

LESSON 34

Ezra 7:19-24

19 The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, those deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it out of the king's treasure house. 21 And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily, 22 Unto an hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 23 Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons? 24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

The vessels in verse 19 may have been some that were overlooked when the captured vessels were returned by Cyrus in Ezra 1. But it is also possible that these vessels were new. Verse 20 says that Ezra had a right to draw on the royal treasury if anything else was required.

In verses 21-24, the king addresses the Persian treasurers that Ezra would encounter on his trip to Judah. This letter would serve both as Ezra's introduction to those officials and as a command to them from the king to give Ezra whatever he required.

Verses 21-24 may be the commissions that we will read about in the next chapter.

Ezra 8:36 - And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

Ezra's rights of requisition from these officials were considerable but not unlimited. The letter provides in verse 22 a ceiling on each item except for the salt, which was a very cheap commodity at this time.

The amount of silver in verse 22 is enormous (but remember that that figure is a maximum value; we don't know how much Ezra actually received, only that it was not greater than 100 talents). A

Babylonian talent weighed about 75 pounds, and so 100 talents of silver would have weighed almost four tons. Herodotus tells us that the annual income from the entire satrapy was 350 talents. So the maximum amount of silver that Ezra could have required was almost one-third of the annual income of the entire province.

Some commentators are bothered by that large amount, and so they argue that a copyist error may have replaced “mina” for “talent” for the silver in verse 22. (The Babylonian “talent” was 60 minas, with a mina being 60 shekels.) But there is no evidence of that. Perhaps Ezra just wanted to generate some good will in the provinces by letting them know he could ask for a very large amount of silver, but then asking for a much smaller amount.

In verse 23, we see a concern by the king that the wrath of God not fall on him, or on his realm, or on his sons. We have seen that concern before in this book expressed by a king, and it was common in the polytheistic world in which they lived. (Recall from Ezra 6:10 that Darius likewise asked for prayers for his well being and for that of his sons.) The king here was motivated by his own personal interest to see that these activities were done in the proper manner to avoid offending the God of Israel. Perhaps the king added this part himself to a decree that was written for him by Ezra.

In verse 24, the exemption of the temple officials from taxation is known from other ancient sources to have been a Persian policy. But, of course, Ezra (the priest) had a personal interest in making sure this common provision made its way into this particular edict!

Ezra 7:25-26

25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. 26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

In verse 25, the king’s attention returns to Ezra. The king instructs Ezra to teach the law to those who don’t know it and to appoint magistrates and judges to enforce the law.

We know that Ezra did not need a command to teach the law because verse 10 told us that Ezra had already set his heart to teach the law.

And we know from extra-Biblical sources that Persian kings were concerned that each of their subject peoples would take seriously their own laws, presumably so that they would also take seriously the laws of Persia.

In verse 26, the king refers to both the law of God and the law of the king, and he prescribes severe punishments for those who disobey either law.

These commands by King Artaxerxes are very similar to earlier commands by Darius with regard to the Egyptians. In 519 BC, Darius ordered the Egyptian satrap to assemble “the wise men ... from among the warriors, the priests, and the scribes of Egypt so that they may set down in writing the ancient laws of Egypt.” That same text refers to “the law of Pharaoh, of the temples, and of the people.”

Once again, extra-Biblical evidence confirms the historical accuracy of Ezra. The Persians had respect for the ancient laws of their peoples, including religious law, and the Persians were willing to put those laws into effect as far as possible even within the boundaries of their own empire.

The authority granted to Ezra in these verses essentially makes him a sort of religious governor in the province.

The phrase “**all** the people who are beyond the river” most likely refers to the Jews who live in the province, as opposed to including people from other nations. In other words, the king is most likely **not** forcing everyone in the province to live according to Jewish religious law. But the king is forcing the Jews to live according to their own laws.

Some commentaries argue that the king is commanding **all** who live in the area, Jew and non-Jew alike, to obey the Jewish law – but that is not what we see Ezra doing in the closing chapters of the book.

Ezra and his judges are given permission to punish lawbreakers in four ways.

First, they can execute those who refuse to follow the law. Second, they can banish evildoers from the province. Third, they can confiscate the offender’s possessions. And fourth, they can imprison those who were found guilty. We will see Ezra inflicting some of these punishments later in the book (and keep in mind that Ezra most likely wrote this part of the decree).

The second Aramaic part of Ezra ends in verse 26, and the remainder of the book of Ezra is written in

Hebrew.

Ezra 7:27-28

27 Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem: 28 And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

With verses 27-28, we are suddenly made very much aware of Ezra the man as his own voice breaks into the text with, as one commentator said, "a grateful delight which time has done nothing to diminish."

Ezra will take up this history himself in the first person until the end of Chapter 9. Nehemiah, like Ezra, does much of his own narration. While the use of first person is common with the prophets, it is not common in the historical books. In fact, the book of Nehemiah is the only historical book written primarily in the first person. (Ezra, of course, could not have written Ezra 1-6 in the first person because that all happened long before he arrived.)

Verse 27 tells us that God moved the king to beautify or adorn the temple.

The Hebrew word for "adorn" is also found in Isaiah and in the Psalms. In Isaiah 60:7, 13, the object of the verb is the temple, in Isaiah 55:5 and 60:9, the object is the people of God, and in Psalm 149:4 the object is the meek.

The use of the word in Isaiah to refer to the temple is of particular interest here and has caused some to conclude that this return marked the event prophesied by Isaiah 60. But, having the New Testament, we know that those final chapters of Isaiah pointed instead to a later day than Ezra's day in which the temple would be perfectly adorned by the suffering servant, Jesus. This event in Ezra's day may have been a partial fulfillment, but the complete fulfillment did not happen until the Messiah arrived.

Here, at the end of Chapter 7, we have an unfortunate chapter break. This final phrase is probably better seen as introducing Chapter 8 rather than closing Chapter 7.

Ezra closes the chapter by revealing that he gathered some of the leading men of Israel to return with him to Jerusalem, which would likely have caused many others to join with them in returning to Jerusalem.

And, again, although we often say that the people “returned” to Jerusalem, they were returning only in the sense that Jews had left and now Jews were coming back. But initially **most** (and by now, **all**) of the Jews who returned were different Jews from those who had left. The Jews who had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar had died by now, and it was their descendants who were returning. But these descendants had never lived in Jerusalem, but rather they had all been born in exile. What must it have been like when they finally saw Jerusalem with their own eyes!

Ezra 8:1

1 These are now the chief of their fathers, and this is the genealogy of them that went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king.

Chapter 8 begins with a list of the names and the genealogies of those who returned with Ezra in 458 BC.

The heads of each family are identified along with the number of males who accompanied each of them.

As we just mentioned, the end of Ezra 7:28 should really begin Chapter 8. In the second half of 7:28, Ezra mentioned that he gathered some of the leading men of Israel to journey to Jerusalem with him. In this list, those men are specifically identified.

When we examine the list, what we find is that almost all of the Jews who returned with Ezra were direct descendants of those who had returned almost eighty years earlier under Sheshbazzar.

Once again we are confronted with the question of the faithfulness of those who had stayed behind in Babylon when the Jews were first allowed to return to Jerusalem. Had they been wrong to stay behind? Those who were returning now had been born outside of Jerusalem. Should they have been born in Jerusalem instead?

On one hand, Isaiah had called on the people to return long before they had the opportunity to return.

Isaiah 48:20 – Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, “The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!”

And we know that it was part of God’s plan of redemption that the Jews return to Jerusalem. Isaiah had prophesied that the gospel would be proclaimed first in Jerusalem. Daniel had prophesied about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem under the Romans at a time when that temple had not yet been rebuilt. God wanted his people to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. And it was vital that there be faithful Jews in Jerusalem to welcome the Messiah.

But, on the other hand, such noted Jews as Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Mordecai, and Esther remained in exile, at least for a time. In fact, Ezra is described in glowing terms as an expert in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Ezra must have recognized that the Lord wanted the Jews to return to Israel. Why didn’t Ezra return earlier?

It is possible that both Ezra and Nehemiah were prevented from returning because they held official positions in the king’s court, Ezra as a scribe and Nehemiah as a cupbearer. It seems that both needed the express permission of the Persian king before they could return.

It is possible that the majority of those who stayed behind did so because of financial reasons. We know that some who remained behind financially assisted those who chose to return. Perhaps they also saved their own money so that later they could return with Ezra without being a burden on others. Or maybe they preferred the riches of Babylon over the poverty of Jerusalem.

Of course, even now under Ezra, many Jews still decided to remain behind in exile. Many exiles had likely chosen to marry women of Babylon and so chose to remain near their wives’ families. Perhaps some had positions of authority and wealth that they were unwilling to give up or perhaps let them do more for God’s people by staying behind. For some, the decision may have involved a lack of faith. Perhaps, unlike Moses in Hebrews 11:25, they chose **not** to be mistreated with the people of God but rather chose to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin by staying behind in Babylon. But some may have stayed behind because of advanced age (Daniel?) or bad health.

In short, we cannot say that all of those who remained behind were wrong to do so, and we cannot say that all of those who remained behind were right to do so. We need to leave that determination to God.

Ezra 8:2-14

2 Of the sons of Phinehas; Gershom: of the sons of Ithamar; Daniel: of the sons of David; Hattush. 3 Of the sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty. 4 Of the sons of Pahathmoab; Elihoenai the son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred males. 5 Of the sons of Shechaniah; the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males. 6 Of the sons also of Adin; Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males. 7 And of the sons of Elam; Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males. 8 And of the sons of Shephatiah; Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him fourscore males. 9 Of the sons of Joab; Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males. 10 And of the sons of Shelomith; the son of Josiphiah, and with him an hundred and threescore males. 11 And of the sons of Bebai; Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty and eight males. 12 And of the sons of Azgad; Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him an hundred and ten males. 13 And of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names are these, Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them threescore males. 14 Of the sons also of Bigvai; Uthai, and Zabbud, and with them seventy males.

The Daniel in verse 2 is not the famous Daniel, who lived years earlier, but perhaps he was named in honor of the famous Daniel.

As with almost every list of names in the Bible, some commentators doubt the authenticity of this list. The reason for their doubt is that this list contains only 12 families, and they argue that means this list was contrived to represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

There are at least four problems with that argument.

First, by their logic, had there actually been only 12 families, then Ezra would have had to alter the list, thereby making it unauthentic, to convince the critics that the list was authentic!

Second, nowhere does the text say that the 12 families represent the twelve tribes.

Third, if that symbol had been intended, then Ezra could have chosen only 12 families to accompany him for that reason. That is, it is possible for the list to be authentic and to be a symbol at the same time.

Fourth, there are really more than 12 families mentioned here because verse 2 includes an additional three families (Phinehas, Ithamar, and David), although they are not enumerated like the 12 families in

verses 3-14. Perhaps these 12 were listed this way to remind us of the 12 tribes.

We saw a similar list back in Ezra 2 with regard to the first return under Cyrus, but there are a few differences between the list in Ezra 2 and the list in Ezra 8.

Here in Ezra 8 the priestly families (Phinehas and Ithamar in verse 2) are mentioned first, while in Ezra 2 the priestly families were mentioned last. Phinehas in verse 2 was the son of Aaron's third son, Eleazar, and Ithamar was Aaron's fourth son (Exodus 6:23-25).

Another difference between this list in Ezra 8 and the list in Ezra 2 is that this list includes a different descendant of King David in verse 2: "Of the sons of David, Hattush." Ezra 2:2 mentions Zerubbabel, the descendant of King David that we met earlier in our study of Zechariah.

As we know, it was crucial that the line of David be preserved so that Jesus could later be born from the line of David to rule forever on the throne of David. But note that Hattush was not the leader that Zerubbabel had been. Now the leaders are the priests and the scribes.

Also, note that the ESV translation of verses 2-3 is odd: "of the sons of David; Hattush. Of the sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty." Why are both Shechaniah and Pharosh mentioned as the fathers of Zechariah? I think a better view is that the text should be read as: "of the sons of David; Hattush, of the sons of Shechaniah. Of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah..." That is, I think Shechaniah is mentioned here to show us how Hattush is related to David, which is explained further in 1 Chronicles 3.

1 Chronicles 3:9, 22 - These were all the sons of David, beside the sons of the concubines, and Tamar their sister. ... And the sons of Shechaniah; Shemaiah: and the sons of Shemaiah; Hattush, and Igeal, and Bariah, and Neariah, and Shaphat, six.

From 1 Chronicles 3, we can deduce that Hattush was likely in the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. Dating Zerubbabel's birth around 560 BC, and taking a generation to be about 25 years, we get a date of around 460 BC, which is very close to 458 BC, the date of this return.

If we compare the family names in verses 4-14 with the names in Ezra 2:3-15, we find that almost all of the families are present on both lists. The exceptions are Shecaniah and Shelomith. Here are the names the two lists have in common:

- Parosh (2:3 and 8:3)

- Pahath-moab (2:6 and 8:4)
- Adin (2:15 and 8:6)
- Elam (2:7 and 8:7)
- Shepatiah (2:4 and 8:8)
- Bani (2:10 and 8:10)
- Bebai (2:11 and 8:11)
- Azgad (2:12 and 8:12)
- Adonikam (2:13 and 8:13)
- Bigvai (2:14 and 8:14)

What that means is that most of the people returning in Ezra 8 were being reunited with family members and descendants of family members who had returned 80 years earlier.

Commentaries disagree about the meaning of the phrase “those who came later” or “those who are last” or “the last sons” in verse 13. Most likely it simply means that these three family heads were the last family heads from those families to migrate to Judah and that all of the others had migrated earlier.

As for why this list is given, we answered that question when we studied the list in Ezra 2. The Bible contains lists of honor and lists of shame. Here we see a list of honor. In Chapter 10 we will see a list of shame.

Another reason we have the list is to show the continuity between the Jews who had been exiled, the Jews who had returned under Cyrus, and the Jews who were returning now. This was not a new people. This was the same people.

Finally, another reason we have these names is to show that they were real people. They suffered hardships. They experienced fear. They likely agonized over whether they should leave their home

and go to Jerusalem or remain behind. They were real people!

Ezra 8:15

15 And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi.

Ezra 7:6-8 briefly mentioned Ezra's departure from Babylon, but here we are given more details.

The returning Jews assembled at the Ahava River, which was most likely a canal of the Euphrates. They camped there for three days, which is a common period of time when beginning or ending a journey. (See Ezra 8:32 and Nehemiah 2:11.)

One thing that happens during these three days is that Ezra reviews the people, and what he discovers is that there are no Levites among them. As we discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the Levites do not seem to have been very numerous at this time. Sheshbazzar also had difficulty in finding Levites who were willing to return to Jerusalem back in Ezra 2:40-42.

We earlier discussed some reasons for the paucity of Levites. 2 Kings 24:14 tells us that the Babylonians had left the poorest of the land behind, and many of the Levites may have been in that group. Also, the Levites in exile had likely changed professions and saw little to gain from returning to Judah as Levites.

Recall that the very small number of Levites in relation to priests is strong evidence that the law did not originate with Ezra as some today argue.

In the law (Numbers 18:21, 26), it is assumed that the Levites would greatly outnumber the priests because, for example, the Levites received the tithes and passed only a tenth (a tithe of the tithe) to the priests. (That suggests that at that time priests were about 10% of the tribe of Levi.) Also, under the law, the Levites lived in 48 Levitical cities – whereas here we have only a handful of Levites in total! Had the law been rewritten during this time as some argue, it would never have reached us in the form that we now have it.

“Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah was still being added to and revised.”



#ezra-esther