

## Lesson 24

### Back to Ezra

There is a lapse of about 57 years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It was during that time that the events in Esther occurred. We know almost nothing about what happened to the former exiles in Judah during that period.

The only reference we have to what happened is from Ezra 4:6-23, and especially verse 6, where the hostility of the Samaritans is described. What we can deduce from that description is that the Jews were most likely subjected to similar hostility from their neighbors throughout much of that intervening period.

When we left Ezra 6, Darius was king. Then Xerxes, Darius' son, was king during the events in Esther, and now Xerxes' son Artaxerxes is king.

As we turn our attention back to the book of Ezra, we should pause and remember the key themes we identified in the first half of the book. Those themes were the temple, the law, and the wall. Looked at another way, those themes were worship (the temple), the Word of God (the law), and separation or purity (the wall). We will see each of those themes again in the second half of Ezra, but the final two will play the most prominent role: the law and the wall.

Finally in Ezra 7 we meet the man from whom the whole book of Ezra has taken its name. Chapters 7 and 8 will introduce us to the scholar-priest Ezra, to his task, and to his expedition. Chapters 9 and 10 will show the moral disarray that he found at Jerusalem when he returned and will show us the strict countermeasures he applied. Much of the account is written by Ezra in the first person.

Being surrounded by people with a different way of life seems to have a negative effect on the Jews, as we will soon see. Likewise today, being surrounded by people with a different outlook on life can have a negative effect on our own purity and godliness. Some of the Jews here appear to have lived like their neighbors in order to be at peace with them and be accepted by them. That is always a danger for God's people, both then and now. Ezra's call for purity and for a return to God's word is call we all need to hear.

What has life been like for the returned exiles during the nearly 60 years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7? In a word, it has been rough.

From both Ezra and Nehemiah it seems that the people were constantly threatened by their enemies (Ezra 4:6-23; Nehemiah 4; 6). Also, there seems to be no doubt that the vast majority of the former exiles were poor (cf. Neh 5:1-5; Mal 2:9; 3:14). Also, these poor were apparently being mistreated and abused by their fellow Jews (Neh 5:1-5; Mal 3:5). Many of the Jews had forsaken the Law of Moses and had married foreign women (Ezra 9:1-2; Mal 2:11). Even the religious leaders were failing their responsibilities (Mal 1:6-8; 2:7-8).

In short, what we needed was a restoration, and, of course, the only way to achieve a restoration is to return to God's word. What was needed was someone who could encourage (perhaps with some forceful encouragement!) God's people to once again worship and live as God wanted them

to worship and live.

Enter Ezra!

### **Ezra 7:1-5**

Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, 2 The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, 3 The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, 4 The son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, 5 The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

The Artaxerxes mentioned in verse 1 was Artaxerxes I, the third son of Xerxes and Amestris. He reigned from 464 to 424 B.C., and Nehemiah was his cupbearer.

We also meet Ezra in verse 1. The name Ezra means “help” and may be a shortened form of the name Azariah, meaning “the Lord has helped.” At least three of his ancestors were named Azariah (1 Chronicles 6:3-15).

Chapter 7 opens with a genealogy that shows Ezra’s connection to Aaron. It begins with Ezra and walks back through history to Aaron, the first high priest.

The genealogy here is presented in an abbreviated form, which we can see when we compare it with the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6. The two lists agree up to Meraioth, but from there on some of the names are left out of the list here in Chapter 7, and at the end Ezra’s name is added.

Should it bother us that some names are left out? Not at all. It is common in the Bible, where we know from other studies that the phrase “the son of” does not necessarily imply a direct father/son relation, but sometimes passes over generations and simply means “a descendant of.” We know that happens at least one place in this genealogy because Ezra is identified as the son of Seraiah. Seraiah was High Priest at the time of Zedekiah and was killed by Nebuchadnezzar. (See 2 Kings 25:18-21.) That happened nearly 130 years before these events, so we know that several generations must have been omitted from the list. (Other commentaries suggest that Ezra was the actual son of a different Seraiah, which is possible and would explain the missing missing names.)

Some argue that six names were dropped from the genealogy through a copyist’s error. They point specifically to the similarity between *Amariah* and *Azariah*, where the break in names occurs. Comparing 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 with Ezra 7:1-5, they suggest a copyist inadvertently skipped from Amariah to Azariah while copying the list. The original copy had the complete list, but somewhere a copyist dropped some of the names. That theory would explain why we are now missing the middle part of the list, but it is also possible that the author intentionally shortened the list, which we know he did when it comes to the gap between Seraiah and Ezra.

Several noteworthy names occur in the list. Aaron, of course, was the first high priest and principal aide to his brother Moses. Eleazar assisted at the commissioning of Joshua (Numbers 27:18-23). Phinehas is famous as the priest who speared both the Israelite and the Moabite woman in Numbers

25. Hilkiah was the High Priest in the time of Joash. (2 Kings 22) Zadok was the High Priest who replaced Abiathar, the last descendant of Eli to occupy that position. (1 Kings 2)

All very interesting, but any time we see a genealogy in the Bible we should immediately ask *why* it was included. What was the point? (And there is *always* a point!)

One point can be seen just from the length of the genealogy, which prepares us to meet someone of considerable importance. The 16-ancestor genealogy introduces Ezra with fanfare and establishes him as the most prominent person in the book. It also “signals that something momentous is to come and that Ezra is at the center of it.”

So, one point of the genealogy is to let us know we are about to meet someone important. But the main point of the genealogy is to show that Ezra is a direct descendant of Aaron, and thus Ezra has the right to act as priest and the authority to introduce reforms. The purpose is to show that Ezra came from a line of High Priests going all the way back to Aaron, although Ezra himself was not a High Priest. (He seems to have been a cousin of the contemporary high priestly family.) Ezra was acting with authority both from the Persian king and also from his Jewish ancestry as part of the High Priestly family. It was important that the people respect him and respect his position, and that is why we have his genealogy.

### **Ezra 7:6**

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| 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. |
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In Jewish tradition, Ezra is regarded as a second Moses. It was perhaps Ezra more than any other person who stamped Israel with its lasting character as a people of the book. Some commentators go too far with this point and suggest that Ezra actually wrote or perhaps rewrote much of the law we find in the books of Moses. But as we read his book, we see that the law was something Ezra received rather than something Ezra created. Verse 6 is definitive on this point – it describes the law as the Law of Moses, not as the Law of Ezra! And verse 6 provides the source for the Law of Moses – “the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given.” The law did not come from Ezra. The law did not come from Moses. The law came from God.

We are told in verse 6 that Ezra came from Babylon. Nehemiah, by contrast, came from Susa, which is where we found Queen Esther. Coming from Babylon meant that Ezra had lived with the great majority of exiled Jews, who seem to have concentrated in Babylon and the surrounding areas. (Although we know from the Elephantine Papyri that an entire colony of Jews lived in the south of Egypt.)

The phrase “went up” or “came up” in verse 6 is an idiom commonly used throughout the Old Testament to denote a trip to Jerusalem. Because Jerusalem is located at the top of a mountain, travelers must literally ascend to the city no matter where they originally came from.

We are told that Ezra was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses. The word “scribe” could refer to a Persian office or could simply refer to Ezra’s position as a priest and scribe among the Jews. If the

former, it must refer to the position to which Ezra was appointed by King Artaxerxes when he was given the specific tasks we are about to see.

Not only was Ezra a scribe, he was a scribe “versed” or “skilled” in the law of Moses, or as the KJV reads, “a ready scribe in the law of Moses.” The Hebrew word translated “versed” or “ready” refers to a person of the highest efficiency or a professional of the highest order. The word “skilled” literally means “rapid.” Its use here suggests a quickness of grasp and an ease of movement through complex and complicated material.

We are also told in verse 6 that the favor of the Lord or the hand of the Lord was upon Ezra, which means that God had given his special favor to that person. This description also suggests that God had influenced the Persian king to act in sending Ezra back to Judah and granting all his requests. We are not told what Ezra requested, but likely he requested some or all of the things granted to him in the letter of Artaxerxes we are about to read.

Beginning with Ezra there arose in Israel a class of specialists (called scribes) who were teachers of the law. They studied, interpreted, and copied the scriptures, and came to be greatly revered by the people. By the time of the New Testament, scribes wielded significant power throughout Israel.

Scribes had three primary duties. First, as the title “scribe” suggests, they served as the copyists of the law. Second, they served as the teachers of the law. It was their duty to make sure that every Israelite was acquainted with the rules and regulations of the law. Third, they served in a judicial capacity, passing sentence in the court of justice. Their knowledge of and skill in interpreting the law made them ideal candidates for the position of judge. Scribes were routinely found among the ranks of the Sanhedrin.

The prophets condemned those who handled the scriptures but did not know God (Jeremiah 2:8). Sadly that situation eventually came to be true of the scribes that followed Ezra. Prior to the exile, the priests were regarded as the guardians of the law, but after the exile that role moved to the scribes. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra marked the point of this transition. By the time of Christ, the scribes had drifted far away from the model that Ezra left for them. In fact, they had drifted so far that when their long awaited Messiah arrived, they did not recognize him. Here is what they were like in Jesus’ day:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (Luke 20:46-47)

That is *not* how they started. They had fallen far away from the standard that Ezra set for them.

### **Ezra 7:7-9**

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king. 8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For upon the first day of the

first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

Ezra did not return to Jerusalem by himself, but instead he was accompanied by a group of Jews, including some from groups that we studied earlier—priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. The names of many of the returnees will be given in Chapter 8.

Verses 7-8 tells us that the return occurred during the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, which was 458 BC, and verse 9 tells us that the journey lasted about three and a half months. A direct path from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 500 miles, but they almost certainly took a longer route through Northern Syria to avoid the Arabian desert (which is further suggested by their arrival in mid-summer). The trip by the longer route could have been 800 to 900 miles. Ezra's group would have followed the Euphrates River north, then journeyed west across the plains to Damascus, and finally south through Samaria to Jerusalem. Covering that distances in 3.5 months meant they averaged about 10 miles per day, which is about half the usual rate of 15 to 20 miles a day. The slower rate of travel was likely due to the children and elderly in their number as well as to the large amount of gold and silver they were carrying with them.

The journey would have been dangerous, particularly at this time due to the revolt that was occurring in Egypt and the general lawlessness that accompanied the revolt. (We will say more about this revolt later.) But they returned safely because, as verse 9 tells us, the good hand of God was on Ezra.

### **Ezra 7:10**

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

One commentary I studied described verse 10 as “one of the most amazing verses in the entire Bible,” and I certainly agree.

Verse 10 is a key verse in Ezra, and a key verse in the entire Bible. “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” All of Ezra's actions in the remainder of this book that bears his name must be interpreted in light of this verse. Verse 10 shows us the secret of Ezra's lasting influence.

What did Ezra do? He did four things. First, Ezra “set his heart.” Ezra determined within his heart that he would faithfully and resolutely commit himself to the habits detailed in the rest of the verse. The word “heart” in verse 10 means the whole of one's being. Religion was not just a hobby to Ezra.

Second, Ezra studied the law of the Lord. He devoted his life to the reading and analysis of God's Word.

Third, Ezra practiced the law of the Lord. His examination of the Scriptures was not done simply to grow in knowledge. He applied that knowledge to his life.

And fourth, Ezra taught the law throughout Israel. He did not keep the things he learned to himself. He taught them to others.

“[Ezra] is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”

In this one verse we have our own tasks when it comes to God’s word – we must prepare our heart, we must study it, we must do it, and we must teach it. All four are required, and each one depends on the other three. We can’t live what we don’t know. We can’t teach what we haven’t studied.

Many today fail to study the word at all, and sadly that is not just true of those out in the world but is increasingly true in the Lord’s church. We were once known as a people of the book, but I fear we are losing that reputation. What does it mean to be a people of the Book?

- It means that we love the word of God.
- It means that we live the word of God.
- It means that we study the word of God.
- It means that we know the word of God.
- It means we rely on the word of God.
- It means we search the word of God.
- It means we turn to the word of God for answers.
- It means that we teach the word of God.
- It means that we proclaim the word of God.
- It means that we delight in the word of God.
- It means that we memorize the word of God.
- It means that we instruct our children in the word of God.
- It means that we respond to temptations by quoting the word of God.
- It means that we understand the power and relevance of the word of God in our modern world.
- It means that our preachers and our leaders and our teachers are Bible scholars.
- It means that we quote the Bible in our daily speech.
- It means that the word of our God is our standard in everything that we do.

- It means that we put the word of God ahead of our own popularity. (Ezra certainly did that, as we will see in the closing chapters of this book.)
- It means that we, like the noble Bereans, compare all that we hear with the word of God.
- It means that if the price of peace is compromising the word of God, then that price is too high.
- It means that our sermons begin with the phrase “Please open your Bibles to...” and are focused on the word of God.
- It means that our pulpits and classes ring with the word of God rather than ring as “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”

**That is what it means to be a people of the Book!** The denominations have largely cast the Bible away – but that must never be true of the Lord’s church.

“Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: **because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts**, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 5:24)

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” (Hosea 4:6) What you don’t know can destroy you!

Many who study, fail to do what the word commands them to do. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.” (1 John 5:3) “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Obedience is what happens when study and love come together.

Ezra loved God’s word and he loved God’s people. And because he loved both, Ezra told God’s people what they needed to hear.

“Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.” (R. L. Whiteside)

What must our own attitude be toward God’s word? Ezra 7:10 tells us. We must set our heart to study it, and to do it, and to teach it. God’s word cannot be just an afterthought to us or a weekend hobby to us. Our entire life – both individually and as a congregation – must be centered on the word of God. When we move away from God’s word, we move away from God. When we neglect God’s word, we neglect God. When we fail to love God’s word, we fail to love God.

If we are no longer seen as a people of the book, then what is the answer to that problem? Verse 10 gives us the answer – “Ezra had set his heart.” The answer is **focus!** Ezra had devoted himself to God’s word – to studying it, to obeying it, to teaching it. In short, Ezra was focused on God’s word! Absent focus we will accomplish nothing, and that is not just true in our service to God. Excellence and achievement in any area demand focus.

We live in the Age of Distraction, and it shows. If we are mediocre and lackluster in our service, then it is likely because we are distracted by other concerns. “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” (Matthew 13:22) “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:21) If you want to know what is important to us, look at what we are focused on – if you want to know where our treasure is, look for our heart.

Ezra was focused on God. He was focused on his mission. He was focused on God’s word. And just look at what he accomplished for God and for God’s people. Let’s notice the focus of Ezra as we study these chapters.