

Ezra 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 July 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 7. Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra the son of Saraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shalom, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraoth, son of Zerahiah, son of Uziah, son of Bukhiah, son of Abishur, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest, this Ezra went up from Babylonia.

He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. And there went up also to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants.

And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel. This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel. Artaxerxes king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, peace. And now I make a decree that any one of the people of Israel, or their priests, or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. For you are sent by the king and his seven counsellors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counsellors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their

God that is in Jerusalem. With this money then you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem.

And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury. And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river. Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cores of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons.

[3 : 06] We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on any one of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God. And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province beyond the river, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach.

Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment, or for confiscation of his goods, or for imprisonment.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Finally, in chapter 7 of the book named after him, Ezra himself comes upon the stage. His voice isn't heard until verse 27 though. Ezra is a priest with a known lineage stretching back to Aaron, through several high priests, Sariah, Hilkiah, Phinehas, Eliezer, and Aaron. We have a fuller genealogical list in 1 Chronicles chapter 6 verses 3 to 15. It is quite likely that a number of names were dropped out between Azariah and Miriath. The names between these two are included in the list in 1 Chronicles. There seems to be no reason to leave them out here, and it's easy to imagine the eyes of an early scribe copying the text, accidentally skipping, as two Azariahs and Amariahs are in the list. This sort of scribal error is known as parablepsis. Ezra is here described as the son of Sariah. In 2 Kings chapter 25 verses 18 to 21, Sariah's death at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is described. His death occurred around 586 BC, with the downfall of Jerusalem. It seems likely that there were at least two or three generations dividing Ezra and Sariah. They probably aren't mentioned here, as the priesthood wasn't exercised in the ordinary way during the period of the exile.

The events of the chapter are dated to the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, around 458 BC. The temple had been finished about 60 years previously, according to the typical chronology. Ezra is a priest and a devoted scribe skilled in the law of Moses. On these two accounts, he is well qualified for the task ahead of him. He seems to have exercised some administrative authority as a skilled scribe in the Persian Empire, in addition to being a trained and gifted Taurus scholar. As such a scribe, he would have been well able to teach the people and to lead a party of priests and Levites back to Jerusalem.

[6 : 01] Although he has a high priestly lineage, however, he does not appear to be the high priest himself. Nevertheless, we should consider affinities between Ezra and Moses. Moses played a priestly role in the setting up of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system. He led the people, but also instructed the people in the law in the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra's party would re-establish a fuller and more ordered worship in the temple, and he would also instruct the people in the law, much as Moses had instructed the people in the law in the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra travels from the first to the fifth month to get from Babylonia to Jerusalem, around from April to August. The first few days of the journey seem to be days of gathering the party together and preparing them for what lies ahead. In Ezra chapter 8 verse 31, we see that they set out properly on the twelfth day of the first month.

Then we departed from the river Aheba 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.

Once again, the agency of the Lord is highlighted. At various other points in Ezra, God is spoken of as stirring up the people's hearts to take certain actions. In the preceding chapter, we were told that the rebuilding of the temple took place according to God's decree. Here the Lord's agency is described as a matter of the good hand of God being upon Ezra. Ezra set his heart to study, to observe, and to teach the law of the Lord, and the Lord set his good hand upon him. The hand of the Lord being upon people is usually associated with prophecy. However, its use of Ezra the scribe could perhaps be seen as an extension of the notion of receiving the guidance of the Lord, typically associated with prophecy, to the skilled study of the scriptures. A man like Ezra, gifted in the study of the scriptures, is bringing the guidance of the Lord much as the prophet does to the people.

The role of such teachers would become much more important in the years that followed, as there would not be inspired prophets in the same way. In verses 12 to 26, we have another Aramaic section of the book, a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest. This letter, along with Ezra's expression of praise in response to it in verses 27 to 28, is probably taken from Ezra's personal memoirs. King Artaxerxes and his seven counsellors send Ezra to set up the true worship of God within Jerusalem. While the king was a pagan and a polytheist, this was the more general policy of the empire. He sends Ezra to superintend matters in Jerusalem, but also to teach the word of the Lord. With Ezra, he sends a great quantity of silver and gold, with which Ezra can buy materials for the temple and its worship. Once again, God is building up his house with the gifts of Gentiles.

Ezra is clearly a trusted servant of the king. He is given a lot of prudential latitude in how he handles the expenses. The king also seems to have a measure of understanding of the worship of the Lord that may perhaps evidence the influence of high-ranking Jewish officials and counsellors.

[9 : 06] Over this period of time in the Persian Empire, there were figures like Esther and Mordecai, Nehemiah and Ezra, all figures enjoying high office and with the ear of various Persian kings.

As a new superintendent, Ezra is instructed to set up magistrates and judges, establishing the law of the king, but also establishing the law of God by teaching the people the Torah. Ezra is distinguished in the eyes of the king as a man who has wisdom that has been given to him by God. Perhaps the king has seen in Ezra the character of a man who has devoted himself to study of the word of God and wants to support Ezra in his teaching of the Jewish people. He puts the full weight of the Persian government behind Ezra. Anyone who doesn't cooperate with the law of the king, but also with the law of God, will be liable to suffer death, banishment, confiscation of goods, or imprisonment. Ezra is astonished and encouraged by the strength of the king's authorisation, and as he gathers people together, he praises the Lord for what he has done. The king's commitment to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, recalls prophecies such as that of Isaiah chapter 60 verses 6 to 10.

A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.

All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nibiath shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful. Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you. For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favour, I have had mercy on you. The Lord is starting to fulfil such promises, as he is using pagan kings to rebuild his house and his walls, to glorify the temple, and also to upbuild his people.

A question to consider. A number of commentators note parallels between the story of Ezra in this and following chapters, and the story of Moses in the Exodus. What parallels can you see, and what greater theological connections might they help us to draw?