

INTERNATIONAL BIBLE LESSONS.

FIRST QUARTER: THREE MONTHS' STUDIES IN JEWISH HISTORY.

B. C. 444.]

LESSON X. READING THE LAW.

[March 7.]

Neh. 8. 1-12.

[Commit to memory verses 8-10.]



1 And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Mo'ses, which the LORD had commanded to Is'ra-el.

2 And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Ma'ti-thi'ah, and She'ma, and An'a-i'ah, and U-r'i'ah, and Hil'-ch'i, and Ma'a'se'iah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pe-da'iah, and Mish'a-el, and Mal-chi'ah, and Hash-shum, and Hash-bad'a-na, Zech'a-ri'ah, and Me-shul'-lam.

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people (for he was above all the people); and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And

all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

7 Also Jesh'u-a, and Ba'ni, and Sher'e-bi'ah, Ja'min, Ak'kub, Shab-beth'a-l, Ho-di'jah, Ma'a-se'iah, Kel'i-ta, Az'a-ri'ah, Joz'a-bad, Han'an, Pe'l'a-i'ah, and the Le'-vites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

9 And Ne'he-mi'ah, which is the Tir'sha-tha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Le'vites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God: mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.

10 Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our LORD: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

11 So the Le'vites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved.

12 And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.

General Statement.

In the face of difficulties apparently insurmountable, Nehemiah accomplished his purpose of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In fifty-two days after the first stone was laid the wall was finished, and the gates swung upon their hinges. The ruler then called together a great assembly of the people to worship God and listen to the reading of his law. The people came, not only from within the city, but from all the villages in the province. They met in the open square at the southern entrance to the temple enclosure, a vast company of men, women, and children. A platform had been erected, upon which stood the chief men of the land, the priests, and the appointed interpreters. In the midst stood Ezra, the priestly scribe, who had come from the East several years before Nehemiah with the purpose of effecting a religious reformation. As he opened the parchment roll, the entire assembly first stood, and then prostrated themselves upon the ground,

in token of reverence for the sacred word. Then began the reading. The priest read a brief portion in the ancient Hebrew tongue, and then paused, while the Le'vites on either side gave the explanation, partly a translation into a more modern form, partly a paraphrase, and partly an application. For six hours the service was continued, for the people were eager to know the contents of their sacred books, and the message came as a revelation. Its first effect was to awaken the conscience, and loud cries arose as the listeners realized their unfaithful they and their fathers had been to the ancient covenant. But the Le'vites quieted their sorrow by telling them that this was a day of rejoicing and not of grief, when God's word was revealed to them. On that day began a new era in the history of Judah, an era of Bible-study and of renewed loyalty to the faith of the fathers.

Explanatory and Practical Notes.

Verse 1. All the people. This was a gathering of the people from all Judea, on the Jewish new year; both as an anniversary, and a celebration of the newly completed wall. **As one man.** There is an impressiveness and moral power in a multitude assembled for religious service. In every age revivals of religion have extended large convocations of worshippers. (1) *Hence we should seek to bring all the people to God's house.* **Into the street.** Rev. Ver., "the broad place." It was an open park on the declivity known as Ophel, just south of the temple precincts. **Before the water-gate.** A gate leading to the subterranean reservoirs under the temple. **They spake.** That is, by their rulers, who had called the assembly. **Ezra the scribe.** The greatest character in the later history of the Jewish people, called "the second founder of Israel." He was a priest, and a student in the law, who had come to Jerusalem by royal appointment thirteen years before Nehemiah, and wrought great reforms among the people. He is believed by the Jews to have, 1) Instituted "the great synagogue" at Jerusalem; 2) Edited, arranged, and settled the canon of the Old Testament; 3) Introduced the use of the Chaldee characters in place of the obsolete Hebrew; 4) Written, partly from ancient documents, the Books of Chronicles and Ezra; 5) Established synagogues for worship and the reading of the law. After this he returned to Chaldea, where his tomb is still shown at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. **The scribe.** The scribes began to fall, and the people turned toward the written law. They were of various ranks, the high-

est being interpreters and teachers of the Scriptures, the lowest mere copyists and writers. As a class, they were held in high respect, but in later years they grew proud and arrogant, well deserving the censures which they received from our Lord. **The book of the law.** Probably not only the Pentateuch, but with it others of the Old Testament Scriptures, which Ezra was then engaged in arranging. (2) *We should be like these ancient Jews, eager to read and understand the word of the Lord.*

2. Ezra the priest. He was descended from Hilkiah, who had been high-priest in the reign of Josiah. **Brought the law.** The sacred writings, being in manuscript only, were very scarce and valuable, and only on great occasions brought before the people. So it was in the Middle Ages. In 1300 A. D. a Bible cost the wages of a working man for thirteen years; now eight Bibles can be bought by one day's labor. (3) *Are we grateful enough for having a Bible in every house?* **Both of men and women.** The Hebrews were in advance of all other Oriental nations in the respect which they paid to their wives, though even they were below the standards of Christianity, which has elevated woman from a slave to a companion. **Hear with understanding.** Children of an age to listen intelligently. (4) *Let us bring the children with us to worship God.* **The first day of the seventh month.** This was "the feast of trumpets." Lev. 23, 24; Num. 29, 1-6. A New Year celebration, as this month, the seventh of the ecclesiastical year, was the first of the civil year. It corresponded nearly with our October. (5) *It is well to begin the New Year with the reading of God's word.*