

Lesson 25

Ezra 7:11-14

11 Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel. 12 Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time. 13 I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. 14 Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand;

Verses 11-26 contain a letter from King Artaxerxes. As with the other letters by Persian kings that we have seen in this book, some question the authenticity of this letter. As before, they say that the letter is too Jewish to have come from the pen of a Persian king. They also complain that the letter gives powers to Ezra to that are much more extensive than one would expect. But, as before, the answer is simple – the king undoubtedly had help in writing the letter. In fact, Ezra himself was likely responsible for writing much if not all of this letter, and then afterward the letter was approved by the king. As for the powers granted to Ezra, Nehemiah was also granted extraordinary powers just 14 years later by the same king. We will see in a moment that the political situation surrounding these events likely played a big role in the powers that the king gave to Ezra.

The authenticity of the letter is further shown in its use of Persian terms such as “king of kings” in verse 12 and “seven counselors” in verse 14 (the latter being something we also saw in Esther). The letter shows familiarity with Persian customs, and one commentary noted that it has a similar form to other Persian letters of the time that have been found. While the introduction to the letter in verse 11 is written in Hebrew, the letter itself in verses 12-26 is written in Aramaic, the language of official correspondence in the Persian Empire.

This letter does not just send Ezra off on a mission. Instead, the letter sends Ezra off on a mission with the funds and resources he needed to accomplish that task.

As we read through the entirety of the letter, we will see that it contains five stipulations: (1) It authorizes Ezra and those with him to go to Jerusalem to see that God’s law was observed. (2) It provides a grant to buy sacrifices and temple vessels. (3) It commands the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra. (4) It frees all the temple officials from taxation. (5) It authorizes Ezra to set up a judicial system.

Ezra, as did Joseph many years before, had authority in a foreign government, and, as with Joseph, that authority was part of God’s providence in using Ezra to fulfill God’s purposes for his people.

Why did the king send Ezra on this mission? We have already mentioned one reason—God wanted

the king to send Ezra on the mission. But there may have also been a reason in the king's mind that had to do with what was going on elsewhere in his kingdom (and this also was most likely part of God's plan to make sure the setting was right for what he planned to accomplish).

In 460 B.C. the Greeks sent a fleet of 200 war galleys against Persia. This fleet sailed to Egypt, gained a great victory over the Persian army there and captured Memphis in the autumn of 459. This Greek victory placed the coast of Palestine and Phoenicia into Greek hands. It was in 458, immediately after the fall of Memphis to the Greeks, that Ezra was sent to Judea "to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (7:14) and to reorganize and strengthen Israel, which was the traditional enemy of the Philistines (now in Greek hands). From the point of view of the Persian king a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal fortress. As long as the Greeks dominated the coast and Egypt, the Persian king would support a strong Judean province headed by a Judean-Persian official and peopled by a pro-Persian population, most of whose families remained back in Babylon and Persia (as hostages if needed). This situation likely explains the extraordinary powers that the king gave to Ezra.

The letter begins with a typical salutation in verse 12. The phrase "king of kings" was a popular title for a Persian monarch. Ezra is the recipient of the letter, and, as we discussed, very likely also the author of the letter, given to the king only for his signature – after he got advice from his seven counselors. (We saw this same group in Esther 1:13, where they were advising the father of this king.)

Verse 13 is the permission of the king allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem under the authority of Ezra. This return was not forced, only those who were willing to go had permission to return. This decree allowed all Jews to return to Jerusalem if they wanted to do so. As we often see in this book, verse 13 separates the laity from the clergy, which is yet another indication that Ezra had a hand in writing this letter.

In verse 14, Ezra is told by the king to go to Judah to see if the Jews there are living according to the Law of God. Ezra was being sent to Jerusalem with the express purpose of establishing the law of God in the land.

No reason is given for this order, and most likely it originated from Ezra himself because that is what he wanted to do and that is what he knew God wanted him to do. Some suggests that Ezra may have received reports from Judah that distressed him and caused him to want to travel there and initiate reforms. Artaxerxes naturally saw Judah as an area that could be easily influenced by Egypt and the Greeks, and so he likely had concerns of his own that something nefarious was happening there.

The phrase "the law of your God which is in your hand" in verse 14 confirms that this was a written law, not just an oral law. It certainly meant that Ezra knew and understood the law, but it may have also meant that Ezra had a literal scroll in his hand. If so, then Ezra, it seems, was one who carried God's word around with him wherever he went. Yet another lesson for us, who I fear sometimes go out to battle and forget our sword!

Ezra 7:15-18

15 And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his

counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, 16 And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem: 17 That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. 18 And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God.

The second item of business addressed in the letter is the provision of the king and his counselors for the temple of God.

The Persian authorities offered silver and gold to Ezra dedicated for the purchase of animals and other offerings. This money was to be taken from the province of Babylon, the province from which the company was beginning its journey. The monetary tribute was to be supplemented by the freewill offerings of the people and priests who voluntarily returned to the land of Israel.

The animals specifically identified in verse 17 are bulls, rams, and lambs. These gifts and offerings were to be presented at the temple in Jerusalem. Any excess money was to be used at the discretion of Ezra and his fellow priests (“thy brethren” in verse 18), probably earmarked for the daily service of the temple.

The king’s accurate knowledge of the sacrifices acceptable to God almost certainly originated with Ezra himself, as did the instructions on what was to be done with the excess money!

We should keep in mind that the exiled Jews were not able to keep these sacrifices while they were separated from the temple, and thus there was no doubt a large sacrifice whenever groups returned.

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 treasurers that Ezra would encounter on his trip to Judah. This letter would serve both as Ezra's introduction to them and as a command to them from the king to give Ezra whatever he required. Verses 21-24 may be the commissions or edicts that we 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 were considerable but not unlimited. The letter provides a ceiling on each item except for the salt, which was a very cheap commodity in Israel.

The amount of silver is enormous (but remember that it is a maximum value; we don't know how much he actually received, only that it was less than this amount). A Babylonian talent weighed approximately 75 pounds. So 100 talents of silver would have weighed almost four tons. Herodotus informs us that the annual income from the entire satrapy was 350 talents. So the amount provided Ezra is almost one-third of the annual income of the entire province.

The Babylonian “talent” in verse 22 was 60 minas, with a mina being 60 shekels. Some suggest a copyist error may have replaced “mina” for “talent” here, but there is no evidence of that. (The Babylonians used a Base-60 number system, the remnants of which we can still see today – 60 minutes in an hour, 360 degrees in a circle. How did they arrive at such a base? Most bases can be traced back to the human hand – our own Base-10 being the best example. But a single hand gives us Base-5, and the 3 joints on the 4 fingers of that hand give us Base-12. Most believe that Base-60 came from an early merger of two groups of people – one using Base-5 and one using Base-12.)

In verse 23, we see a concern by the king that the wrath of God not fall upon him, or his realm, or 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 6:10 that Darius likewise asked for prayers for his well being and for that of his sons.) Thus the king was motivated by his own personal interest to see that the activities were done in the proper manner to avoid offending the God of Israel.

In verse 24, the exemption of the temple officials from taxation is known from other ancient sources to have been a Persian policy.

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 do not know it, and he also instructs Ezra to appoint magistrates and judges to enforce the law.

We know that Ezra did not need a command to teach because verse 10 told us that Ezra had already set his heart to teach the law. We know from extra-Biblical sources that Persian kings were concerned that each of their subject peoples 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. This power to inflict penalties, and the confiscation in particular, was later invoked in the divorce proceedings we will see in Chapter 10. (See 10:8.)

These commands by King Artaxerxes are very similar to earlier commands by Darius with regard to the Egyptians. In 519 B.C. 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 he is, on the other hand, forcing the Jews to live according to their own laws. (Some commentaries, however, argue the opposite – 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.

The second Aramaic part of Ezra ends in verse 26, and the remainder of the book is 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 the history himself in the first person until the end of Chapter 9. Nehemiah, like Ezra, will do much of his own narration in the next book. While the use of first person is common with the prophets, it is not common in the historical books. Nehemiah is the only historical book written primarily in the first person.

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, where each time God is the subject of the verb. 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 have caused some to conclude that this return marked the event prophesied by Isaiah. 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 may have been a partial fulfillment, but the complete fulfillment would not happen until the Messiah arrived.

Ezra closes the chapter by revealing that he gathered some of the leading men of Israel to return with him to Jerusalem. One would assume that if the heads of the families return to the land, then it is more likely that the rest of the families will return as well.

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

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 those who returned with Ezra in 458 B.C. The heads of each family are identified along with the number of males who accompanied each leader. The text notes that the returnees departed from the city of Babylon.

As we just mentioned, the end of 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 identified.

Almost all of the Jews who returned with Ezra were direct relatives of those who had returned almost eighty years earlier under the leadership of Sheshbazzar. It is quite likely that these Jews were among those who had remained behind while supporting their relatives who had returned immediately following the decree of Cyrus.

Once again we are confronted with the question of the faithfulness of those who had stayed behind

in Babylon when the others were first allowed to leave for Jerusalem.

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

Isaiah 48:20 – “Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it even to the end of the earth; say ye, The LORD hath redeemed his servant Jacob.”

Jeremiah 31:21 – “Set thee up waymarks, make thee high heaps: set thine heart toward the highway, even the way which thou wentest: turn again, O virgin of Israel, turn again to these thy cities.”

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 come back to Judah.

But, on the other hand, such noted individuals as 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. Surely Ezra recognized that the Lord wanted the Jews to return to Israel.

Why did he not 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. As a result, both seem to need the express permission of the Persian king allowing their return.

As it relates to those mentioned in the list recorded here, it is probable that the majority were unable to return previously because of financial reasons. One would assume that every attempt was made to assist those who chose to return by those who remained in Babylon. Over the course of time, those who remained were able to build resources sufficient to allow them to return with Ezra.

Of course, many Jews still elected to remain in exile. The reasons for this choice are many. Many exiles had likely chosen to marry women of Babylon and thus elected to remain near their wives’ families. Perhaps some had positions of authority and wealth that they were unwilling to give up. For some the decision likely involved a lack of faith. Many others were likely just unable to afford the trip.

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 Zerariah, and with him two hundred males. 5 Of the sons of Shechaniah; the son of Jahaziel, and with him three
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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; Jeshaiah 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.

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

There are at least four problems with that argument. First, by their logic, had their actually been only 12 families, then the author would have had to alter the list, thereby making it unauthentic, to convince the critics that the list is authentic! Second, nowhere does the text say that the 12 families represent the twelve tribes. Third, if the symbol is intended, then Ezra likely chose only 12 families to accompany him for that reason. Fourth, there are really more than 12 families mentioned because verse 2 includes an additional three families (although they are not listed by number as are the following 12).

We saw a similar list in Ezra 2 with regard to the first return under Cyrus, but there are a few differences. Here 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 and the one in Ezra 2 is that this list includes a descendant of King David in verse 2: "Of the sons of David, Hattush." From 1 Chronicles 3, we can deduce that Hattush was 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 2:3-15, we find that almost all are present on both lists. (The exceptions are Shecaniah and Shelomith.) What that means is that in most every case families are being reunited as exiles returning now are meeting 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 ones from the family to migrate to Judah and that others had migrated earlier.

As for why this list is given, we considered 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.