

# ***Ezra and Nehemiah Trials, Tribulations, and Lists***

Lesson #9 for November 30, 2019

Scriptures: Ezra 1:9-11; 8:1-23; Daniel 1:1-2; 5; Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Nehemiah 11:1-2; 12:1-26.

1. It has often laughingly been suggested that when reading the Bible and one gets to the genealogies, one should stop and end one's reading! But, those genealogies are present for a reason. God has not included anything in Scripture that is not there for some reason.
2. For one thing, God is concerned about every detail of every person's life. What is your understanding of God's record system in heaven? Does He really know everything about us? Does that scare you?

**Jesus is weighing the character of every individual. If our motives are not pure, if our desire to please self is stronger than our desire for righteousness or to glorify God, we may rest assured that nothing is hidden from his eye, and that the desires of our hearts, as well as the acts of our lives, will be considered in the Judgment.**—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,\* January 15, 1885, par. 12.†

3. Read Ezra 1:9-11 and Daniel 1:1-2. Gold and silver utensils prepared by the specially-trained people of God had been taken from Solomon's Temple by Nebuchadnezzar's army in 605 B.C. Review the story of Belshazzar many years later and his final feast as Babylon was being conquered by Cyrus and the Medo-Persians as recorded in Daniel 5. That event occurred in October, 539 B.C. Nabonidus's son, Belshazzar, had been left in charge of Babylon because Nabonidus was more interested in things that were happening in Arabia including worshiping the "moon god"; neither of them thought there was any danger to Babylon.
4. The events of that night included the handwriting on the wall which preceded the appointment of Daniel to a high position in the new government of Medo-Persia and the subsequent decree by Cyrus to allow the first return of Jews to Jerusalem.
5. What do you think Zerubbabel's and, later, Ezra's appeal to convince people to join them was? Did they attempt to convince people that this was God's will for them? A new start?
6. When Zerubbabel and Joshua got ready to return to Jerusalem, Cyrus gave them 5,400 gold and silver bowls and other articles to take back for use in the temple. Notice that Ezra (Ezra 1:9-11) gives considerable detail while Daniel (Daniel 1:1-2) only gives the big picture about those events.

The history of nations speaks to us today. To every nation and to every individual God has assigned a place in His great plan. Today men and nations are being tested by the plummet in the hand of Him who makes no mistake. All are by their own choice deciding their destiny, and God is overruling all for the accomplishment of His purposes.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*\* 536.2; *Ed*\* 178.2; *FLB*\* 168.3; *Mar*\* 152.2.

7. Scan Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. In these lists we get an idea what kind of people chose to return to Jerusalem and the surrounding territory. There were priests and Levites, temple guards, temple workmen, and descendants of Solomon's servants, in addition to a number of Israelites and priests who could not prove their genealogy. Did some from Israel return?
8. It is interesting to note that both Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 tell us that the total number of exiles who returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua was 42,360. However, if you add up the individual

numbers, you will notice some apparent discrepancies. How do we explain those discrepancies as listed in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 120?

Exile Lists	Ezra 2	Nehemiah 7
Men of Israel	24,144	25,406
Priests	4,289	4,289
Levites, Singers, Gatekeepers	341	360
Temple Servants (Descendants of Solomon's Servants)	392	392
Men of Unproven Origin	652	642
<b>Totals</b>	<b>29,818</b>	<b>31,089</b>

9. Why do you think Ezra and even God were concerned about all those detailed lists? Was Ezra particularly concerned to make sure who were legitimate Jews and who were not?
10. It is interesting to note that there were a few priests who could not positively prove their genealogies. So, the Jewish governor at that time would not allow them to participate in all the priestly activities and benefits without consulting the Urim and Thummim.
11. What do we know about the Urim and Thummim?

**Exodus 28:30:** "Put the Urim and Thummim in the breast-piece, so that Aaron will carry them when he comes into my holy presence. At such times he must always wear this breast-piece, so that he can determine my will for the people of Israel."—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation*\* (2nd ed., Exodus 28:30). New York: American Bible Society.

**Deuteronomy 33:8:** About the tribe of Levi he said:

"You, LORD, reveal your will by the Urim and Thummim

Through your faithful servants, the Levites;

You put them to the test at Massah

And proved them true at the waters of Meribah."—*Good News Bible*.\*

12. Why do you suppose these thousands and thousands of people chose to return to Palestine? Did they have any idea what the condition of the city and the territory around Jerusalem was? Most of those who returned had never been to Palestine. Was there an emotional appeal?
13. They all must have recognized that it was a long way to Palestine and, no doubt, the journey could be dangerous.

By now, the Jews who remained in the land of exile had been there for almost a century and a half. Excavations of Nippur have brought to light numerous documents that show that many wealthy Jews lived in that region of Mesopotamia during the reign of Artaxerxes I. Hence, it may have been a difficult task for Ezra and his fellow leaders to convince as many to return as did accompany him. These returning colonists could expect only a hard pioneering life in the old homeland, with far fewer comforts than in Babylonia. In view of these considerations it is surprising to find that Ezra succeeded in persuading almost 2,000 families to cast in their lot with their brethren in the old homeland.—*The SDA Bible Commentary*,\* vol. 3, 376.

14. Ezra sent out a call to get people to join him and to return to Palestine in the second group of returnees. When they had all gathered at the Ahava Canal, he discovered that no Levites were among them. So, he chose eleven trustworthy men and sent them to Iddo who was probably the head of a community of Jews living not far away. We know nothing else about Iddo or Casiphia than what are mentioned in this verse. But, fortunately, there was a generous response. Twenty-two Levites and an additional 220 temple workmen joined the group after that appeal. (Ezra 8:17-20)
15. Ezra did not want to ask the emperor for protection for his journey. He had told the emperor that God would be able to care for them. So, before they departed, they had a period of fasting and prayer; and God did, in fact, protect them. See Ezra 8:16-23. However, thirteen years later when Nehemiah returned with a small group of associates carrying important letters to the enemy groups around the Israelites and also probably a significant amount of gold and silver, he did ask for some army officers to accompany him. See Nehemiah 2:9.
16. Is it wrong to ask for someone, perhaps even someone of the world, to assist us when there is a need as Nehemiah did when he returned? Are we showing a lack of faith in Christ if we ask for healing and then we go to the medical doctor who might be able to help?
17. Jesus Himself chose to place mud made with saliva on a person's eyes to heal him. (John 9:6-7) We know for sure that saliva or even mud created with saliva is not an approved medicine. But, it was believed in His day that saliva had healing properties. So, Jesus chose to use it. Most of the medicines that we use today come from some natural source and have been proven to work for the purposes for which they are prescribed. If Jesus were, once again, on this earth as a Human Being and wanted to heal someone, would He use such medicines? What healed Naaman? Was it faith? Or, the water of the Jordan?
18. Read Nehemiah 12:27-40. Nehemiah left his job as the emperor's wine taster and went to Jerusalem to finish the wall. What kind of wall was built around Jerusalem that was so large and substantial that large groups of people could march around the city on top of the wall? Notice that Nehemiah traveled along the wall with one group in one direction, and Ezra traveled with another group in the other direction. Ezra felt it was important to document even the number of animals sacrificed that day as a special celebration. See Ezra 8:35.
19. Surely, at the time of the completion of the wall, there were a lot of reasons for celebrating. Many of the people had found places in the surrounding towns and cities to reestablish themselves and build homes. (Nehemiah 7:73)
20. There is a puzzling passage in Nehemiah 11:1-2.
 

**Nehemiah 11:1-2:** <sup>1</sup> The leaders settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people drew lots to choose one family out of every ten to go and live in the holy city of Jerusalem, while the rest were to live in the other cities and towns. <sup>2</sup>The people praised anyone else who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.—*Good News Bible*.\*
21. Nehemiah recognized that they needed a significant number of people living in homes in Jerusalem in order to: (1) Provide a significant number of people who would protect the city and defend it against enemies, and (2) Build homes that would be able to accommodate people from the surrounding villages who would need to escape to the walled city of Jerusalem if an enemy army approached.
22. We need to remember that when Nebuchadnezzar finished conquering Jerusalem the third time, he had reduced it to a pile of rubble. Many of the Jews returning to Palestine recognized that it would be much easier to establish themselves in one of the smaller villages or towns surrounding Jerusalem than to live in Jerusalem itself.
23. Moving to a new location is always a challenge. And if you have been accustomed to living in a rural farming community, to move to a fortified city like Jerusalem would be an extra

challenge.

24. How many Adventists in our day are willing to pull up roots and move to an area with no Seventh-day Adventists to see if they can start a new church?

**Our workers are not reaching out as they should.** Our leading men are not awake to the work that must be accomplished. When I think of the cities in which so little has been done, in which there are so many thousands to be warned of the soon coming of the Saviour, I feel an intensity of desire to see men and women going forth to the work in the power of the Spirit, filled with Christ's love for perishing souls.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 7, 40.1.†

25. After the completion of the wall, the Scriptures were read; however, we do not know what portions of the books of Moses were read to the people on those eventful days. Do you suppose Deuteronomy 30:1-6 was part of what was read?

**Deuteronomy 30:1-6:** <sup>1</sup> “I have now given you a choice between a blessing and a curse. When all these things have happened to you, and you are living among the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you, you will remember the choice I gave you. <sup>2</sup>If you and your descendants will turn back to the LORD and with all your heart obey his commands that I am giving you today, <sup>3</sup>then the LORD your God will have mercy on you. He will bring you back from the nations where he has scattered you, and he will make you prosperous again. <sup>4</sup>Even if you are scattered to the farthest corners of the earth, the LORD your God will gather you together and bring you back, <sup>5</sup>so that you may again take possession of the land where your ancestors once lived. And he will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your ancestors ever were. <sup>6</sup>The LORD your God will give you and your descendants obedient hearts, so that you will love him with all your heart, and you will continue to live in that land.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

26. As we have mentioned, very few of the people were able to read the Hebrew Scriptures at that point in time. But, Ezra and Nehemiah—being well educated—knew of those prophecies. They chose to exercise their faith, knowing that God would be with them.
27. While we celebrate those people who chose to return to Palestine, we recognize that only about 1-2% of the Jewish people actually chose to do so. Why do you suppose so many decided to stay in Mesopotamia and Persia?
28. What has happened to those Jews who decided to remain in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Persia (Iran)? Consider this by Kim Hjelmgaard in *USA Today*\* from August 29, 2018:

In a nation that has called for Israel to be wiped off the face of the Earth, the Iranian government allows thousands of Jews to worship in peace and continue their association with the country founded more than 2,500 years ago....

At its peak in the decades before Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, 100,000 to 150,000 Jews lived here, according to the Tehran Jewish Committee, a group that lobbies for the interests of Iranian Jews. In the months following the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran's second and last monarch, many fled for Israel and the United States....

Today, 12,000 to 15,000 Jews remain in Iran, according to the committee. It's a small minority in a nation of 80 million people. But consider: Iran is home to the Middle East's largest Jewish population outside Israel....

<https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/world/inside-iran/2018/08/29/iran-jewish-population-islamic-state/886790002/> [Retrieved on September 2, 2019].<sup>‡</sup>

29. There are now far fewer Jews left in Iran (Persia) than there were in Ezra's day!
30. **The number of Jews now living in Iraq (Mesopotamia and Babylon) is almost zero!**

Present estimates of the Jewish population in Baghdad are eight (2007),<sup>[66]</sup> seven (2008)<sup>[67]</sup> five (2013).<sup>[68]</sup> [sic] or ten (2018).<sup>[69]</sup> Among the American forces stationed in Iraq, there were only three Jewish chaplains.<sup>[70]</sup>—  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Jews\\_in\\_Iraq](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Iraq) [Retrieved on September 2, 2019]. [Numbers in brackets are in the source.]<sup>‡</sup>

31. Read Nehemiah 12:1-26. The Messiah was coming and was to be from David's line.
32. Nehemiah 12:22 is a challenge for those trying to establish the history of the Jewish people that followed Ezra and Nehemiah. We are not told whether the Darius mentioned in this verse is Darius II (424/423–405/404 B.C.) or Darius III (336–331 B.C.). Darius II would fit in with what we know of the histories of Nehemiah and possibly also Ezra. Darius III did not reign until nearly 80 years later. If it was Darius III, that would create some real problems for those trying to create a chronology. Fortunately, it is quite certain that this passage is talking about Darius II. Some biblical critics are determined to choose Darius III and, thus, to raise questions about biblical chronology.
33. Some amazing things had been accomplished by Ezra and Nehemiah and their associates. There is no question about the fact that God had blessed them. Many people with different skills were needed to accomplish all that was done. Ezra focused particularly on the different types of individuals needed in the temple to care for the building and the surroundings and also to conduct the religious services.
34. Have you ever wondered why God continued to work with the Jewish people even after some of them had been deported to Assyria and then others to Babylon? Should God have chosen another group of people and started over? How should God's children feel when they experience some kind of setback?

There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God. No; Christ is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.... He desires to restore you to Himself, to see His own purity and holiness reflected in you. And if you will but yield yourself to Him, He that hath begun a good work in you will carry it forward to the day of Jesus Christ. Pray more fervently; believe more fully. As we come to distrust our own power, let us trust the power of our Redeemer, and we shall praise Him who is the health of our countenance.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*\* 64.1.

35. In earlier lessons, we noted that the prophecies of Daniel which link very specifically with events carried out by Ezra and Nehemiah allow us to pin down the exact dates for: (1) The coming Messiah's anointing/baptism, (2) His crucifixion on the cross, and (3) The stoning of Stephen and the final rejection of the Jewish people as a nation in A.D. 34, exactly 490 years after the decree to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Along with the stoning of Stephen, a terrible persecution started in and around Jerusalem, and faithful Christians were scattered far and wide, carrying the gospel with them. The 2300-day prophecy (Daniel 8:14) tells us that 1810 years later, a very important event would occur. Seventh-day Adventists believe that event

was the beginning of the pre-advent judgment in heaven. But, we cannot document it beyond question.

36. How is God able to predict events so accurately hundreds of years in advance? In Isaiah 40-55, God repeatedly said through Isaiah that one of the identifying marks of the true God is His ability to predict events far in the future. Do you think that is a convincing argument? See John 14:29.
37. Repeatedly in Scripture, we can read about times when individuals or whole groups of people suffered terrible persecution or setbacks. (See Isaiah 43:1.)
38. In Nehemiah 10:29, we read that the people who had returned from Babylon joined themselves together in making a covenant promise to obey God's laws and requirements. In our study for this week focusing on Ezra 2&8, as well as Nehemiah 7, 10, and 12, we see who was involved and what they accomplished.
39. Included in the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, there is itemization of animals that returned to Jerusalem with the first group of exiles. Why do you suppose Ezra counted even the animals? Was it because God cares about animals as well as human beings? Along with Noah's family, He preserved the animals in the ark. He was concerned about the animals living in Nineveh in Jonah's day. (See Jonah 4:11.)
40. Having studied this lesson, why do you think Ezra thought it was necessary for them to include all of these lists? Was this at the special instruction of God? Why were these lists preserved? What should they teach us about God?
41. It seems quite clear that those long lists in Ezra and Nehemiah tell us that God knows all about our families and even the things which we own.
42. Jesus Himself said that God takes care of the sparrows and even counts the hairs on our heads. (Luke 12:6-7) Isn't that sufficient reason for us to be concerned about every detail of our lives as well?
43. Are you happy that God knows all the details of your life? Or, does that bother you?
44. Read Acts 14:22. Why do we need to go through a time of trouble just ahead of us in order to prepare us for living in a kingdom where there will be no problems, no troubles, no sin, no death, and no worries of any kind?
45. The great controversy must come to a convincing conclusion before Jesus can come back again. Every person must be convinced that God was/is right and that Satan was/is wrong. That includes all the beings in the rest of the universe. All of Satan's accusations against God have to be shown to be false. Satan has claimed that given complete freedom, every being in the universe would choose to follow his side. God has said that a group of people living in the final days of this earth's history will remain true to Him no matter what the Devil might do to them. Are we ready to stand firmly on and for God's side?
46. God's people are called to be holy. (See Leviticus 19:2.) That instruction was repeatedly given in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. What does it mean to *be holy*? It means to be set apart for an important purpose. In this case, it means to be set apart to be God's faithful people and to carry out His mission.
47. In what ways do Christians stand out in the world today? Or, do they mostly just look like their neighbors around them? Are we living holy lives as Adventists in 2019?

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