

# Ezra 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Ezra chapter 8. These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia in the reign of Artaxerxes the king, of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom, of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel, of the sons of David, Hattosh, of the sons of Shekhaniah, who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered one hundred and fifty men, of the sons of Pehath-Moab, Eli-Hoinai, the son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred men, of the sons of Zatu, Shekhaniah, the son of Jehaziel, and with him three hundred men, of the sons of Aden, Ebed, the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty men, of the sons of Elam, Jeshiah, the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy men, of the sons of Shephetiah, Zebediah, the son of Michael, and with him eighty men, of the sons of Joab, Obadiah, the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen men, of the sons of Bani, Shalomith, the son of Jehazaphiah, and with him one hundred and sixty men, of the sons of Bebi, Zechariah, the son of Bebi, and with him twenty-eight men, of the sons of

Asgad, Johanan, the son of Hakatan, and with him one hundred and ten men, of the sons of Adonikam, those who came later, their names being Eliphilat, Jewel, and Shemaiah, and with them sixty men, of the sons of Bigvi, Uthai, and Zechah, and with them seventy men. I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahavah, and there we camp three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi. Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarab, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshulam, leading men, and for Joerib, and Elnathan, who were men of insight, and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Kasiphiah, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers, and the temple servants at the place Kasiphiah, namely to send us ministers for the house of our God. And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Malai, the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Shehrabiah, with his sons and kinsmen.

18. Also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshiah, of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons twenty, besides two hundred and twenty of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites, these were all mentioned by name. Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahavah, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, the hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.

So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty. 18. Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Shehrabiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them, and I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counsellors and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered. I weighed out into their hands six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels worth two hundred talents, and one hundred talents of gold, twenty bowls of gold worth one thousand arrochs, and two vessels of fine bright bronze, as precious as gold. And I said to them, You are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a free will offering to the Lord, the God of your fathers. Guard them, and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites, and the heads of the fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord. So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God. Then we departed from the river

Heba on the twelfth day of the first month to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and from ambushes by the way. We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days. On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Merrimoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jezebubad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Biniuai. The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

[ 4 : 39 ] At that time, those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering, twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps, and to the governors of the province beyond the river, and they aided the people and the house of God. In Ezra chapter 8, Ezra playing the role of a sort of miniature Moses leads a group of people from Babylonia back to Jerusalem. As in the book of Numbers, the group is divided by families and is counted. The families mentioned here are also mentioned in Ezra chapter 2 verses 3 to 15. They're connected with the earlier migration. The reference to the sons of Adonaiqam, who came later, or who came last, in verse 13, might be a reference to a whole family that had returned in these two migrations, the first part in the first migration, and then those that remained in the second. Among the numbers of those returning are two representative priests, and also a descendant of David, Hattash. Phinehas was the son of Eliezer, who was the son who inherited the high priesthood from Aaron. In the return, he was represented by Gershom. Ithamar, the other son of Aaron, was represented by Daniel. Along with these men, there were 12 lay families. Andrew Steinman notes that

Pehath-Moab was split in two. The household of Joab, mentioned in verse 9, is also mentioned in chapter 2 verse 6. There he is mentioned as one of the two halves of the family of Pehath-Moab.

Altogether, they number 1,512 men. There are 12 heads of the lay families. There's Ezra, two representatives of the priestly families, and a descendant of David. There was a slight possibility, given the focus on the number 12 throughout this passage, that we're supposed to see some significance in the fact that 1,512 is 12 plus 12 times 5 cubed. When Israel first departed from Egypt, they had left with around 600,000 people, ordered in 50s, which is 12 times 10 to the power of 350s. The group gathered together around the river near Aheba. Encamped there for three days, they prepared for the journey. During this time, Ezra found that there were none of the sons of Levi among the company. As he needed such a group among his company, he sent a delegation to Cacipha to summon some qualified Levites. Commentators have speculated whether there was some sort of temple or site of Jewish worship at Cacipha, something that would have explained why Ezra summoned people from them, and why it's referred to as the place Cacipha. We know, for instance, of the existence of a Jewish temple at this period at Elephantine, in Egypt. Perhaps there were other sites in Babylonia. This, of course, raises difficult questions about how to relate this to the single site of worship that is spoken of in Deuteronomy. Were special allowances being made for diaspora communities, for instance? Ezra hadn't sought for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect the company. Rather, the company fasts and prays, seeking that the Lord would give them the protection that they need. There are a lot of similarities between the story of Ezra's company and their journey towards Jerusalem, and the story of the Exodus. But there are also several differences.

In the Exodus, the children of Israel face military opposition. Military opposition from the Egyptians, which is defeated at the Red Sea, and then military opposition from the Amalekites, which the Lord also delivers them from. By contrast, Ezra's company does not face military opposition. However, they are protected by the Lord. The Lord is their defence. In Ezra's company, we see the character of this Exodus as one that is much more akin to a pilgrimage. They are numbered like the children of Israel. There are priests and Levites specially charged with the management and the carrying of holy items. They leave around the time of Passover, two days before Passover, on the twelfth day of the first month. Similar to, but not the same day as, the departure from Egypt in the Exodus.

Artaxerxes, and presumably some rich private benefactors, have entrusted to Ezra an immense quantity of riches, all of which has been dedicated to the service of the Lord in the temple. Ezra commits this to the charge of twelve of the leading priests and ten of their relatives. They and the Levites must guard it until they reach Jerusalem, where they will weigh it out to the priests and the leaders of the people in the chambers of the house of the Lord. After arriving in Jerusalem, they wait for three days, and then on the fourth day they weigh out all of the treasures to the leaders. As a scrupulous and careful official, Ezra ensures that everything is registered. At this time, the returning company also offer a great number of sacrifices to the Lord. The number of sacrifices of the bulls, rams, lambs and goats, can with the exception of the seventy-seven lambs, all be divided by twelve.

[ 9 : 36 ] This, along with other numbers in the chapter, suggests that Ezra's company had a strong sense of themselves as representing all of Israel. Some variants of the text have seventy-two instead of seventy-seven lambs, a number that would be divisible by twelve. However, on textual grounds, the number seventy-seven does seem to be the one to be preferred. Ezra's company also delivers commissions from the king to the satraps and the governors of the province beyond the river.

The reference to plural satraps perhaps suggests the presence of satraps of other realms beyond that of the province of beyond the river, or the trans-Euphrates. The instructions that they are being given presumably relate to the way that they are to treat Jews within their territories, along with the support they should give to Ezra's mission.

A question to consider. In verse 22, Ezra recounts his expression of confidence in the protection of the Lord to King Artaxerxes. In the prophets, God had condemned his people for causing his name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles. How, in the return from exile, are the Jews becoming a reason for Gentile people and nations to honour the Lord and his name.