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Ezra Reads the Scroll of Deuteronomy

Nehemiah 7:73b to 8:12

Ezra reads the scroll of Deuteronomy DIG: What was the occasion for assembling the people on “the first day of the seventh month” (see Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 29:1-6)? And why the public square rather than the Temple for this activity? How do the people first respond to the scroll of Deuteronomy (see verses 3, 5-6 and 9)? Why? What is the make-up of this historic group? Who was helping the people understand the Scriptures that Ezra was reading? Why can’t the people understand the Torah on their own?

REFLECT: How important was the reading of God’s Word when you were saved? How important is it now? Do you have a regular time of Bible study each day? Did you weep and mourn when you were saved? Did you give to the poor or reach out to others on the margins of society? Did you tell anyone? Why? Why not? How do you spread the Word today? After you were saved, when has God’s Word particularly touched you or helped you in a powerful way? Describe a time when you have experienced conviction and grief from a truth you have read in Scripture?

458 BC During the ministry of Ezra (to see link click [Bf](#) - The Second Return).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs
(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: **The Nehemiah Memoirs**).

What happens in the next two chapters of **Nehemiah** is a work of reformation and revival. **ADONAI** steps onto the pages of human history and in the space of a few days brings about a renewal of passionate worship and dedicated obedience that **Yerushalayim** had not seen in two hundred years. Not since the days of **Josiah** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah](#), to see link click [Ai](#) - **Josiah Ruled For 31 Years from 640 to 609 BC**) had **the City of David** known anything like it. Through the long, dark years of exile, **the Holy City** had languished almost to the point of extinction, and what worship there was happened in private gatherings with wistful longings for a return of better days.¹⁵²

Following the return of the exiles under **Zerubbabel** and the rebuilding of **the Temple**, attempts to restore biblical worship in **Tziyon** had languished. For the better part of seventy

years in Babylon (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)) there was little evidence of genuine worship. But then came **Ezra**. Every revival has its roots in a deepened study of the Scriptures, and **Ezra** was an expert in the Scriptures. **He had set his heart to seek the Torah of ADONAI, to observe and to teach its statutes and ordinances in Isra'el (Ezra 7:10).** The stage was set.

Then the seventh month came and Bnei-Isra'el (the children of Isra'el) were in their towns. Then all the people were brought as a single body into the plaza that was before the Water Gate, the name derived from its proximity to the spring of Gihon, the water of which was carried into the City through this gate on the festival of Sukkot (Nehemiah 7:73b-8:1a).



They said to Ezra the scribe, “Bring out the scroll of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 28:61, 29:20, 30:11 and 31:26) that ADONAI had commanded Isra'el (Nehemiah 8:1b).” When **Ezra** lifted the scroll and unrolled it to the passage **he** would read, **the people honored the Word of God by standing (Nehemiah 8:7).** **Ezra the cohen brought the Torah before the assembly, which included men and women and all who could understand what they heard** (see the commentary on [Deuteronomy Ft - The Reading of the Torah](#)). **This happened on the first day of Tishri, the seventh month of Tishri (Nehemiah 8:2), two months after arriving (Ezra 7:8).** Now, without warning, **the people came into the City and gathered in the plaza before the Water Gate.** The fact that such a service could occur apart from **the Temple** illustrates the lesson **the children of Abraham** had learned from the exile. **They** did not absolutely need **the Temple** in order to approach **ADONAI**.¹⁵³ It was a huge, joyous gathering.

About 45,000 exiles had come home to the Land in **the First Return** under **Zerubbabel**, and that was just the men, let alone the women and the children. But almost eighty years

had passed since then. Who knows how the population of **Judah** and **Jerusalem** had exploded since then? And to that number was added the recent returnees with **Ezra** in **the Second Return**. The Court of the Women in **the Temple** could only hold about 6,000. So, meeting there would have been impossible given the numbers involved. But whose idea was it that **they** should meet in that way? And why were **they** there? The answer is . . . **the Scriptures!** It was the New Year's Day of the civil calendar, celebrated as **Rosh Ha'Shana, or Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1-6; Psalm 81:3-4; Ezra 3:1-6; Isaiah 27:12-13; Matthew 24:3; First Thessalonians 4:13-18; First Corinthians 15:50-58)**, with a cessation of labor and a sacred assembly. **They** were *required* to assemble for worship by **Leviticus 23:24**. But even if everyone else had forgotten that, **Ezra** would not have.

Something extraordinary happened that day. **The teacher of Isra'el** was ready to **teach**, and **the people** were ready to listen to **the Torah**, which holds out success and **life to those who obey its commandments (Joshua 1:7; Deuteronomy 30:15-30)**.



So, he read from it out loud before the plaza in front of the Water Gate from first light until midday, in the presence of the men and women, and others who could understand, and this continued for a week (Nehemiah 8:7). In the Bible, **water** for washing is a picture of **the Word of God (John 15:3; Ephesians 5:26)**, while **water** for drinking is a picture of **the Spirit of God (John 7:37-39)**. When we apply **the water of the Word** to our lives, then **the Spirit** can work and bring the help we need. It is refreshing to the soul when you receive **the Word** and allow **the Spirit** to **teach** you.¹⁵⁴ **And all the**

people listened attentively to the scroll of Deuteronomy (Nehemiah 8:3). No sleepy eyes. No glancing at watches. No daydreaming. **The audience** consisted of men, women and children, all of whom could **understood what was read (Nehemiah 8:8).** Perhaps the only ones absent were nursing mothers and their babies. There is no hint of youth activities. Everyone was expected to be there. Everyone was expected to listen.¹⁵⁵



Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform constructed for this purpose. Standing near him at his right hand were thirteen priests: Mattitiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah and at his left hand were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people for he was above all the people. When he opened it, all the people stood up. The proceedings began with a blessing and a prayer. Ezra blessed ADONAI, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, amen!” as they lifted up their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped ADONAI with their faces to the ground (Nehemiah 8:4-6).

Then the reading of the Deuteronomy followed. **The Levites - Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbetai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah - instructed the people while the people were standing in their place. Ezra read from Deuteronomy for a time, then he paused so that the Levites could translate it (into Aramiac, the common language of the day) and give a running commentary as it was read. Thus, everyone understood what was read (Nehemiah 8:7-8).**

The Talmud asserts that, “When the Torah was forgotten from Isra’el, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it” (Succ. 20a). The reading of **Deuteronomy** had a shattering impact upon **Ezra’s** audience. Just as the reading of the scroll of **Deuteronomy** triggered a revival under Josiah (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Ai](#) - [Josiah Ruled For](#)

31 Years from 640 to 609 BC), reading of **Deuteronomy** triggered the need for **everyone** to repent. **They wept** as **they** confessed **their sins** (see **Bp - The Israelites Confess Their Sins**). But then, Ezra, the cohen-scribe (see **Ac - Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: This commentary is based on several premises**) said to all the people, "Today is kadosh to ADONAI your God. Do not mourn or weep!" For all the people had been weeping when they heard the words of Deuteronomy (Nehemiah 8:9), for through the Torah comes awareness of sin (Romans 3:20b). But today, the Torah can't save us; it can only convince us that we need to be saved and point us to Yeshua Messiah the Savior. Thus, the Torah became our guardian to lead us to Messiah, so that we might be [saved] based on trusting in Him (Galatians 3:24).

It was obvious from **their** reaction that the spiritual condition of the second generation of **the First Return** had deteriorated. It had been eighty years since **Zerubbabel** had brought **the Jews** back to **the Promised Land** (see **Af - Ezra-Nehemiah Chronology**). Even though **the Temple** had been built and the Levitical system had been implemented, over time, worship had become rote and dull. **Their** vitality had evaporated and **they** were merely going through the motions. **The Word of God** had no impact on **their** daily lives. But all that changed for **them** when **Ezra** rode into town.

Ezra also had an impact on the recent returnees of **the Second Return**. How much of the Scriptures had **they** been able to hear during **their** exile in Babylon? No doubt **the priests** and **Levites** engaged in a certain amount of instruction, but it does appear that this occasion proved definitive for **them** also. Even if the sections of **Deuteronomy** were known, the sustained reading of those scriptures under the powerful influence of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** turned into an emotional experience for all that were present. It must have felt for **them** as though **they** were hearing **the Word of God** for the very first time. **It** searched **them**, tried **them**, and found **them** wanting (**Dani'el 5:27**).

Corporate conviction of **sin** - a deep awareness and sensitivity to **sin** - is a mark of revival. As **Deuteronomy** was read and explained to **the people**, it was as if **ADONAI Himself** was speaking to **them** and reading **their** hearts. They saw **themselves** as **sinner**s, more concerned with self than with pleasing **God**. Guilt - not just the feeling of guilt, but a realization that **sin** had made them liable to the punishment of **Ha'Shem** - overtook them. And **they** began to **weep**. **They wept** collectively with sobs of contrition and a sense of worthlessness.¹⁵⁶

But amid the sound of weeping, **Ezra** intervened to insist that it was not a day for **weeping**, but a day for rejoicing. This was to be the first **Rosh ha'Shanah** (see the commentary on

Leviticus Ee - Rosh ha'Shanah) after the return from the Babylon captivity. So, **he said to them, "Go! Eat choice food, drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who have nothing ready. For today is kadosh (Hebrew: holy, to be set apart) to our LORD. Do not grieve, for the joy of ADONAI is your strength."** Here **Ezra** was telling **the people**, "Today is holy, today we begin the ten Days of Awe before **Yom Kippur**, but do not grieve, on the contrary: **eat the fat, drink the sweet.**" We are meant to rejoice on **Rosh ha'Shanah**. **Then the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Hush! For today is kadosh. Do not grieve."** So, **all the people departed to eat and drink, to send portions and to celebrate with great joy, because they came to understand the words that were explained to them (Nehemiah 8:10-12).**

The day was set apart because it was **the first day of the seventh month (7:73b)**, and the start of the Jewish religious calendar. **The first day of the month** was a day of solemn rest comparable to **Shabbat rest (Leviticus 23:24)**. But the day anticipated **the Festival of Sukkot** - an especially exciting day for children, who must have enjoyed the prospect of camping, sleeping under temporary shelters in memory of the protection afforded **their** ancestors during their wilderness wanderings. It does appear as though **the feast** had been forgotten after being celebrated when the people first returned to **the Land** eighty years earlier (see **Aq - Rebuilding the Bronze Altar and the Festival of Sukkot**). **Sukkot** was a family affair, with its ritual of special foods and delicacies. It was definitely not a time to be **weeping**, but to be giving thanks recalling **God's** goodness and faithfulness to **Isra'el**.

On **Yom Kippur** a declaration would be made, following the ritual of blood sacrifice, that all **the sins of God's people** were fully and permanently forgiven. During the festival, two goats were chosen. One was sacrificed, and the other (the scapegoat), on whose head **the sins of the people** were symbolically laid, was driven into the wilderness and left. This ritual pointed forward to **the Messiah**, who died for our **sins** and set us free. With this in mind, **Ezra** encouraged **the people** to be **joyful**, for **ADONAI** had come to **their** aid in grace and mercy. On the Jewish calendar, **Sukkot** follows Yom Kippur, giving **God's people** an entire week of happy celebration. The sequence is important: first conviction, then cleansing, and then celebration. The sinner has no reason for rejoicing and **the forgiven child of God** has no reason for mourning (**Matthew 9:9-17**).¹⁵⁷ Peace, joy, and strength - these three are the basis for a fruitful life for all believers. What constitutes a fruitful, successful life for a believer? Not the acquisition of things or the accumulation of a certain economic net worth. Believers may have none of these and still know a profound sense of all happiness and well-being. Why is that? Because in knowing the forgiveness of **ADONAI**, the certainty of **His** promises, and the sustaining presence of **the Ruach ha-Kodesh**, we find these outward things to have no real significance. What matters is peace of conscience and

fellowship with **Yeshua Messiah**, who calls us **friends (John 15:15)**. The relentless pursuit of pleasure apart from the gospel is a dead end, a cul-de-sac of despair. Living for the things of this world - “stuff” that decays (**Matthew 6:19**). - is ultimately senseless and shortsighted, as those who have found the soul-satisfying life of communion with **Yeshua Messiah** can testify.¹⁵⁸