



## EZRA, THE MAN OF THE BOOK EZRA 7 - 8

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Historical Background

58 years have gone by since the events of Ezra chapter 6. In that time the events of Esther took place. The only recorded event in Ezra (4:6) of this interval concerns opposition in Xerxes reign (485-465 B.C.).

The next Persian king after Xerxes was Artaxerxes I (Longimanus, III "long hand" 464-424 B.C.). He was the younger son of Xerxes who killed his older brother to obtain the throne.

*During his reign the empire continued to decline in strength. The Greeks attacked Cyprus, Egypt rebelled, and parts of Asia Minor attained independence.*

*In Judah, the Persian province of Yehud that was part of the larger satrapy of Eber Nari (lit. "beyond [i.e., west of] the [Euphrates] river"), the Jews did not continue to fortify Jerusalem. They were content simply to worship at the temple. Their earlier zeal to return to the Mosaic ordinances that included separation from non-Jews waned. Over this 58-year period some of them intermarried with unbelieving Gentiles (9:1-2). Evidently the Levites neglected the teaching of the law (7:25; cf. Neh. 8:1-12), and temple worship became formal rather than sincere (7:23).*

– Thomas Constable, *Bible Study Notes, Ezra*

The "after these things" of verse 1 probably refers to the completion and dedication of the Temple in 515 B.C. (see chapter 6).

#### B. Theological Background

In total contrast to Esther's silence about God or any religious element there is almost a refrain in Ezra 7 that the "*hand of God was upon him*" (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28).

### II. EZRA'S BACKGROUND 7:1-10

7:1-10 tell us quite a bit about the man Ezra.

#### A. His background

Ezra descended from Aaron and was thus a priest.

#### B. His preparation

He was a "scribe skilled in the Law of Moses (verse six)." During the period of the exile, priests were often removed from their sacrificial duties. Their main official duty became the teaching of the law. There were others called "wise men" who also is one responsibilities with the law. The word "scribe" may indicate that he had unofficial position in the Persian government.

Ezra was especially fitted for the task set before him ("*for such a time as this*") combining as he did the roles of priest, lawgiver and wise man (all roles which our

Lord himself fulfilled). Ezra had "*prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel*" (7:10).

He was "skilled," that is, he was so familiar with this material that he could translate and interpret rapidly.

### **C. His Dedication**

Ezra had not only "*set his heart to study the law of the Lord,*" but also "*to do it*" (compare James 1:25) and "*teach statutes and ordinances in Israel*" (7:10). To relive the law is what was taught in it. It is with this desire that Ezra left his situation in Babylon for a difficult and dangerous journey to the little community in Judea.

## **III. ARTAXERXES' DECREE 7:11-26**

This is one of the few places that another language beside Hebrew is used in the Old Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, the decree is quoted as it appeared in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire.

The decree may have been drawn up by Ezra himself or by a close associate.

### **A. Persian Elements**

The King is said to have seven counselors (7:14) and we are given a glimpse of the Persian power center (cf. Esther 1:14). Note the use of the term "God of heaven" (verse 12). Reference is made to the Persian practice of tax exemption for certain religious officials, thus Jewish temple employees received special tax exemptions (v. 24; cf. 2:43).

### **B. Jewish Elements**

The decree evidences a knowledge of Jewish interests and theology. The author uses sacrificial terminology (vs. 16-17). He refers to the Jews "*freely offering*" themselves (verse 13).

### **C. The Purpose of Ezra's Mission**

Ezra was to appoint judges to judge on the basis of God's laws and to ensure that all members of the community were aware of and instructed in them (v. 25). Ezra was to teach God's law and the Persian government would pay him to do so.

### **D. The Promises of Artaxerxes**

Artaxerxes' decree promised provisions for the temple worship (vs. 14-20), authorized Ezra to withdraw funds from the provincial treasury (vs. 21-23; cf. 4:12), and permitted him to establish judicial and educational systems in Judah (vs. 24-26).

The reason Artaxerxes permitted all this was evidently so there would be peace and good will among his Jewish subjects and so he might appease the wrath of Jehovah (v. 23). He probably also hoped that a Pro-Persian Judea would act as deterrents to Greek and Egyptian ambition.

In verse 19 the "utensils" for the temple may have been some that Cyrus had overlooked (6:5), or perhaps they were gifts from Artaxerxes.

#### IV. EZRA'S THANKSGIVING 7:27-28

Unlike Esther, Ezra recognized and acknowledged that God had moved Artaxerxes to do what he had done (cf. Proverbs 21:1).

#### V. THE JOURNEY ITSELF 8:1-36

The group made relatively good time covering the journey in about four months. They traveled in the hottest time of the year and though the route was well-traveled the unprotected group was vulnerable to outlaws. With a very human and humble touch Ezra comments in 8:22 that he was ashamed to request an escort of the King because he had boasted that God would protect them. Later Nehemiah accepted a military escort when he returned to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:9).

Later on the text shows Ezra as primarily a priest and scholar rather than as an administrator. The assurance that God had called him and opened the doors for him gave Ezra the courage and strength to do all that he did.

##### A. The Leading Men Who Returned 8:1-14

1. The descendants of the priestly and royal families in Israel appear first in this list (vs. 2-14).
2. The rest of the Jews

Ezra's companions were mainly the relatives of those Jews who had returned 80 years earlier under Sheshbazzar \*cf. 8: 3-14 with 2:3-15). The one exception was Joab's family (v. 9).

##### B. The Necessity of Recruiting Levites to Return 8:15-20

No Levites had volunteered to return to Judah. In view of his plans for the restoration, Ezra needed more Levites than those already in Judah. Due to his recruiting efforts in Casiphia (site unknown, probably a district of Babylon), 38 Levites and 220 temple servants joined the immigrants. Estimates of the total number in Ezra's party vary from 1,700 to 5,000, plus women and children.

##### C. Ezra's Spiritual Preparation 8:21-23

Because he knew the trip was going to be dangerous, he sought God's favor in prayer. (*Verse 21 was the text of John Robinson's last sermon at Leiden before the Pilgrims sailed for the New World in 1620*). - Ibid

##### D. Ezra's physical preparations 8:24-30

Ezra was especially careful to make sure that the expensive temple utensils arrived safely and to guarantee that everyone would perceive that his handling of the precious cargo was completely honest (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:20-21).

*The Babylonian "talent" (v. 26) weighed about 66 pounds. The "daric" (v. 27) was a thick gold Persian coin that weighed 130 grams or about 4 1/2 ounces.... The total weight of the precious cargo the exiles took with them seems to have been about 28 tons.... There are records that indicate that there were some very wealthy Jews living in Babylon at this time....* -Ibid

*Following Ezra's example, Christian leaders should delegate responsibility. Ezra carefully chose the people to whom he gave responsibility. It may seem exaggerated to have taken such precautions with the money, to weigh it out carefully, to record*

*every detail. However, to do things carefully, with decisions and transactions documented in writing, is a sign of wisdom rather than a lack of confidence. It protects everyone involved. Many present-day scandals could be avoided if Christian leaders would learn from Ezra." - Breneman, Mervin, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. The New American Commentary Series, quoted by Constable*

### **E. Safe Arrival 8:31-36**

Evidently the people began to assemble at the River on the first day of the first month. Ezra discovered in these first days that there were no Levites among the travelers and so for the next eight days enlisted Levites, prayed and divided the load among the priests and Levites. Then they departed from the river of Ahava (probably a canal tributary from the Euphrates) on the 12th day of the first month but the journey really began on the first day of the first month (7:9).

Arriving in Jerusalem they rested for three days and then deposited their treasury in the Temple (see Nehemiah 2:11).

## **CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION**

### **1. MAN HAS A NEED FOR CONTINUOUS REVIVAL**

The initial enthusiasm of those who first returned with Zerubbabel quickly faded to the point that Haggai and Zechariah had to prompt the people to return to the task of rebuilding the temple (rather than attending to their own homes). The zeal of the first generation must be rekindled for the next. In one's own life there is constant need for recommitment, renewal and revival.

*I have seen it happen time and time again. A person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, and in those early days, he or she overflows with joy and zeal for God. At first they cannot help but read their Bible and share their faith. Then perhaps a little opposition or rejection comes their way. Or perhaps they are disappointed by another Christian, or by their church. Perhaps God fails to bless them in the way and within the time frame they expected. Often such folks become more and more self-absorbed, less and less active in the things of God. They talk about the "good old days" and grumble about the present. They become disillusioned and bitter. They lack endurance. God has a word for us:*

*"So do not throw away your confidence, because it has great reward. 36 For you need endurance in order to do God's will and so receive what is promised. 37 For just a little longer and he who is coming will arrive and not delay (Hebrews 10:35-37).*

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us (Hebrews 12:1).*

*"Because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything. 5 But if anyone is deficient in wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without reprimand, and it will be given to him*

(James 1:3-5). – Robert Definbaugh, *From Creation to the Cross, “The Return To The Promised Land”*

## **2. GOD IS SOVEREIGN EVEN IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN**

The Book of Ezra (and Esther) portrays a God Who is sovereign and Who is faithful to His covenant promises, in spite of the failures and faithlessness of men. One cannot fail to see the truth of this proverb exemplified in the Book of Ezra:

The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord like channels of water; he turns it wherever he wants (Proverbs 21:1).

God moved in the heart of Cyrus, so that his decree fulfilled the prophecies of Jeremiah (25:8-12; 27:21-22; 29:10-14) and Isaiah (44:28 - 45:1). Cyrus was God’s servant (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1), and so was Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 25:9). In addition, God moved in the hearts of the Jews, prompting them to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5).

## **3. GOD IS FAITHFUL EVEN WHEN MEN ARE UNFAITHFUL**

God spoke through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, urging the Jews to renew the construction of the temple (Ezra 5:1ff.) God also worked through Darius, whose decree facilitated the completion of the temple (Ezra 6). In spite of all the failures of the Jews, God brought a remnant back to the Promised Land and fulfilled His promises regarding the return of His people (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13).

This should never be taken as an excuse for Christians to sin or to be careless in their walk with God. It is instead a strong incentive for faithfulness, for we can be assured that our labors are not in vain.

## **4. CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”**

*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:10)*

Every believer ought to have this passion. No one will ever know more of God than they know of Christ, and no one will ever know more of Christ than they know through the Word! We should make it a life-style goal to know God through His Word. A lifetime of diligent study will not exhaust the depths of God’s revealed Word.

The fervent study of God’s Word must never be an end in and of itself. We must also devote ourselves to the practice of God’s Word.

## **5. CHRISTIANS SHOULD GIVE PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING TO GOD FOR ALL HE HAS DONE FOR US**

After receiving the generous grant of Artaxerxes, including volunteer offerings of silver and gold by the king and his counselors (7:15), a huge credit line on the king’s treasury (7:21-22), exemption of all temple-related personnel from tribute, tax, or toll (7:24), and authority to appoint magistrates and judges to enforce and teach the law (7:25-26), Ezra lifts his voice in praise to Yahweh for extending lovingkindness to him: *“Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who ... extended mercy to me before the king...”* (7:27-28).

And He has done even more for us – given His Son Who died in our place, for our sins, received us into His family and continuously gives us all good things in Christ. Praise the Lord!!