

LESSON 32

Back to Ezra

Ezra 1 began with the first year of Cyrus in 539 BC. Ezra 6 ended 24 years later with the dedication of the temple in 515 BC.

Why didn't the book of Ezra end with Chapter 6? After all, the temple has been rebuilt. Why do we need another chapter? Jeremiah helps us answer that question.

Jeremiah 7:3-4 - Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'

Prior to the exile, the people had a false confidence. They thought that the temple would protect them. They did not believe that God would ever let anything happen to the temple. But, of course, they were wrong, as Jeremiah had told them. What this tells us is that just rebuilding the temple was not enough. Something else was needed. What was it? Ezekiel answers that question for us.

First, Ezekiel also told the people that their confidence in the temple was misplaced. In fact, Ezekiel saw the glory of God departing from the temple because of the people's idolatry. But just prior to that, Ezekiel told the people what they needed:

Ezekiel 11:19-20 - And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

In short, the Jews prior to the exile had a temple but needed a new heart. And that was also true of the Jews in Ezra's day. By the end of Ezra 6, they had a new temple. But they still needed a new heart, and that is why we have Ezra 7-10.

The second return occurred in 458 BC. What that means is that there is a lapse of 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. All of the events in the final four chapters of the book of Ezra will occur during that one year, 458 BC.

The only reference we have to what happened between 515 and 458 is in Ezra 4:6, where the hostility of the Samaritans during the reign of Xerxes (486 to 465) 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 in Ezra 4:6, and now Xerxes' son Artaxerxes is king after the assassination of Xerxes by the commander of his bodyguard. Recall that Artaxerxes may have been the son of Queen Vashti from Esther 1. He was not the son of Queen Esther. We can only speculate about what happened to Esther after the events in her book or after the death of Xerxes.

As we turn our attention back to the book of Ezra, we should pause and remember the key themes that 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 scholar-priest from whom the book of Ezra has taken its name. Chapters 7 and 8 will introduce us to Ezra, to his task, and to his expedition. Chapters 9 and 10 will show us the moral disarray that he found at Jerusalem when he returned and will show us the strict countermeasures that he applied. Much of the account is written by Ezra in the first person.

As we will soon see, being surrounded by people with a different way of life seems to have had a negative effect on the Jews. 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. It is a call for God's people at any time in history.

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

From both Ezra and Nehemiah it seems that the people were constantly threatened by their enemies. We saw that earlier in Ezra 4:6-23. And we also see that in Nehemiah 4 and Nehemiah 6. Most of

those descriptions describe events after Ezra 7, but Ezra 4:6 described an event before Ezra 7. In any event, the impression is that these threats from their neighbors was a constant problem.

Also, there seems to be no doubt that the vast majority of the former exiles were poor. Remember from Ezra 2:66-67, that the rich had horses while the poor had donkeys, and the donkeys outnumber the horses 9 to 1.

Also, when Haggai prophesied about 20 years after the first arrival, the economic situation appears to have worsened considerably. A run of bad harvests and high prices combined with enemy intervention had left the Jews with nothing but their expensive paneled homes to remind them of their former prosperity — and to remind them of their neglect of God's house. (Haggai 1:4)

Later, in Nehemiah, we read:

Nehemiah 5:3-Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.

Also, these poor were apparently being mistreated and abused by their fellow Jews.

Malachi 3:5-And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness ... against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.

As we see later in Ezra 9, many of the Jews had forsaken the Law of Moses and had married foreign women. And even the religious leaders were failing their responsibilities.

Malachi 2:7-8 -For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts.

The people no longer followed or even knew the law of God, and they no longer cared about the things of God. And their leaders were no better.

What was needed was a restoration. And, of course, the only way to achieve a restoration is to return to the original blueprint, the word of God.

What was needed was someone who could encourage God's people (sometimes with forceful encouragement!) 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 Zerahiah, 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:

"After these things?" Which things? We looked at that question at length in our introduction, and we won't repeat it all here. But recall that Ezra 4:7-23 jumped ahead in time until later in the reign of Artaxerxes, and so "these things" here in verse 1 must refer only to the events leading up to the dedication of the temple in 515 BC. As for why the book jumped ahead in time in Chapter 4, we spent a lot of time looking at that back in Chapter 4.

The Artaxerxes mentioned in verse 1 was Artaxerxes I, the third son of Xerxes and Amestris (who may have been Vashti, as we discussed). Artaxerxes reigned from 464 to 424 BC, 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. The genealogy begins with Ezra in verse 1 and walks back through history to Aaron, the first high priest, in verse 5.

This genealogy 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 of the names are left out? Not at all.

It is common to shorten genealogies in the Bible, something perhaps for which we should be thankful!

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 likely happens at least one place in this genealogy because Ezra is identified as the son of Seraiah in verse 1. Seraiah was High Priest at the time of Zedekiah and was killed by Nebuchadnezzar (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 if the Seraiah in verse 1 is the Seraiah in 2 Kings 25. But some commentaries suggest that Ezra was the actual son of a different Seraiah, which is certainly possible.

Other commentators argue that six names were dropped from this 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 that 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 text intentionally shortened the list.

Several noteworthy names occur in this genealogy.

- **Aaron**, of course, in verse 5 was the first high priest and principal advisor to his brother, Moses.
- **Eleazar** in verse 5 assisted at the commissioning of Joshua (Numbers 27:18-23).
- **Phinehas** in verse 5 is famous as the priest who speared both the Israelite and the Moabite woman in Numbers 25.
- **Hilkiah** in verse 1 was the High Priest in the time of Joash (2 Kings 22).
- **Zadok** in verse 2 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** that genealogy was included. What was the point? And there is **always** a point! The Bible is not a phone book. Any time we see a long list of names, we need to look for the theological significance of the list.

One point can be seen just from the length of the genealogy, which prepares us to meet someone of considerable importance. This 16-ancestor genealogy introduces Ezra with a great deal of 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.” (And yes, Ezra himself was likely the author, but sometimes it is okay to blow your own horn!) So, one point of the genealogy is to let us know that we are about to meet someone important.

But the main point of the genealogy does not come just from the length of the genealogy but rather from who is listed. The main point of the genealogy is to show us that Ezra is a direct descendant of Aaron. What that means is that Ezra has the right to act as a priest and has the authority to introduce religious reforms.

The purpose of this genealogy is to establish that Ezra came from a line of High Priests going all the way back to Aaron, although Ezra himself was not a High Priest but rather 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 Ezra and respect his position among them, and that is why we have this genealogy.

Ezra 7:6

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.

In Jewish tradition, Ezra is regarded as a second Moses.

Why? Because 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 that we find in the books of Moses. But as we read Ezra's 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 been concentrated in Babylon and the surrounding areas.

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 from anywhere. Because Jerusalem is located at the top of a mountain, travelers must literally ascend up to the city no matter where they originally came from.

We are told in verse 6 that Ezra was a scribe. But not only was Ezra a scribe, he was a scribe “versed” or “skilled” in the law of Moses. The Hebrew word refers to a person of the highest efficiency or a professional of the highest order. The word 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 Ezra his special favor. This description also suggests that God had influenced Artaxerxes to act in sending Ezra back to Judah and granting all of Ezra’s 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 that we are about to read.

We are familiar with the office of scribe from its frequent mention in the New Testament, and often not in positive terms. But that office seems to have largely originated with Ezra. These scribes studied, interpreted, and copied the scriptures, and they came to be greatly revered by the Jews. And, as we see in the gospel accounts, scribes wielded significant power throughout Israel by the time of the New Testament.

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 who did not know God.

Jeremiah 2:8 - The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit.

Sadly that situation eventually came to be true of the scribes that came along after 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 had 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 the scribes were like in Jesus' day:

Luke 20:46-47 - 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.

That is **not** how the scribes started. The scribes of Jesus' day had fallen far away from the standard that Ezra had set for them. Did that happen overnight? No. It was a gradual process, and there is nothing in the world more dangerous than a gradual drift away from God - one so gradual that it is unnoticed.

#ezra-esther