

LESSON 35

Ezra 8:16-17

16 Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Elnathan, men of understanding. 17 And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God.

Some commentaries believe this list of names has been corrupted due to the fact that Elnathan is mentioned three times. But there is no need to reach that conclusion. More likely, there were just three people with the same name. (I was once on a conference call with five people – four of whom were named Bob!)

Ezra sends 11 men (which, not being 12, should make the critics happy!) to go find some Levites. As for why he sent 11 rather than 12, perhaps it was because the tribe of Levi is missing! These 11 men are looking for Levites.

The 11 men include nine leaders or family heads and two interpreters. The leaders were no doubt intended to use their influence to convince some Levites to join them, while the interpreters (or “men of understanding”) were likely intended to use the law to persuade the Levites to accompany them to Jerusalem.

Ezra not only sent leaders and interpreters, but he even told them what to say. Ezra knew this mission was important, and so he left nothing to chance. That Ezra sent so many men suggests again that he thought it would be difficult to convince the Levites that they should return.

Verse 17 mentions “Iddo, the chief at the place Casiphia.” Who was Iddo and where was Casiphia?

Casiphia is related to the word “silver” and may have been named after a guild of silversmiths. Most likely a school was located there, and Iddo was the head of the school. And, for whatever reason, it seems that Ezra knew that Levites could be found there.

As for Casiphia, it is curious that the text makes a point of calling it a “place.” (Unless you are using

the NIV, which for some reason failed to translate that word. It might make you wonder what else the NIV left out!) Some argue that the Hebrew word translated “place” actually refers to a sanctuary or a synagogue, which would further support the idea that this was a religious school. As we said earlier, many of the Levites had likely moved on to other professions after their deportation, but perhaps that was not true of all the Levites. Ezra was not just looking for Levites - he was looking for **faithful** Levites, and he knew that he could find them in Casiphia.

Ezra 8:18-20

18 And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren, eighteen; 19 And Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty; 20 Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name.

Ezra’s plan is successful, and verses 18-19 tell us that two independent Levitical families decide to accompany him to Jerusalem. The total number of returning Levites is 38.

Recall from before that the Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

Verse 20 tells us that 220 “Nethinims” or temple servants also accompanied Ezra. As we have discussed, the role of the temple servants was to assist the Levites, and having such a large number may have been a factor in convincing these Levites to join them on their return.

Verse 20 points out the important role played by King David in organizing the priestly families. It is not clear at all why so many Nethinims were willing to return, when so many Levites were not.

Verse 20 suggests that Ezra had a list of their names, but (thankfully?!) that list is not given here. The purpose of the list was two-fold – to serve as a roll call on the trip back, and to record and confirm the Jewish ancestries of those who returned. (Ezra was a very organized leader!)

Adding everything up, the total number of those who returned with Ezra was about 1700 men plus women and children, perhaps close to 5000 people in total.

How does that number compare with the number who returned under Cyrus? It was a lot smaller!

Ezra 2:64 - The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore.

From 42,000 in the first return to only 5,000 in the second return - should the people have been discouraged by that decline?

We are about to see that Ezra's primary concern will be about the faithfulness of God's people in Jerusalem. So, with that as his primary concern, how do we think Ezra went about choosing people to accompany him? Do we think he put out the call for any and all, or do we think he wanted only faithful Jews to go back with him? If Ezra had come back with 42,000, but with only 5,000 of them faithful to God, don't we know that the problem of faithlessness he faced would have just been made worse?

There is a lesson for us here. We should not become preoccupied with numbers. Instead we should be preoccupied with faithfulness - and then the numbers will follow.

1 Corinthians 3:7-So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

We plant. We water. God gives the increase.

And we should remember that God's people have been in the majority only twice in the history of the world - right after creation, and right after the flood.

So, no, Ezra and the others who returned should not have been discouraged by the huge drop in numbers from the first return. Instead, they should have been thankful for the numbers they had and they should have focused on trusting God, obeying God, and being faithful to God in a difficult situation. And that is precisely what we see them doing in the closing chapters.

Ezra 8:21-23

21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. 22 For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all

them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. 23
So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us.

Verses 21-22 describe the preparations for the journey.

First, Ezra proclaims a fast as a way to seek God's protection for the hazardous journey.

Whether commanded or not, fasting by both Jew and Gentile in the Bible often occurs at times of great anxiety. David fasts while pleading for the life of his child in 2 Samuel 12:16. The people of Nineveh fast upon hearing news of the imminent judgment announced by the Lord in Jonah 3:5. Nehemiah fasts upon hearing the bad news concerning the state of the city of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1:4. Darius fasts while Daniel is in the lions' den in Daniel 6:18.

Unlike the fasts we saw in Esther, we are told that this fast is accompanied by prayer. Specifically, the people ask God in verse 21 to grant them a safe journey or "a right way," literally a "straight road" (which is a bit funny given their plan to head north and then circle around and head south to avoid the desert!).

Verse 21 played a role in the history of the United States. When the Pilgrims left England for America in 1620, Ezra 8:21 was the text of the last sermon they heard before departing on their voyage.

Ezra 8:21 - Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

The phrase "our little ones" in verse 21 reminds us that entire families were returning with Ezra, but the Hebrew word can also refer to anyone who is weak, including the aged. Some may have stayed behind because of advanced age or ill health, but perhaps those excuses were not used by all who fell in those categories.

The reference to "our substance" in verse 21 is a reminder that the road was unsafe due to bandits and the nearby Egyptian rebellion.

This danger, as well as the reason for the fervent fasting and prayer, is highlighted in verse 22, where Ezra explains why he did not ask the king for a band of soldiers to accompany them, which was a question that was perhaps being asked by some who were going back with him.

Ezra had told the King that God would protect them, and so to ask for soldiers would have indicated a lack of faith on his part. But, in ancient times (and likely as well as in modern times!), the roads between Babylon and Judah were teeming with gangs of bandits. And this group was loaded down with gold and silver.

Some commentators try to pit Ezra against Nehemiah, and they point to these verses as a jab by Ezra against Nehemiah, who traveled with a military escort in Nehemiah 2:9.

But the two missions were different. Ezra's mission was religious, while Nehemiah was sent as a political official, a governor, to Judah. Nehemiah was likely given no choice about having a military escort.

And I'm not saying that we should question Ezra's decision here to refuse the king's protection, but God was already using the Persian king to allow his people to return, so why not also use the Persian soldiers to allow his people to return safely?

In any event, God answered their prayers – he listened to their entreaty in verse 23 – and they arrived safely without the Persian troops.

“There are times when faith must take on flesh, when what is professed must be expressed in concrete situations. There are those times when we must reject all visible human help and risk all on God alone. When could we possibly be safer? But we often don't view it that way. We are like the terrified lady onboard ship in a terrific storm. She happened to pass the captain and asked, ‘Is there any hope, Captain?’ to which he responded, ‘Our only hope is in God.’ She turned more pale and gasped, ‘Are things really that bad?’”

Ezra 8:24-27

24 Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them, 25 And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered: 26 I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents; 27 Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.

A better translation of verse 24 is: “I separated twelve men **as well as** Sherebiah and Hashabiah and

with them from their kinsmen, ten men.”

It is clear from 8:18-19 that Sherebiah and Hashabiah are Levites, and so what verse 24 is telling us is that Ezra chose 12 priests and 12 Levites. This choice by Ezra may confirm that Ezra was fond of the number 12, which could then explain why he chose 12 families earlier.

These priests and Levites are assigned to be treasure bearers.

In the Law, the priests and Levites were given the responsibility of caring for the furnishings of the tabernacle. The priests handled the sacred objects and cared for them while the Levites carried them without touching them. In this passage, these groups are essentially given the same responsibility with the silver, the gold, and the temple vessels instead of with the furnishings.

Verses 25-27 describe a staggering amount of wealth.

A Babylonian talent weighed approximately 75 pounds, and so 650 silver talents and 100 gold talents together weighed almost 30 tons! The silver vessels weighed over 7,000 pounds. Also mentioned are 1,000 darics or “drams.” A Persian daric was a thick gold coin that was named after the Persian king Darius.

Ezra carefully weighs the silver and gold to make sure that none of it is lost.

Many commentators have questioned the amount of treasure detailed here. But, as we have already seen, the Persian kings had tremendous wealth and enjoyed displaying it.

We should also keep in mind God’s role in this return – if God wanted his people to return loaded down with Persian treasure, then that is what was going to happen – and that is what did happen! (Although these gifts will be called a “freewill offering” in verse 28.)

This great wealth also reminds us of Ezra’s decision not to use a military escort – a decision that must have astonished (and perhaps worried) the king and the other Persians in view of the great treasure they were carrying.

Ezra 8:28-30

28 And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and

the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers. 29 Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD. 30 So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God.

These verses record the instructions that Ezra gave to the treasure bearers.

Ezra first tells the treasure bearers that they are “holy unto the Lord,” which means that they had been set apart for a divine purpose.

This was something with which the priests were already very familiar.

Exodus 28:36 - “You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, ‘Holy to the LORD.’

But here Ezra applies it to the Levites as well. And, in fact, in verse 2 of the next chapter, Ezra will apply it to all the people, calling them “the holy race.”

Of course, these descriptions remind us of our descriptions and of God’s commands to us in the New Testament.

1 Peter 1:15-16 - But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

1 Peter 2:9-But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Ezra then tells the treasure bearers to carefully protect (“watch and keep” in verse 29) the valuables. Literally, the text reads, “be awake and keep.” They were not to fall asleep on the job!

And, again, we are reminded of a New Testament passage. We, too, must guard a great treasure.

1 Timothy 6:20-O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.

As we noted earlier, these gifts in Ezra 8 are called here “a freewill offering” unto God in verse 28.

Yes, these gifts were part of God's plan for his people, but these gifts had not been coerced.

The priests' and Levites' assignment to guard the treasure was to last until they were able to weigh out the treasure in the chambers of the temple in Jerusalem.

Ezra 8:31-34

31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. 32 And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days. 33 Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them was Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, Levites; 34 By number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time.

Verse 31 helps us with the chronology of these events.

Back in Ezra 7:9, we saw that the exiles assembled at the river on the first day of the first month. That was the official beginning of the journey.

But they did not leave on the first day. Instead, they stayed by the river while they searched for the Levites and did the other things Ezra just told us about.

Finally, as we see here in verse 31, they began their long journey from the river to Jerusalem on the 12th day of the first month.

Is there any special significance of the 12th day of the first month? It is two days before the Passover.

Leviticus 23:5-In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD'S passover.

That Ezra left on the 12th day (rather than wait until after Passover) tells us how anxious he must have been to reach Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:9 tells us they arrived on the first day of the fifth month.

Verse 31 tells us that they were delivered from enemies and ambushes along the way. The Hebrew used here does not mean that unsuccessful ambushes occurred, but more likely means that God made sure that the exiles were never attacked at all during their journey to Jerusalem.

There are many proofs of the divine origin of the Bible, but one of those proofs is the understatement that we often find in God's word. We have an example of that here in verse 32.

If I had written the book of Ezra, and if I had experienced a dangerous and circuitous 900 mile trek journey with 5000 people and tons of gold and silver to reach a city that I had heard about all my life but never seen with my own eyes, how would I have written about those events? How many chapters would I have devoted to that long and difficult trip?

Here is how Ezra describes it by inspiration in verse 32: "And we came to Jerusalem." Not much of a travel log, but it certainly gets the point across!

After resting for three days, the first thing the people did was weigh the silver and the gold to confirm that none of it was missing.

Why the three day wait? Perhaps this was just a time of rest following the rigorous journey. It is also possible that they arrived late in the week and waited until the Sabbath was over before weighing out the valuables, an activity that would have been considered work.

The valuables were weighed out to the priest Meremoth, the son of Uriah. Ezra most likely had to send to King Artaxerxes signed certification that these treasures had been received in the temple.

There is something possibly very interesting that we can conclude about Meremoth. Here he is called the son of Uriah, but we get a little more information about him from Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 3:4-And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired.

Now where have we seen Hakkoz before? The answer is that we saw him back in Ezra 2, where he had been among those priests who were unable to prove their lineage.

Ezra 2:61-63 - Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, and the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The

governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

Evidently, the family of Hakkoz had been accepted as priests when they were evaluated by the priest with the Urim and the Thummim, and by this time that family had produced one of the leading priests of the temple.

Accompanying Meremoth was Eleazar, the son of Phinehas. It is possible that this is the same Eleazar from Nehemiah 12:42, who was one of the priests who led the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem.

Ezra 8:35-36

35 Also the children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats for a sin offering: all this was a burnt offering unto the LORD. 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.

With verses 35-36, the narrative switches back to the third person. (“I” and “we” become “those” and “they.”)

In 7:17, Artaxerxes commanded that certain offerings be made, and here in 8:35 we see that command being carried out.

The offering included 12 bulls, 96 rams, 77 lambs, and 12 goats. Why those numbers?

We know that Ezra was fond of the number 12, and for good reason! The number 12 is used from Genesis to Revelation as a symbol for the people of God. And, as with many symbols, the symbolic meaning comes from a literal meaning. There were literally 12 patriarchs and literally 12 apostles, and so the number 12 is a perfect figure for God's people under either covenant. And perhaps it also comes from the combination of three (the figurative number for God) with the number four (the figurative number for God's creation).

How are these numbers related to the number 12?

The number 96 is 12 times 8, and 8 is the figurative number for renewal (the eighth day being the first

day of a new week). So perhaps the number 96 was chosen to depict the renewed situation of God's people. But, again, the number 96 would then have both a literal meaning and a figurative meaning.

What about 77? That one is harder to explain. Some argue that 77 should be 72, which is also divisible by 12, being 12 times 6. The number 6 denotes something that falls short of perfection, and so perhaps the number 72 might point to the greater temple that was yet to come in Christ. But, again, the text here does not say 72 - it says 77!

Perhaps the most likely explanation for why we have 96 rams and 77 lambs is that there were 96 rams and 77 lambs! Perhaps we should not strain to find some figurative meaning for those numbers, although the 12 bulls and the 12 goats were likely chosen for their symbolic significance.

The plural "satraps" in verse 36 ("lieutenants" in the KJV) is seen by some as a problem. Why? Because Trans-Euphrates or Beyond the River was a single satrap. Some suggest that the phrase also includes the Egyptian satrap, which was nearby and which also had a substantial Jewish population.

But I think the best explanation is to notice the text is referring here to a person (satraps) and not a place (a satrapy). A single satrapy could have had multiple satraps.

The final phrase in Chapter 8 is particularly important: "they furthered the people, and the house of God." Yes, Ezra has God on his side, but Ezra also has Persia on his side! And, of course, that is true only because Ezra has God on his side. God is behind all of this, and God made sure that Ezra had all of the help he needed to accomplish his mission.

But perhaps we should pause and consider the delicate situation into which Ezra had been placed here. Yes, Persia supported Ezra, but what if Persia asked Ezra for something that was opposed to what God wanted Ezra to do? We know how Ezra would have responded to that, but what about ourselves?

Yes, persecution from the government is a terrible thing, but perhaps we should be more fearful of an embrace from the government. When did the most terrible heresies in the early church occur - when the church was being persecuted by Rome, or later when the church was being embraced by Rome? Perhaps we could ask a **Roman** Catholic!

We need to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29), and we need to do that without regard to whether those men are persecuting us or embracing us.

#ezra-esther