country, since working together strengthens unity.

We will also note that, when they first arrived from exile, they generously offered to provide all that was needed to build the temple (2:68). Yet, twenty years go by and the intervention of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah was needed to implement the projects agreed upon in the enthusiasm of their return.

upon it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

9:1; 10:2
29:38; Num 28:6; Dt 16:13
3 They built the altar in the same place, in spite of the fear they had of the people of the land, and they offered burnt offerings upon it, and the morning and evening sacrifice. 4 They celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles as it is written, and offered burnt offerings daily according to the established ritual. 5 Then they continued offering the perpetual sacrifice and the sacrifices on the Sabbaths, the New Moon and all the solemnities of Yahweh, besides what everyone would offer voluntarily to Yahweh.

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

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

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

according to the ordinance of David, king of Israel.

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

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

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

Hg 2:3

The rebuilding is interrupted

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

2K 17:24

3 Zerubbabel, Joshua and the heads of the Israelite families answered them, "We cannot let you join us, for we alone must rebuild it, as Cyrus, king of Persia, has commanded."

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

Hg 1:2

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

The same thing happens now as well. Though we might wish to welcome everyone, we cannot surrender holy things nor leadership of the communities to unconverted people. Neither can

the Church accept political support which would compromise its freedom.

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

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

An unrelated document

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

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

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

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

¹²It should be made known to the king that the Jews who came up from your side to ours and have gone to Jerusalem are now building this rebellious and wicked city. They are now rebuilding the walls and have laid the foundation. ¹³Be it known, then, to the king, that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, they will no longer pay taxes, tributes or toll duties and, in the end, this city shall bring harm to the kings.

¹⁴Now, as we eat the salt of the palace and we do not wish to see the king dishonored, we are sending this information to the king. ¹⁵If you look into the records of your fathers, you will find that this city is a rebellious city. It has disturbed the kings and the provinces, and has fostered sedition from of old. It is precisely because of this that it was destroyed. ¹⁶We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls restored, you will soon lose your territories on that side of the River.”

¹⁷The king wrote this in reply:

“To Rehum, the governor; to Shimshai, the secretary; and to the rest of their colleagues who are in Samaria and in the other places at the other side of the River: Greetings: ¹⁸The letter you sent to me has been read word for word in my presence.

¹⁹I gave orders to inquire into these things, and it has been found that from ancient times that city has rebelled against the kings, and that sedition and rebellions have happened there.

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

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

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

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

Work resumes

5¹The prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Hg 1:14; Zec 4:9 son of Iddo, addressed the Jews who lived in Judea and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was with them.

²Upon hearing them, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, son of Jozadak, Hg 2:23 began to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. The prophets of God were with them, supporting them. ³Then Tattenai, the governor of the province at the other side of the River, and Shethar Bozenai came with their counselors and said to them, “Who has ordered you to build this house and its walls?” ⁴And they also asked, “Who are the men working on the construction of this building?”

⁵But the favor of God was with the leaders of the Jews, for these people did not oblige the Jews to stop the work while the matter was being referred to king Darius and a letter could be sent back concerning this.

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

⁷“To king Darius: Peace. ⁸We wish to inform the king that we went to the province of Judea, to the house of the great God. They are now building the temple with hewn stones and timber to reinforce the walls; the work is being done with great care and progresses quickly at their hands. ⁹We questioned the Elders, and

asked them: Who has ordered you to build this house and finish this Sanctuary? ¹⁰We also asked them their names and wrote down the names of their leaders for your information.

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

¹³However, in the first year of his reign Cyrus, king of Babylon, issued a decree that the house of God should be rebuilt. ¹⁴The gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple of Jerusalem, and placed in the temple of Babylon, were taken from there by king Cyrus and turned over to Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor. ¹⁵He said to him: Take these vessels, and bring them to the temple of Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in the same place. ¹⁶Then Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that time until now, it is gradually being rebuilt but is still not finished.

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

Darius helps build the temple

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

³“In the first year of his reign, king Cyrus has issued this decree concerning the house of God in Jerusalem: Let the foundation of that house be laid and the house be rebuilt in order that sacrifices be offered in it. The said house shall be thirty meters high and thirty meters wide, ⁴with three layers of hewn stones and one of wood. The expenses shall be paid for by the house of the king. ⁵Moreover, the ves-

sels of gold and silver which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple of Jerusalem are to be returned to the place where these used to be kept in the house of God.

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

⁸This is the command I give as to what you should do to help those Jewish leaders rebuild the house of God: pay the expenses in full and without delay, with the income from taxes of the province at the other side of the River which is allotted to the king. ⁹Then, upon the request of the priests of Jerusalem, give them daily and without fail what is needed for the sacrifices to the God of Heaven: young bulls, rams, lambs, wheat, salt, wine and oil. ¹⁰With these, they shall offer sacrifices acceptable to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons. ¹¹Moreover, I command the following: if anyone opposes these ordinances, a beam shall be pulled out of his house and he shall be hung on it, and his house reduced to a heap of ruin as punishment for his rebellion. ¹²And may the God who makes his Name dwell there crush every rebel, king or people, who goes against this and tries to destroy the house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, give this command. Let it be carried out at once.”

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

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

Dn 5:2

Dt 12:11

1K 6:2;
7:10

sin-offering for all Israel, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

29;
Lev 8

¹⁸Then they installed the priests according to their ranks, and the Levites according to their classes, for the service of the house of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

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

²¹The Israelites who had returned from exile ate the Passover lamb with all those who had separated themselves from the people of the land and joined the returned exiles to seek Yahweh, the God of Israel.

12:15;
Lev 23:6

²²They celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread joyfully for seven days. The reason for their joy was that Yahweh had turned the king of Assyria to look favorably on them so that they had been allowed to continue the work of rebuilding the house of the God of Israel.

Ezra comes to Jerusalem

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

⁶This Ezra, well-educated in the law given to Moses by Yahweh, the God of Israel, went up from Babylon, and as the hand of Yahweh, his God, was upon him, the king granted him all he asked. ⁷Many children of Israel, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants, also came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of king Artaxerxes.

⁸Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. ⁹He

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

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

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

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

Es 1:14

¹⁷With this money, take care to buy young bulls, rams, lambs, and everything needed for the grain offerings and the libations, which you shall offer upon the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem.

¹⁸Do whatever seems best to you and your brothers with the rest of the silver and gold, according to the will of your God.

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

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

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

Ezra was in the Persian province of Babylon as the person in charge of Jewish reli-

gious affairs. He was a priest and belonged to the groups which had meditated on the law of Moses under the influence of Ezekiel. They had gathered the different texts and may even have edited the biblical books forming “the law”—from Genesis to Deuteronomy—into their final version. These priests understood that Israel was beginning a new phase of its history. The Jews who had returned from the Exile must be

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

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

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

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

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

List of the Jews returning with Ezra

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

²Of the clan of Phinehas: Gershom; of the clan of Ithamar: Daniel; of the clan of David: Hattush ³son of Secaniah; of the clan of Parosh: Zechariah, with whom one hundred and fifty males were registered; ⁴of the clan of Pahath-moab: Eliehoenai, son of Zerariah, and with him two hundred

males; ⁵of the clan of Zattu: Shecaniah, son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males; ⁶of the clan of Adin: Ebed, son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males; ⁷of the clan of Elam: Jeshaiiah, son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males; ⁸of the clan of Shephatiah: Zebadiah, son of Michael, and with him eighty males; ⁹of the clan of Joab: Obadiah, son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males; ¹⁰of the clan of Bani: Shelomith, son of Josiphiah, and with him a hundred and sixty males; ¹¹of the clan of Bebai: Zechariah, son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males; ¹²of the clan of Azgad: Johanan son of Hakkatan, and with him a hundred and ten males; ¹³of the clan of Adonikam: the younger sons, whose names are: Eliphelet, Jeiel and Shemaiah, and with them sixty males; ¹⁴and of the clan of Bigvai: Uthai, son of Zabud, and with him seventy males.

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

¹⁸As the good hand of God was with us, they brought us Sherebiah, a very sensible man, of the sons of Mahli, son of Levi, son of Israel, and with him were his sons and his brothers, numbering eighteen; ¹⁹Hashabiah and with him Isaiah of the sons of Merari, their brothers and their sons, twenty; ²⁰and of the helpers whom David and the leaders had placed at the service of the Levites, two hundred twenty-two men, all written down by name. ^{2:43}

• ²¹There at the banks of the river Ahava, I proclaimed a fast so we might

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

The law will transform the Jewish people into a more faithful and responsible people, serving God in every detail. This also entails the risk of

confusing authentic faith with external practices. A people who equate serving God with temple worship and religious practice only can become indifferent to what is most important in life.

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

Ne 2:9 humble ourselves before our God, to implore him for a safe journey for ourselves, our children and our goods. ²²I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on the way, for we had said to the king, “The hand of our God is for good, upon all who seek him; and the power of his wrath upon all who abandon him.” ²³So we fasted and prayed to our God for this intention, and he listened to us.

Num 3:8 ²⁴I chose twelve of the leaders of the priests, besides Sherebiah and Hashabiah and ten of their brothers. ²⁵I weighed out before them the silver and gold, the consecrated vessels given by the king, his counselors and his leaders, and by all the Israelites who were there, for the house of our God. ²⁶And I entrusted into their hands six hundred and fifty talents of silver, silver vessels worth a hundred talents, ²⁷twenty bowls of gold worth a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as vessels of gold. ²⁸Then I said to them, “You are consecrated to Yahweh, these vessels are sacred objects, and the silver and gold are voluntary offerings made to Yahweh, the God of our ancestors. ²⁹Take care of them and keep them until you weigh them before the leaders of the priests, the Levites and the families of Israel in Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of Yahweh.”

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

³¹We left the banks of the river Ahava to go to Jerusalem on the twelfth day of the first month. The hand of God was with us and he kept us from all attacks and ambushes from enemies throughout our

journey. ³²We arrived in Jerusalem where we rested for three days. ³³On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver, the gold, and the vessels were weighed into the hands of the priest Meremoth, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar, son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad, son of Jeshua, and Noadiah, son of Binnui. ³⁴After counting and weighing everything again, the total weight was written down.

³⁵The Jews who had returned from exile offered sacrifices to the God of Israel: twelve young bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin-offering, twelve he-goats. All these were burnt offerings to Yahweh. ³⁶And the decrees of the king were delivered to his governors and officials of the province beyond the River, who helped the people and the house of God.

About intermarriages

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

³When I heard this, I tore my garments and my mantle, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down very much grieved. ⁴All who remembered the words of the God of Israel gathered around me. They were afraid because of this sin committed

1K 6:5;
Ezk 41:5

Mal 2:10

Ne 9:2

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

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

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

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

See what is said to the effect in Nehemiah 13.

by those who had returned from exile. ⁵I remained seated and dismayed until the evening sacrifice; and then, at the time for the evening offering, I rose from my fasting, and with my clothes and mantle torn, I knelt down, spreading out my hands to Yahweh, my God.

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

⁷From the days of our ancestors to this day, our guilt has been great. We, our kings and priests have been given into the hands of foreign kings because of our crimes; we have been delivered to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and put to shame as on this day. ⁸However, for a brief moment, the mercy of Yahweh, our God, has been shown to us. He made a remnant of our people survive, and allowed the survivor to settle once again in his Holy Place. He has given us joy and life, though we are in bondage. ⁹We are no more than slaves, but in the midst of our slavery, God has not abandoned us, he has extended a merciful hand over us to support us before the kings of Persia. He has revived our life, enabled us to rebuild the house of our God, and to have walls in Jerusalem and in the other cities of Judah.

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

¹³After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our sins, you, our God, have pardoned our wickedness, since you allowed all who are here to survive. ¹⁴How could we despise your commandments once more and intermarry with these wretched people? Will you not be angry with us and destroy us without leaving any remnant or survivors?

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

The foreign wives are cast out

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

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

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

⁹All the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled in Jerusalem within the three days. It was the twentieth day of the ninth month, and all the people were in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because it was raining.

¹⁰Then the priest Ezra stood up and said, "You have been rebels in marrying foreign women, and have increased the offense of Israel. ¹¹Now then, acknowledge your sin before Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, and carry out his will. Separate your-

Lev
18:25;
Dt 18:9

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

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

selves from the people of this land and from your foreign wives.”¹² The whole assembly answered with a loud voice, “Yes, we shall do as you say.”¹³ But the people are so numerous and we are now in the rainy season. We cannot endure the inclement weather; and besides, this matter cannot be settled in a day or two, for we are many who have committed this sin.¹⁴ Our leaders can represent the whole assembly: those in our cities who have married foreign women shall come at appointed times, accompanied by the local leaders and judges of every city, until we have turned aside from us the anger of our God because of this matter.”

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

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

The list of the guilty

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

²⁰In the clan of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah;

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

²²In the clan of Pashhur: Elieoenia, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasah.

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

²⁴Among the temple musicians: Eliashib and Zaccur.

Among the gatekeepers: Shallum, Tellelem and Uri.

²⁵And among the Israelites:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁴of the clan of Bani: Maadai, Amran, Uel,³⁵ Benaiah, Bediah, Cheluhi,³⁶ Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,³⁷ Mattaniah, Matenai and Jaasau;³⁸ of the clan Binnui: Shimei,³⁹ Shelemiah, Nathan and Adaiah.⁴⁰ of the clan of Zaccai: Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai⁴¹ Azarel, Shelemiah Shemariah,⁴² Shallum, Amariah, Joseph;

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

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



NEHEMIAH

How Nehemiah felt called

1 • ¹The words of Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah; in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes, I was in the Citadel of Susa when ²Hanani, one of my brothers, came, with some men from Judah. I asked them about the Jewish survivors who had returned from exile and about Jerusalem.

³They answered me, “The people now live there in the province, in the midst of great poverty and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates burned.”

⁴When I heard these words, I sat down, and wept and mourned for days. I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵And I said,

“O Yahweh, God of heaven, you are fearsome and great. You keep your Covenant and your kindness towards those who love you and fulfill your commandments. ⁶May your ears be attentive and your eyes open to listen to the prayer of your servant!

I am now in your presence day and night, for your servants, the children of Israel. I confess to you the sins we chil-

dren of Israel have committed against you: I myself and the family of my father have sinned. ⁷We have acted very badly. We did not fulfill your commandments, laws and instructions which you gave to your servant Moses.

⁸But remember, too, what you said to Moses: If you are not faithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. ⁹But if you fulfill my commandments and put them into practice, I shall again lead you back to the place where I have chosen to dwell. I shall gather you, though you be dispersed to the ends of the world.

¹⁰So then, Lord, do not forget that they are your servants. They are your people, whom you have saved with your great power and strong hand. ¹¹Listen to my prayer and to the prayer of those who only wish to honor your Name. I ask you to help me now. May I be well received by the king.”

I was then in charge of preparing the drinks of the king.

Nehemiah gives up everything to go to Jerusalem

2 • ¹In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of king Artaxerx-

• **1.1** Nehemiah served in the palace of king Artaxerxes as cup bearer, a high position at a time when kings were afraid of being poisoned.

He is a man whose future is assured: yet, he leaves everything to serve God.

Nehemiah's vocation comes from:

- His great trust in God's promises.
- An understanding of history which only a believer can have: Jews need not blame anyone else for their difficult situation. Their own sins are the cause of their misfortunes. They must not expect their national restoration to come

from the kindness of more powerful countries, but from their own conversion.

Nehemiah is an example of all those who are able to recognize the voice of the Lord through events and who do not wait for a special call to get to work. There is no doubt that every Christian, trusting in God, is called to discover and achieve what God expects for the salvation of the world, just as Nehemiah did.

• **2.1** Nehemiah asks and receives because he is not a nuisance, and his years of loyal service

es, I was doing my duty as cup bearer. I took up the wine and gave it to the king. I had never been sad before the king in the past. ²So, the king said to me, “Why do you look sad? You don’t look sick. Is there something that bothers you?”

I became hesitant. ³And I said, “May the king live forever! How could I afford not to be sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates are burned down?”

⁴The king said to me, “What do you want, then?” I asked help of God from heaven and ⁵said to the king, “If it seems good to the king and if he is pleased with my work, then may he send me to the land of Judah, to the city where my ancestors are buried, that I may rebuild it.”

5:14;
13:6

⁶The queen was sitting beside the king, and the king asked me, “How long will you be gone? When will you be back?” I told him the date and he allowed me to leave. ⁷And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, may you give me letters for the governors of the province at the other side of the River that I may travel to Judah; ⁸and also a letter to Asaph, the caretaker of the king’s forest, for I will need wood for the gates of the citadel near the temple, for the walls of the city and for the house where I shall live.”

Ezra
8:22

The good hand of God was supporting me, so that the king gave me what I asked. ⁹I went to the governors at the other side of the River, and delivered to them the letters of the king. The king had ordered that I be accompanied by officers of the army and horsemen. ¹⁰But Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah, the Ammonite

officer, came to know of my arrival and it displeased them that someone had come to help the Israelites.

¹¹I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. ¹²Then I arose in the night, accompanied by a few men, without telling anyone what my God had inspired me for and what I planned to do in Jerusalem.

Bringing along only the horse on which I rode, ¹³I went out by night by the Gate of the Garbage Dump, and inspected the ruined wall of Jerusalem and the burned gates.

¹⁴I went on, to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Reservoir, but my horse could not pass through anywhere. ¹⁵So I went up, in the night, by the ravine. I inspected the wall and turned back, entering by the Valley Gate.

So I returned to the house. ¹⁶The counselors did not know where I had been or what I was doing. Until that time I had not yet told any of the Jews or the counselors, or the priests or the nobles, or any of those in public office.

¹⁷Then I said to them, “You yourselves see the misery we are in because Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and put an end to this humiliating situation.” ¹⁸And I recounted to them how the good hand of God had helped me, and what the king had told me. Everyone said, “Let us begin the work.” And they encouraged one another to make this good work a reality.

¹⁹Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite officer and Geshem the Arab heard of this. They laughed

have earned him affection and esteem. His discretion and initiative are underscored and his fervent words encourage skeptics whom he persuades.

Was it necessary to build the walls of Jerusa-

lem? In fact, more than the restoration, Scripture stresses the way it was achieved: by calling for everyone’s cooperation, Nehemiah builds up the morale of the Jerusalem community.

at us and came to tell us, "What are you doing? You are rebelling against the king." ²⁰I answered them, "The God of heaven shall grant us success. We, his servants, are now going to build. But as for you, you have neither right nor inheritance nor anything to do with Jerusalem."

They begin to build the wall

3 ¹The high priest Eliashib and his brothers, the priests, were entrusted with the building of the Sheep Gate. They built it, set its doors and continued as far as the Tower of Hananel. ²The people of Jericho worked at their side, and farther on, Zaccur, son of Imri. ³The Fish Gate was assigned to the sons of Hassenaah. They set up and fixed its doors, bolts and bars.

⁴Next to them, Meremoth, son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz, and Meshullam, son of Berechiah, son of Meshezabel built the next section; and at their side, Zadok, son of Baana, repaired another section. ⁵At their side, the inhabitants of Tekoa worked, but their nobles wanted not to labor in the service of their Lord.

⁶The Old Gate was repaired by Joiada, son of Paseah, and Meshullam, son of Besodeiah. They set up and fixed the gate with its bolts and bars.

⁷Next to them worked Malatiah of Gibeon and Yadan of Meronot with the people of Gibeon and Mizpah, beside the house of the provincial governor. ⁸Next to them worked Uzziel, of the jewellers' guild. Next were Hananiah, of the perfumers' guild: they strengthened Jerusalem as far as the Wall of the Square. ⁹Next to them repairs were carried out by Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem. ¹⁰Next to them Jedaiah son of Harumaph worked opposite his own

house; next to him repairs were carried out by Hattush son of Hashabneiah. ¹¹Malchijah son of Harim and Hasshub son of Pahath-moab repaired the next section as far as the Tower of the Furnaces. ¹²Next to them worked Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, he and his daughters. ¹³Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate; they restored it, constructed its framework and set its doors, bolts and bars in place, and repaired a thousand cubits of wall up to the Dung Gate. ¹⁴Malchijah son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired the Dung Gate, he and his sons: he set its doors, bolts and bars in place. ¹⁵Shallum, son of Colhozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah, worked at the Fountain Gate; he built it, covered it, and set its doors, bolts and bars in place. He also rebuilt the wall of the conduit cistern, adjoining the king's garden, as far as the steps coming down from the Citadel of David. ¹⁶Next to him, Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur, worked up to a point opposite the tombs of David, the Artificial Pool and the House of Heroes. ¹⁷Next to him worked the Levites: Rehum son of Bani and next to him Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, for his own district. ¹⁸Next to them worked their brothers: Binnui son of Henadad, ruler of half the district of Keilah; ¹⁹next to him, Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, opposite the slope up to the Armory, towards the Angle.

²⁰Next to him Baruch son of Zabbai worked from the Angle as far as the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest. ²¹Next to him Meremoth son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz from the door of Eliashib's house to its farther end. ²²Next to him worked the priests who lived there. ²³Next to them worked

Jer
31:38

13:16

Benjamin and Hasshub, opposite their own houses. Next to them Azariah son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah, beside his own house. ²⁴Next to him Binui son of Henadad from the house of Azariah up to the Angle. ²⁵Next to him Palal son of Uzai worked opposite the corner of the tower jutting out over the upper palace of the king near the prison courtyard. Next to him Pedaiah son of Parosh worked ²⁶as far as the Water Gate, in an easterly direction and up to a point opposite the projecting tower. ²⁷Next to him the men of Tekoa worked opposite the great tower as far as the wall of Ophel.

²⁸From the Horse Gate onwards repairs were carried out by the priests, each opposite his own house. ²⁹Next to them worked Zadok son of Immer opposite his own house. Next to him Shemaiah son of Shecaniah, keeper of the East Gate. ³⁰Next to him Hananiah son of Shelemiah and Hanun sixth son of Zalaph. Next to him Meshullam son of Berechiah worked opposite where he lived. ³¹Next to him Malchijah, of the goldsmiths' guild, repaired as far as the quarters of the helpers and the merchants, opposite the Watch Gate as far as the high chamber of the corner. ³²And between the high chamber of the corner and the Sheep Gate repairs were carried out by the goldsmiths and the merchants.

The enemies try to discourage Nehemiah

- ³³When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry. He ridiculed the Jews ³⁴and said before his brothers and the lords

of Samaria, "What are those miserable Jews trying to do? Are they perhaps going to rebuild, finish and celebrate the inauguration in a single day? Do they think they can make stones out of heaps of ruins?"

³⁵Tobiah the Ammonite who was by him said, "Let them build, for if any fox goes up on their wall, it will surely collapse.

³⁶Listen, O our God, for we are despised! May their insult fall back upon their own heads; give them up to contempt in a land where they shall be exiled! ³⁷Do not cover their guilt nor let their sin be blotted out in your presence, for they have offended those who built."

³⁸The people worked with all their hearts and we finished half the wall's height.

4 ¹Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the residents of Azotus saw that the repair of the wall was advancing, and that we had begun covering the holes. ²They were greatly enraged, and all of them agreed to attack Jerusalem and humiliate me.

³So we prayed to our God, and set a guard day and night. ⁴The people of Judah said, "The strength of the bearers is already failing, and much debris still remains; we can never rebuild the wall." ⁵And our enemies said, "We will take them by surprise before they know it. We will kill them and stop their work." ⁶But some Jews who lived with them came to notify us about this. Ten times they said to us,

• **3.33** Later, Nehemiah's work arouses jealousy and suspicion. Nothing unusual in that. The firmness of this man alone was enough to inspire everyone. At that very moment, building the Jerusalem walls was the specific task which, if not done, would have stopped sacred history. Had the Jewish people given in and delayed,

they would have lost the means to their independence and the meaning of their mission. Similarly today, although the mission of the Church is mostly spiritual, our fidelity to the Lord depends upon our attitude in the face of violations and betrayals of the truth in very specific aspects of social life.

“From all the places where they live, they shall set out against us.”

⁷So I ordered that people be stationed behind the wall, there, in the lowest part. I stationed them by families, with their swords, spears, and bows. ⁸They were afraid, but I stood up and said to the nobles, the counselors and the rest of the people, “Remember the Lord, great and magnificent, and fight for your brothers, sons and daughters, wives and homes.”

⁹When our enemies learned that we had been notified, that God willed that their plans be thwarted, we all returned to the wall, each one to his work.

¹⁰But from that day on, only half of my men worked while the other half, with bows, spears, shields and armor, stood behind all the people of Judah ¹¹building the wall. The bearers picked up their loads with one hand because they held a weapon with the other hand. ¹²Each of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he worked.

Beside me was the man assigned to sound the trumpet. ¹³I told the nobles, the counselors and the rest of the people, “The extent of the work is great and we are scattered along the wall, far from one another, ¹⁴so when you hear the sound of the horn, come to our aid at once and our God shall fight for us.”

¹⁵So we scheduled the work from daybreak till the stars came out, half of us with weapons in hand. ¹⁶I also said to the people, “Everyone shall spend the night within Jerusalem, with his servants. So we may keep guard by night and work by day.”

¹⁷Yet my brothers, my men, the men of the guard who followed me, and I did not take off our clothes when we slept. Everyone kept his weapon with him.

The rich must share the sacrifices of the poor

5 • ¹The common people and their wives presented very serious complaints against their Jewish brothers.

²Some of them said, “We have big families and we need wheat to eat for strength to live.” ³Others cried out, “We have to mortgage our fields, vineyards and houses to get grain because of this famine.” ⁴Others said, “We have borrowed money on account of our fields and vineyards in order to pay the tax to the king. ⁵Though we are of the same race as our brothers and our children are not different from their children, we have to give our sons as slaves; even many of our daughters are now regarded as concubines. And we do not have any other solution, inasmuch as our fields and vineyards have passed on to others.”

Lev
25:39

⁶Those complaints and accusations filled me with indignation. ⁷After thinking about this situation, I reproached the nobles and the counselors. I told them: “You are oppressing your own relatives by charging them interest when they borrow money!” Then I called a public meeting to deal with the problem. ⁸At the meeting I said to them, “Why do you not have compassion on your brothers?”

Because of this, I held a great assembly and said to them, “We have rescued, according to our resources,

• **5.1** *We are of the same race as our brothers* (v. 5). The rulers keep saying that the reconstruction requires sacrifice. The Jewish people demand that the sacrifices be really shared by all. Those who have enough for today must cancel the debts of those who have nothing.

Are you now buying your own brothers? (v. 8). Nehemiah defends the most humble, and denounces the sin the rich have committed without realizing it: driven by the logic of debt and credit, they have come to submit their own people to slavery.

our Jewish brothers who were slaves. But are you now buying your own brothers?"

They remained silent. They could not answer. ⁹And I continued, "What you do is not good. Should you not live in obedience to our God lest we be put to shame by our pagan enemies? ¹⁰My brothers, my relatives and I have also lent money and wheat. Now then, let us forget everything they owe us, ¹¹returning to them at once their fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and canceling their debts in money, wheat, wine and oil." ¹²They answered me, "We will return these and demand nothing from them. We will do as you have said."

So I called the priests, and before them made all of them swear an oath that they would fulfill their promise. ¹³Then I shook out the folds of my mantle, saying, "So may God shake out of his house and his inheritance all who do not fulfill this word, and may he be so shaken that nothing is left of him." The whole assembly answered, "Amen" and praised Yahweh. And the people fulfilled their promise.

¹⁴King Artaxerxes had appointed me governor of the land of Judah in the twentieth year of his reign. Until the thirty-second year, or rather, for twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ever demanded to be given the governor's bread. ¹⁵The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants

lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

¹⁶As I dedicated myself to rebuilding the wall, I did not buy fields; and all my men were there, helping. ¹⁷At my table a hundred and fifty men, leaders and counselors were seated, besides those who came to us from neighboring nations. ¹⁸A male calf, six choice rams and fowls were slaughtered daily, and every ten days a great quantity of wine was brought. But though all these were charged to my account, I never asked for the governor's bread, because the people were already burdened enough with the task of reconstruction.

¹⁹Remember for my good, my God, all that I have done for this people!

Further opposition to rebuilding

6 ¹Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies learned that I had rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem. There was no hole left in it, although the doors had not been set up yet. ²Then Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message saying, "Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono."

They intended to do me harm; ³but I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am much occupied in a very important work, I cannot come down to meet you, for the work would stop if I left it." ⁴They invited me again four times, but I gave them the same answer every time.

⁵Then Sanballat invited me for the fifth time. His servant brought an

We rightfully seek liberation from exploitative and anti-social governments. Finally the exploitative spirit in each one of us may be the last vice to be uprooted.

• **6.1** Sanballat uses every means to discourage Nehemiah:

3:33 – mockery and insults.

4:2 – threat of attack.

6:2 – psychological warfare.

6:6 – accusations.

6:14 – bribing false prophets.

There will always be people who take advantage of God's word to support governments or to deceive the people.

Note the expression in verse 13—to *frighten me and put me to shame*. Quite often, fear is a slippery way leading to sin.

open letter which said the following: ⁶“Do you know the news that circulates among those who are not Jews? Gashmu says that you and the Jews are planning to rebel and that is why you are rebuilding the wall. ⁷And you also wish to become their king, and have already chosen prophets to proclaim you king of Jerusalem. The king shall know of this, so come, that the two of us may talk.”

⁸But I sent to him, saying, “There’s nothing true in what you say; you have invented this story.” ⁹For they all wanted to frighten us, saying: “Let us discourage them that they may not finish the work.”

But I, on the contrary, worked with greater strength. ¹⁰Then I went to She-maiah, son of Delaiah, son of Mehe-tabel, since he could not leave his house. He said to me, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the Sanctuary, and then close its doors, for they are coming to kill you, to strike you this very night.”

¹¹But I answered him, “Should a man like me flee? Why should a man like me seek Sanctuary to save my life? I will not go.” ¹²I understood then that Shemaiah had not been sent by God but that Tobiah and Sanballat had brought him ¹³to frighten me. In hiding in the Sanctuary, I would have committed an offense, and this would have damaged my reputation and put me to shame.

¹⁴O my God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat for what they have done; and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who tried to frighten me. ¹⁵The wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶When our enemies and the neighboring nations knew about it, they were afraid and lost courage. They had to recognize the work of God in this.

¹⁷During that time, several distinguished Jews often wrote to and received letters from Tobiah. ¹⁸Tobiah had many friends in Judah for he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah, son of Arah, and because his son Jehohanan was married to the daughter of Meshulam, son of Berechiah. ¹⁹They even came to speak well of Tobiah in my presence, and recounted to him all my words as well. And it was he—Tobiah—who sent letters to frighten me.

7 ¹When the wall was built and the doors were in place, gatekeepers were designated to keep watch. ²Then I set my brother Hanani as governor of Jerusalem, and Hananiah as head of the Citadel, for he was a faithful man and true servant of God as few can be found. ³Then I said to them, “Open the gates of Jerusalem only when the sun begins to get hot, but while it is still day, close and bar the doors while the guards are still at their posts.

And during the night, the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall come out to keep guard, some at their posts and others in front of their houses.”

The new population of Jerusalem

⁴The city was spacious and wide, but it had few inhabitants and many houses had not been rebuilt. ⁵God inspired in me the idea to assemble the leaders, the counselors and the people to take a census. I found the registry book of the census of those who had returned from exile in the beginning. I found the following written in it:

⁶These are the people of the province Ezra 2 who returned from exile whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had deported, but returned to Jerusalem and Judea, each to his city:

⁷These are the Israelites who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah; here are the numbers:

⁸The sons of Parosh, 2,172; ⁹those of Shephatiah, 372; ¹⁰those of Arah, 652;

¹¹those of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818; ¹²the sons of Elam 1,254; ¹³those of Zattu, 845; ¹⁴those of Zaccai, 760; ¹⁵those of Binnui, 648; ¹⁶those of Bebai, 628; ¹⁷those of Azgad, 2,322; ¹⁸those of Adonimkan, 667; ¹⁹those of Bigvai, 2,067; ²⁰those of Adin, 655; ²¹those of Ater, of Hezekiah, 98; ²²those of Hashum, 328; ²³those of Bezai, 324; ²⁴those of Hariph, 112; ²⁵those of Gibeon, 95.

²⁶The men of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188; ²⁷those of Anathoth, 128; ²⁸those of Beth-azmaveth, 42; ²⁹those of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743; ³⁰those of Ramah and Geba, 621; ³¹those of Michmas, 122; ³²those of Bethel and Ai, 123; ³³those of the other Nebo, 52.

³⁴The sons of the other Elam, 1,254; ³⁵those of Harim, 320; ³⁶those of Jericho, 345; ³⁷those of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 721; ³⁸those of Senaah, 3,930.

³⁹The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; ⁴⁰those of Immer, 1,052; ⁴¹those of Pashhur, 1,247; ⁴²those of Harim, 1,017.

⁴³The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, 74.

⁴⁴The singers: the sons of Asaph, 148.

⁴⁵The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, of Ater, of Talmon, of Akkub, of Hatita, of Shobai, 138.

⁴⁶The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, of Hasupha, of Tabbaoth, ⁴⁷of Keros, of Sia, of Padon, ⁴⁸of Lebana, of Hagaba, of Shalmai, ⁴⁹of Hanan, of Giddel, of Gahar, ⁵⁰of Reaiah, of Rezin, of Nekoda, ⁵¹of Gazzam, of Uzza, of Paseah, ⁵²of Besai, of Meunim, of Nephushessim, ⁵³of Bakbuk, of Hakupha, of Harhur, ⁵⁴of Bazlith, of Mehida, of Harsha, ⁵⁵of Barkos, of Sisera, of Temah, ⁵⁶of Nezhiah, of Hatipha;

⁵⁷the sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, of Sophereth, of Perida, ⁵⁸of Jaala, of Darkon, of Giddel, ⁵⁹of Shephatiah, of Hattil, of Pochereth-hazzenaim, of Amon. ⁶⁰All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392.

⁶¹And these were they who came up from Telmelah, Telharsha, Cherub, Adon, and Immer. But they could not prove that their families and ancestry were of Israelite origin: ⁶²the sons of Delaiah, of Tobiah, of Nekoda, 642. ⁶³And of the priests: the sons of Hobaiah, of Hakkoz, of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, and was named after them. ⁶⁴These people searched for their ancestral registration, but it could not be located. Therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood. ⁶⁵And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest would make a decision through the Urim and Thummim.

⁶⁶The whole assembly together was 42,360, ⁶⁷besides their male and female servants: 7,337; and they had 245 male and female singers.

⁶⁸They had 736 horses, 245 mules, ⁶⁹435 camels, 6,720 donkeys. ⁷⁰Some of the heads of families gave offerings for the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold drachmas, 50 basins, 530 priests' garments. ⁷¹The heads of families gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 gold drachmas, and 2,200 silver minas and 67 priests' garments.

⁷²The rest of the people gave 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,000 silver minas, and 67 priests' garments.

⁷³The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived in their cities.

Ezra reads the law

8 • ¹In the seventh month, all the people gathered as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which Yahweh

• **8.1** This first public reading of the law marks a very important date of sacred history. Until that time, the people of Israel lived their faith through praying and taking part in the temple ceremonies. Decisions and preaching came to them through priests and prophets. They did not feel the need to read the Scriptures.

Several books of our Scriptures were already

in existence but they were kept in the temple or the kings' palace: they were not within reach of the people nor were they the foundation of their faith. Now, however, new demands are made and they no longer have prophets as before. Ezra understands that in the future, the Jewish community will grow through the reading, meditation on and interpretation of the sacred book. Ezra himself tries to gather and complete the

had given to Israel. ²Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men, women and all the children who could understand what was being read. It was the first day of the seventh month. ³So he read it before the plaza in front of the Water Gate from dawn till noon, before the men, women and those children who could understand. All the people were eager to hear the book of the law.

⁴Ezra, the teacher of the law, stood on a wooden platform built for that occasion; and to his right were Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah and Maaseiah; and to his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hasbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was in a higher place; and when he opened it, all the people stood. ⁶Ezra praised Yahweh the great God; and all the people lifted up their hands and answered, "Amen! Amen!" And they bowed their heads to the ground.

⁷The Levites Joshua, Bani and the rest of their brothers explained the law to the people who were standing. ⁸They read from the book of the law of God, clarifying and interpreting the meaning, so that everyone might understand what they were hearing.

⁹Then Ezra, the teacher of the law, said to the people, "This day is dedicated to Yahweh, your God, so do not be sad or weep." He said this because all wept when they heard the reading of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go

and eat rich foods, drink sweet wine and share with him who has nothing prepared.

This day is dedicated to the Lord, so do not be sad. The joy of Yahweh is our strength."

¹¹The Levites also calmed the people down, saying, "Do not weep. This day is a festival day. Do not be sad." ¹²And the people went their way to eat, drink and share, and they had a great feast, because they had understood the words that had been proclaimed to them.

¹³On the second day, the heads of the families, the priests and the Levites came together to Ezra, the teacher of the law, in order to learn the law. ¹⁴There they read ^{Lev 23:33} of Yahweh had commanded the children of Israel that they should dwell in huts during the feast of the seventh month. ¹⁵Then they proclaimed in all the cities and in Jerusalem: "Go to the mountains and bring branches of olive, pine, myrtle, palm and of any leafy tree to build huts according to what is commanded."

¹⁶The people went out and brought branches and built huts for themselves on the roofs of their houses, or in their yards, or in the courtyards of the house of Yahweh, or in the square at the Water Gate or in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.

¹⁷The whole assembly of those who had returned from exile built huts and dwelt in them, a thing the Israelites had not done since the days of Joshua, son of Nun. And there was great rejoicing.

¹⁸They read the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day of the feast. The feast lasted for seven days as prescribed; and there was a solemn assembly on the eighth day.

sacred books, and a new age begins wherein the Scriptures will be everyone's book and the basis of their faith.

This religious and cultural transition is similar in the Church in recent years. People went to church; they prayed and they were taught, but Scripture was foreign to them. However, now the Christian faith can only become strong through the word of God read and heard in the community. Indeed we are behind time: this

renewal should have started four centuries ago when Protestantism began.

The assembly gathered by Ezra will serve as the model for the religious life of the Jewish community. The solemn worship in the Jerusalem temple is not suppressed but, from that time on, in every city the Jews will have a synagogue, that is, a meeting place where they will gather on the Sabbath to hear God's word and to sing psalms.

The Israelites confess their sins

9¹On the twenty-fourth day of that same month, the Israelites assembled to fast. They put on sackcloth and sprinkled dust upon their heads. ²The race of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood and confessed their sins and those of their ancestors.

³They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of Yahweh, their God, for three hours. For another three hours, they confessed their sins and bowed before Yahweh, their God.

⁴Joshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani stood on the platform of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to Yahweh, their God. ⁵Then the Levites: Joshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethaliah said, "Arise, bless Yahweh, our God, forever and ever. Blessed be your glorious Name which is beyond all blessing and praise."

Prayer of Ezra

⁶Then Ezra said, "You, Yahweh, you alone made the heavens, the heaven of heavens, and all their army, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all, and all the angels of heaven adore you.

⁷You, Yahweh, are the God who chose Abram; you brought him out of Ur of Chaldea, and gave him the name Abraham.

⁸You found him faithful to you and made with him the Covenant to give him and his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite. And you have fulfilled your word, for you are just.

⁹You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and listened to their cry by the Red Sea.

¹⁰You worked signs and wonders ⁷⁻¹²against Pharaoh, his ministers and all his people, for you knew that they had treated us harshly, and you have received fame to this day.

¹¹You divided the sea before our ¹⁴⁻¹⁵ancestors who passed through the midst of the sea without their feet getting wet. You cast their pursuers into the depths of the sea, as stones fall into the deep waters.

¹²You guided them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to light for them the way they should follow.

¹³You came down upon Mount Si- ¹⁹nai and spoke with them from heaven. You gave them just decisions and laws that express truth, excellent precepts and commandments.

¹⁴You taught them to consecrate the Sabbath to you. You gave them commandments, precepts and the law, through the hand of Moses, your servant.

¹⁵You gave them bread from heav- ¹⁶⁻¹⁷en and told them to satisfy their hunger. You made water gush forth from the rock to quench their thirst; and commanded them to go and take possession of the land which you had sworn to give them.

¹⁶But our fathers became proud and hardheaded; and they did not listen to your commands.

Gen
12:1;
17:5

• **9.1** We must relate this penance ceremony with Chapters 9 and 10 of Ezra. It deals with asking forgiveness for the sins which separate people from God's law and are harmful to the race of Israel. They stress especially the sin of marrying women of another race and a different religion: Scripture knows that marrying someone of another religion often brings a person to move away from their own religious community. This was Solomon's sin.

After publicly confessing the faults of the community, they remember God's mercy: it is useless to know the sins if feelings of inner repentance are not aroused in remembering how God always forgives generously. Following, we have a summary of sacred history showing God's mercy towards his people.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, several commitments are made: these are necessary to counter the weakness of the will, and to aid the

Num
14:1-4
17 They refused to listen and to remember all the marvels you did for them. They hardened their hearts rebelliously and wanted to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you, God of forgiveness, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness, did not abandon them.

32
18 They even made for themselves a molten calf and said: 'This is your god, Israel, who brought you out of Egypt;' and they terribly insulted you and blasphemed you.

19 But you, in your great kindness, did not abandon them in the desert; the pillar of cloud did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, by which you showed them the way they should take.

Is 63:11;
63:14
20 You gave them your good spirit to instruct them. You gave them manna so they could eat, and water to quench their thirst.

21 Forty years you cared for them in the desert; and they lacked nothing, neither did their clothes wear out or their feet swell.

Num 21:
21-35
22 You gave them kingdoms and lands. You allotted to them the frontier lands. They took possession of the land of Sihon, king of Heshbon, and the land of Og, king of Bashan.

23 And you multiplied their sons as the stars of heaven, bringing them to the land you promised their fathers.

24 Their children entered and took possession of the land. Before them, you crushed the land's inhabitants, the Canaanites, whom you gave into their hands with their kings and all the inhabitants, to do to them as they pleased.

Dt 6:10
25 They conquered fortified cities and a fertile land, took possession

of houses well-stocked, wells ready-hewn, vineyards and olive groves, and fruit trees in great abundance. They ate, were satisfied and grew fat; and they lived comfortably by your great kindness.

26 But then, they were disobedient and they rebelled against you. They threw your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets and they terribly blasphemed you.

27 You handed them over to their Jdg 2
enemies who oppressed them. In their oppression they cried to you, and you listened to them from heaven. By your immense kindness, you sent them saviors who freed them from their oppressors.

28 But when they were at peace, they did evil against you again, and you gave them over to the hands of the enemies who oppressed them. Once more they cried to you, and you listened to them from heaven; and by your great kindness you saved them many times.

29 Insistently, you asked them to return to your law. But they were very proud, so they did not listen to your commands and decisions. They did not observe what people should fulfill to have life. They turned their backs and did not listen to you, for they were hardheaded.

30 You were patient with them for many years. You admonished them by your spirit, through the mouth of the prophets. But they did not listen.

Then you gave them over into the hands of the people of these countries.
31 But because of your great kindness, you did not let them be destroyed, nor did you abandon them, for you are a God of kindness and mercy.

struggle against laxity. It is not merely a question of rules; the risk consists in paying more attention to external observance than to the spirit of

the law whose goal is to form a people always ready to serve God.

³²Now then, our God, great, powerful and fearsome God, you who keep your Covenant and your love, take into account this misery which has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people since the time of the kings of Assyria to the present day.

³³You have shown yourself just in all that has happened, for you have faithfully fulfilled your promises; but we have acted wickedly.

³⁴Our kings and leaders, our priests and our fathers did not keep your law. They did not follow your commandments or the norms you gave them.

³⁵While they were in their kingdoms, enjoying the prosperity that came from you, and the very fertile and wide land you had prepared for them, they did not serve you nor did they turn away from their wicked deeds.

³⁶See, we are now slaves, enslaved in the land you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruits and its goodness.

³⁷The abundant fruits of the land go to the kings you have set over us because of our sins. They do what they please, with us and our livestock, and because of this we live in great distress.”

Promises made by the community

10¹In accordance with all this, we make a firm commitment in writing. The document has been signed by our leaders, our Levites and our priests.

²Nehemiah son of Hacaliah, son of Zedekiah, ³Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, ⁴Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, ⁵Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, ⁶Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, ⁷Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, ⁸Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, ⁹Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah: these are the priests.

¹⁰Then the Levites: Jeshua son of Aza-

niah, Binnui of the clan of Henadad, Kadmiel, ¹¹and their kinsmen Shebaniah, Hodaviah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, ¹²Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, ¹³Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, ¹⁴Hodiah, Bani, Chenani.

¹⁵The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pathmoab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, ¹⁶Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, ¹⁷Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, ¹⁸Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, ¹⁹Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, ²⁰Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, ²¹Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, ²²Meshezabel, Zadok, ²³Pelataiah, Hanan, Ananiah, ²⁴Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, ²⁵Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, ²⁶Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, ²⁷Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, ²⁸Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

²⁹And the rest of the people, the priests and the Levites, the gatekeepers, singers and helpers, and all who have separated themselves from the inhabitants of the land, to follow the law of God, together with their wives and their children who are old enough to understand; all these, ³⁰with their leaders and their brothers, have sworn to walk according to the law of God promulgated through Moses, the servant of God, and to keep and fulfill all the precepts of Yahweh, our God, and his decisions and laws.

³¹We decided not to give our daughters in marriage to the men of the land nor take their daughters as wives for our sons. ³²If the people of the land bring goods or any foodstuff whatsoever to sell on the Sabbath day, we will not buy anything from them on the Sabbath day or on any other sacred feast day. We will leave our fields uncultivated in the seventh year, and cancel all debts owed to us.

³³We consider it our obligation to give one third of a shekel yearly for the service of the house of Yahweh, ³⁴for the show-bread, for perpetual food offering and the holocaust, for the sacrifices on the Sabbath, on the new moon, on feasts for other sacrifices, for the expiation of the sin of Israel and for everything necessary in the house of God.

³⁵Among the priests, Levites and people of the town, we have drawn lots for the offering of firewood, that each family shall bring by turn, to the house of Yahweh every year, to keep the fire burning at the altar of Yahweh, our God, as it is written in the law.

• **10.1** The following chapters combine various documents. Among them, note the text referring to Nehemiah's first mission: 12:27-43. It complements Chapters I through 7.

³⁶We will bring the first fruits of our fields and of our fruit trees to the house of Yahweh through all the years. ³⁷Our first-born sons and the firstborn of our animals, as it is written in the law, as well as the firstborn of our cattle and sheep, we will set aside for the house of Yahweh and for the priests who serve in the house of our God. ³⁸We will bring the best of our cereals, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to be kept in the chambers of the house of our God. We will also bring the tithes from our fields for the Levites. The Levites themselves will collect the tithes from all the agricultural towns. ³⁹A priest, a son of Aaron, will go with them when they collect the tithes. The Levites will bring the tenth part of the tithes into the storage rooms of the house of God where the treasures are kept, ⁴⁰since the Israelites and the Levites bring to these storage rooms what they owe in wheat, wine and oil. In these rooms are also found the supplies for the Sanctuary, for the priests who are on duty, and for the gatekeepers and the singers.

So we will no longer neglect the house of our God.

11 ¹The leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people drew lots so that for every ten men, one would live in Jerusalem, the Holy City, with the remaining nine settling in other cities. ²The people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

³These are the provincial leaders who resided in Jerusalem. And in the cities of Judah, everyone settled on his property, in the city of his family: the people of Israel and their priests and Levites, ministers and the sons of the servants of Solomon.

The Jewish population in Jerusalem

⁴In Jerusalem there lived some of the tribe of Judah and some of the tribe of Benjamin.

Of the tribe of Judah: Athaiah son of Uz-ziah, grandson of Zechariah, son of Amariah, son of Septhiah, son of Mehalalel, of the descendants of Perez; ⁵Maaseiah son of Baruch, grandson of Colhozeh, son of Hazaiiah, son of Adaiiah, son of Joarib, son of Zechariah, descendant of Shelah. ⁶The total number of the descendants of Perez living in Jerusalem was four hundred and sixty-eight adult men.

⁷These belonged to the tribe of Benjamin: Sallu son of Meshullam, grandson of Joed, son of Pedaiah, son of Kolaiah, son of Maaseiah, son of Ithiel, son of Jeshaiiah, ⁸and his brothers Gabbai, Sallai: nine hundred twenty-eight.

⁹Joel son of Zichri was their leader, and Judah son of Hassenuah was second in command of the city.

¹⁰Of the priests: Jedaiah son of Joiakin, son of Seraiah, son of Hilkiah, ¹¹grandson of Meshullam, son of Zadok, son of Meraioth, son of Ahitub, who was the High Priest, ¹²and his kinsmen who were responsible for the temple liturgy: eight hundred and twenty-two; Adaiiah son of Jeroham, son of Pelaliah, son of Amzi, son of Zechariah, son of Pashhur, son of Malchijah, ¹³and his kinsmen, heads of families: two hundred and forty-two; and Amashai son of Azarel, grandson of Ahzai, son of Meshillemoth, son of Immer, ¹⁴and his kinsmen, adult men: one hundred and twenty-eight.

Zabdiel son of Haggadolim was in charge of them.

¹⁵Of the Levites: Shemaiah son of Hashub, grandson of Azrikam, son of Hashabiah, son of Bunni, ¹⁶Shabbethai and Jozabad, the levitical leaders responsible for the outside work of the temple of God; ¹⁷Mattaniah son of Mica, grandson of Zabdi, son of Asaph, who directed the hymns and, at prayer, intoned the thanksgiving; Bakbukiah, the second in rank among his kinsmen; and Abda son of Galal, son of Jeduthun.

¹⁸The total number of Levites in the holy city: two hundred and eighty-four.

¹⁹The gatekeepers: Akkub, Talmon and their kinsmen, who kept watch at the gates: one hundred and seventy-two.

²¹The workmen lived at Ophel; Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of the workmen.

²²The head of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi son of Bani, grandson of Hashbiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Mica, he belonged to the clan of Asaph who were responsible for the chanted parts of the liturgy in the temple of God; ²³there were royal regulations stating how the clans should take turns in leading the temple music each day. ²⁴Pethahiah son of Meshezabel, belonging to the clan of Zerah and the tribe of Judah, was the king's commissioner for all such matters as concerned the people.

²⁰The rest of the Israelites, priests and Levites made their homes throughout the

Num
15:19;
Lev
27:21

Num
18:21;
18:24

8Ne
13 1
Dt
23:4-6

9:2

9:4-7

towns of Judah, each man in his own inheritance,²⁵ and in the villages situated in rural districts of their own fields.

Some of the tribe of Judah made their homes in Kiriath-arba and its outlying villages, in Dibon and its outlying villages, in Jekabzeel and its outlying villages,²⁶ in Jeshua, Moladah, Beth-pelet,²⁷ Hazarshual, in Beersheba and its villages,²⁸ in Ziklag, in Meconah and its villages,²⁹ in Enrimmon, Zorah, Jarmuth,³⁰ Zanoah, Adullam and their villages, Lachish and its fields, and Azekah and its villages. Thus, they settled from Beersheba as far as the Valley of Hinnom.

³¹Some of the tribe of Benjamin made their homes in Geba, Michmash, Aija, in Bethel and its villages,³² Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah,³³ Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim,³⁴ Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat,³⁵ Lod and Ono, and the Valley of the Craftsmen.

³⁶Some groups of Levites settled in Judah as well as in Benjamin.

12¹These are the priests and the Levites who came back with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and with the High Priest Jeshua:

Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra,² Amariah, Mal-luch, Hattush,³ Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth,⁴ Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijai,⁵ Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah,⁶ Shemaiah; also: Joiarib, Jedaiah,^{7a} Sallu, Amok, Hilkiah, Jedaiah.

⁸And the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, Mattaniah—the latter with his kinsmen, directed the hymns of thanksgiving⁹ while Bakbukiah, Unno and their kinsmen, in their respective groups, formed an alternate choir.

^{7b}These were the heads of the priests and of their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua:

¹⁰Jeshua was the father of Joiakim father of Eliashib, Eliashib father of Joiada, ¹¹Joiada father of Johanan, and Johanan father of Jaddua.

¹²In the days when Joiakim was High Priest, the heads of the priestly clans were: clan of ¹³Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; ¹⁴of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; ¹⁵of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; ¹⁶of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; ¹⁷of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin...; of Moadiah, Piltai; ¹⁸of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; ¹⁹also: of Joiaarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah,

Uzzi; ²⁰of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; ²¹of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel.

²²In the days of Eliashib, Joiada, Johanan and Jaddua, the heads of the families of priests were recorded in the Book of the Chronicles up to the reign of Darius the Persian.

²³The descendants of Levi were recorded in the Book of Chronicles as heads of families up to the days of Johanan, son of Eliashib. ²⁴And the leaders of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, Jeshua, son of Kadmiel and their colleagues who stood opposite them to offer praise and thanks, one contingent corresponding to the other, as specified by David the man of God.

²⁵Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon and Akkub were gatekeepers; and stood guard at the storehouses near the gates.

²⁶These lived in the days of Joiakim son of Jeshua, grandson of Jozadak and in the days of Nehemiah, the governor and of Ezra, priest and scholar of the law.

Dedication of the wall of Jerusalem

²⁷When the wall of Jerusalem was inaugurated, the Levites were summoned from all the places where they lived; and they came to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with joy, with songs of thanksgiving, with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. ²⁸The singers, from the neighboring regions and from the villages of Netophath, ²⁹Beth-gilgal and the districts of Geba and Azmaveth, gathered together in Jerusalem, because the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem. ³⁰The priests and the Levites purified themselves, and then purified the people, the gates and the wall.

³¹I then ordered the leaders of Judah to stand on top of the wall; and I organized two grand choirs. The first advanced on top of the wall in the southern part, facing the Gate of the Garbage Dump; ³²behind them went Hoshaiah and half the leaders of the Jews; ³³and also Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, ³⁴Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah and Jeremiah. ³⁵The priests and then the musicians with the trumpets came: Zechariah, son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph, ³⁶with his brothers, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, Hanani, carrying the musical instruments

of David, the man of God. Ezra, the teacher of the law, went in front of them.

³⁷They went straight on, up to the Fountain Gate, near the steps of the city of David, along the top of the wall of the house of David, as far as the Water Gate, on the east.

³⁸The second choir marched to the left: I followed it with half the leaders of the people along the top of the wall, passing through the Tower of the Furnaces and as far as the Wide Wall, ³⁹over the Gate of Ephraim, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, as far as the Sheep Gate; and we stopped at the Watch Gate.

⁴⁰Then the two choirs took their places in the house of God. Half of the counselors, ⁴¹and the priests Eliakim, ⁴²Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, who were carrying the trumpets, were at my side; together with Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam and Ezer. The singers chanted their songs under the direction of Jezrahiah.

⁴³Great sacrifices were offered that day; and the people rejoiced, for God had bestowed great joy on them. The women and the children also participated in the feast. And the shouts of joy of Jerusalem could be heard far away.

⁴⁴At that time, supervisors were appointed to guard the storage rooms where the contributions, the first fruits and the tithes were kept. They were to store in them the portions from the different cities of the territory, required by the law, for the priests and Levites. For the people of Judah rejoiced to see the priests and Levites doing their duty.

⁴⁵They performed the liturgy of their God and the ceremonies of purification with the singers and the gatekeepers, as commanded by David and his son Solomon. ⁴⁶For from the beginning, from the days of David and Asaph, there had been song leaders and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

⁴⁷The whole of Israel, in the time of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, gave the singers and the gatekeepers what was necessary for each day. The sacred objects were

entrusted to the Levites; and what was for the sons of Aaron was given to them.

13 ¹At that time, the book of the law of Moses was read in the presence of the people; and they found this written in it: "The Ammonite and Moabite will never enter the assembly of God, ²for they did not welcome the Israelites with bread and water. They gave money to Balaam to curse them, but our God turned their curse into a blessing." ³When they heard this law, they excluded from Israel all those of foreign descent.

Num 22-24

10

Second mission of Nehemiah

⁴Before this, the priest Eliashib had been caretaker of the chambers of the house of God. Since he was related to Tobiah, ⁵he had allotted to him a spacious chamber which used to be the storage room for the offerings, incense, utensils, tithes of the wheat, wine and oil; that is, for what belonged to the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

⁶I was not in Jerusalem when this happened, because in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had gone to see the king. Then after some time, the king allowed me to return. ⁷I returned to Jerusalem and I was informed of the evil Eliashib had done just to please Tobiah, allotting to him a chamber inside the court to the house of God. ⁸This made me very angry. So I threw all of Tobiah's furniture out of the chamber and ⁹ordered the chamber to be purified; and had the utensils of the house of God, the offerings and the incense put back in place.

Jn 2: 13-17

Nehemiah opposes several abuses

- ¹⁰I also learned that the portions were not given to the Levites. And because of this, the Levites and the singers in charge of the ceremonies had gone back to their fields. ¹¹I was angry with the counselors and said to them, "Why is the house of God abandoned?" Then I gathered together the Levites and the singers, and sent them back to work, according to their respective duties.

¹²With this, all the Jews turned over to the storehouses the tenth part of their

• **13.10** In this last chapter Nehemiah intervenes so that the law adopted by Ezra will be respected, and thus he takes new and more

drastic measures (observance of the Sabbath, racial and religious purification, etc.). This attitude had great advantages; thanks to organiza-

wheat, wine and oil. ¹³I entrusted the administration of the storehouses to the priest Shelemiah, to the teacher of the law Zadok, to the Levite Pedaiah, and to Hanan, son of Zaccur, as assistant. I appointed them, since they were regarded as responsible men. Their work consisted of distributing the food to their brothers.

¹⁴My God, remember the things I have done. Do not forget the good works I did for your house and its ceremonies.

¹⁵In those days, I found men of Judah working in the wine press on the Sabbath. Others took sheaves of wheat and loaded them on their asses together with wine, grapes, figs and every kind of produce they wanted to bring into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. I reprimanded them as they were selling their produce.

¹⁶Some Tyrians who had settled in Jerusalem brought in fish and every sort of merchandise to sell to the Jews on the Sabbath day. ¹⁷So I reprimanded the leaders of Judah, saying to them, "You have done great evil by not respecting the Sabbath day.

¹⁸When your ancestors did not observe the Sabbath, our God brought all those misfortunes on us and on this city. You increase the wrath of God against Israel by not respecting his Sabbaths."

¹⁹So I ordered that, as the shadows were falling on the gates of Jerusalem in the evening, before the Sabbath, the gates were to be closed and not to be opened until after the Sabbath was over. Moreover, I also stationed some of my men by the gates, so that no goods would be brought in on the Sabbath day.

²⁰Once or twice, some merchants who sold every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹But I warned

them, saying, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? Do this again, and I shall use force against you." From then on, they did not return any more on the Sabbath day. ²²I also ordered the Levites to purify themselves; and to come and guard the gates, in order to sanctify the Sabbath. For this, too, remember me, my God, and have pity on me according to your great mercy.

²³In those days, I also saw that some Jews had remarried Ashdodite, Ammonite and Moabite women, ²⁴and half of their children spoke Ashdodite and did not know our own language. ²⁵I reprimanded them and cursed them. I had some of them flogged, and tore out their hair, and made them swear in the name of Yahweh, saying to them: "You shall not marry your daughters to the sons of those people, nor take any of their daughters as wife, neither you nor your sons. ²⁶Did Solomon, king of Israel, not sin in this? Among the many nations, there had not been a king like him. He was loved by God, and God made him king of all Israel. But foreign women also made him sin. ²⁷Will it also be said of you that you committed the same grave crime by rebelling against our God in marrying foreign women?"

²⁸I also sent away from my side one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of the high priest Eliashib, who was the son-in-law of Sanballat, the Horonite. ²⁹Remember this people, my God, for they defiled the priesthood and your Covenant with the priests and Levites.

³⁰So I purified them from everything foreign. And I established regulations for the priests and the Levites, defining the tasks of everyone. ³¹I also fixed the time for the wood offering and for the first fruits.

Remember me, my God, for my good!

tion and solidarity among the Jews, the people of God were able to survive and not wander away from their faith.

However, we can also see the problems on which the Gospel will stumble: attachment to the past, fanaticism for sacred places, and aggressive action against non-conformists. It is a fact that in the following centuries, the religious con-

sciousness of the Jews developed more through contacts with the Greek culture than through their efforts at inner organization.

If we want to be faithful to the biblical message, Christian communities and the Church at large will have to seek growth by opening up to and facing the world.

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