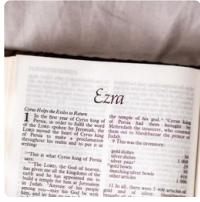


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Ezra 7 - 8



Ezra - Steve Gregg

In this segment, Steve Gregg provides a commentary on chapters 7-8 of the biblical book of Ezra. The passage covers Ezra's journey to Jerusalem with a group of exiles authorized by King Artaxerxes, who grants Ezra full authority to rearrange the spiritual and political structure of the region beyond the river. This journey is seen by Ezra as a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Isaiah. Throughout the segment, Gregg provides historical context and insights into the text's deeper meanings.

Transcript

We made it through the first six chapters of Ezra last time. Actually, in the first two sessions. We've had two sessions covering six chapters.

We have only four chapters remaining to the end of the book. The time frame changes at this point. Between chapter 6 and chapter 7, there is an interval of about 58 years.

Which means that by the time we come to chapter 7, all the characters who were significant in the first six chapters are probably dead. We don't know when they died, but since they were adults in the previous section, and about 60 years have passed, they'd have to be in their 80s if they were still alive at this point. It's not necessarily normal in those days for people to live that long, so we probably are looking at an entirely new population in Jerusalem at this point.

And a new star of the show, a new hero of the story, and that's going to be Ezra himself. In the previous section, it was Zerubbabel and Joshua, the high priests. These were the ones whom Cyrus authorized to take the first batch of exiles back to Jerusalem.

And they would then build the temple. And they did. They had supplies provided by the king of Persia and also by the Jews in exile who sent treasures back with them.

And they built the temple. And so the last section ended in the year 516 BC, and that's when the temple was completed. So now it's 58 years later, and another man arises.

And this man is a lot like the man we have not yet studied, but will afterwards study,

Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were both reformers, and they both came to sort of purify the worship and the lifestyles of the people who had returned to Jerusalem and who were living in compromise. Apparently, the teaching of the law had not been very vigorously carried out, and there were many compromises and lapses in the behavior of those Jews who had returned to Jerusalem.

And perhaps they were discouraged because the temple, though it had been rebuilt, was not quite the masterpiece that Solomon's temple had been. And it was not such a thing of pride to them as it would have been if it was like Solomon's temple. But it was still something, and they had begun to worship God, but in a lackluster way.

And we find this to be true, for example, in the time of Malachi. Malachi probably was contemporary with Nehemiah. We don't know for sure.

But Nehemiah and Ezra were contemporaries. And so Malachi may have been contemporary with Ezra as well. Malachi is a prophet who spoke to the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem and complained about the lackluster approach to worship, how that they were bringing not the best animals for sacrifice, they were bringing even blind and lame animals, something forbidden in the law to do.

Obviously, the refuse of their flocks they were offering to God. They were neglecting the tithes. They were not bringing in their tithes to support the Levites and the priests.

And part of the reason for that was that the priests are said to have failed to teach the law to the people, Malachi said. Also, Malachi complains that the people are divorcing their wives, apparently in favor of marrying other women. And we find in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah that divorcing wives or marrying pagan women or both were problems that had to be addressed by Ezra and Nehemiah.

So a lot of the things that Malachi talks about were probably problems in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Malachi was contemporary with at least Nehemiah in all likelihood. Now, we come to the story then at a much later period than the period where chapter 6 left off.

A new king is reigning. Darius was reigning in Persia at the time that the last chapter closed, but now Darius is no longer in power and we have Artaxerxes reigning. It says, now after these things in the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, Ezra, the son of Sariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Shalom, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Mariah, the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Buki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phineas, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Abishua, the son of Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the chief priest.

This Ezra came up from Babylon, and he was a skilled scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his requests according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him. Now, what we find about Ezra initially is that he comes from a very pure line of priests.

It traces him all the way back to Aaron the priest, and he came down through Eleazar, and we see that he also was descended from Zadok the priest, who was the good priest in the days of David and Solomon. He's also descended from Hilkiah, who was the priest in Josiah's time, who found the book of Deuteronomy in the time that the temple was being refurbished. The high priest Hilkiah found this and gave the book to Josiah, which caused the reforms that Josiah initiated.

That was Hilkiah, who is also in the ancestry of Ezra. Also, Sariah is mentioned. Now, when it says Ezra was the son of Sariah, it's not correct probably to think of him as the first-generation removed son.

Probably just means a descendant of Sariah, because Sariah was living at the time that Jerusalem fell. He actually saw Jerusalem fall. He was the high priest then.

So this is now over 100 years later, and therefore it's not going to be just one generation between these two men. But we can see that Ezra's line was not only priestly, but it was pure priestly, and very likely he would have been the high priest, although maybe not, because of course even though he's descended from high priests, he would have to be the firstborn of his clan and of his own family, and he might not have been that. He does not go to Jerusalem and take the position of high priest in any case.

There must be a high priest in Jerusalem, but Ezra was not the one. He was instead described as a skilled scribe, and that's a very important expression, scribe. You know, in the days of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees were denounced by Jesus.

There were scribes previous to Ezra, previous to the Babylonian exile. For example, there's a man named Shibna who's referred to as a scribe in Isaiah chapter 22, I believe it is, and Shibna is called a scribe, but a scribe in those days was something like a secretary. Before the time of Ezra, a scribe was just someone who wrote things down, but Ezra began an order of scribes that was of a different type.

They didn't just write things down. They did copy the law. They were responsible for keeping the law from perishing.

It was written on perishable materials, and over time, these fall apart. If you've had any Bible for the past 20 years that you've used much, you know very well the cover's falling off and pages are falling out and things like that. When you use the Bible very much or any book very much, it does decompose.

It deteriorates. And this is true despite the fact that we have very high-tech paper and

high-tech glue and things like that that they didn't have. They used parchment and papyrus in those days, and those things are very perishable, much more perishable than the paper you buy by the ream today.

And so obviously the use of the scrolls over time would cause them to have tears and breaks and holes in them, moth holes. Perhaps they'd get wet if they were exposed to water and they'd smear. So they had to continually recopy them so they didn't lose the law.

It had to be transmitted. And the scribes in Ezra's day took on that task, and they were the scholars of the law. Of course, if you're writing the law down all the time, you're going to be exposing your mind to what it says all the time.

In fact, one of the best ways to memorize scripture includes writing it down by memory. Some people I know who've memorized the whole New Testament and significant portions of the Old Testament have said that they did so by first reading a portion out loud a few times, then trying to read it without, or trying to quote it without looking at it. And then once they could do that, they wrote it down and writing it down, they say, really cements it in the mind.

So you can imagine these scribes who are continually writing down the scripture, copying it down, how they would become extremely familiar with it. And Ezra was considered to be the first, at least the first known of this new kind of scribe who became an expert in the scriptures. So instead of just being a secretary who took down notations for the king, as scribes previously were, the term scribe came to refer to an expert in the law of Moses.

In Jesus' day, they were even called lawyers because they were the experts in the law. Many of them in Jesus' day were of the Phariseic denomination. Some were not.

Some were of the Sadducean denomination, but mostly they were Pharisees. And in Jesus' day, of course, their expertise in the law had not kept them pure because they had become externalistic in their application of the law and had, as Jesus mentioned to them in Matthew 23, 23, they had neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness in favor of keeping the small minutiae of the rituals and so forth. And so even being a mentally, intellectually an expert in the word of God doesn't mean that you're a good person, doesn't mean that you even understand what's important in the word of God.

It's possible to memorize the whole Bible and not know which things are the ones that are most important to God because, well, because a person needs to know God also, not just know the word of God. But this man clearly was of the best sort of scribe. He has spoken very highly, although some of the material that follows is written in the first person where he wrote it.

This is not the case with this chapter or chapter 10. Chapters eight and nine are written in the first person and they seem to be Ezra's own memoirs. This chapter and the last chapter seem to be narrated by another voice about him.

Now, he was a priest of the purest lineage, but he was also a man who by vocation had become a legal expert, a law. And we're not talking about the kind of lawyers we have today, attorneys who are, you know, the word attorney almost is synonymous with sleazy in our day. But we're talking about someone who was an expert in the law of God and had a heart for the law of God, as we shall see.

This man rose to the occasion to go to Jerusalem and try to restore a more biblical way of life among the people there. Now, Nehemiah did a similar kind of thing, although he went there to build walls. He also went there eventually to do some reforms.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were reformers. One difference is that we have a lot of information about Nehemiah in his book. We know how he came to be concerned about the people in Jerusalem while he was in Persia.

We know how he got commissioned by King Artaxerxes to go and bring relief to them. We don't know those things about Ezra. We don't know what it was that got Ezra interested in making the trip from Persia to Jerusalem.

It may well have been something very much like what inspired Nehemiah. What inspired Nehemiah was that someone from the exiles had come back to Persia to bring a report that things were not all that good among the new settlement in Jerusalem. And Nehemiah grieved over that and determined if God would permit, he'd go back and help them.

Ezra might have received such a report also, but we don't have any knowledge of it. We don't have any information. He just appears on the scene as one who has permission from the king to go back.

We also don't know how it was that he persuaded the king to give him this permission. All we're told is in verse six, it says, the king, the end of verse six, this is King Artaxerxes of the Persians, granted him all his requests according to the hand of the Lord, his God upon him. Now, all his request means that he apparently approached Artaxerxes and made a request.

And when we see what Artaxerxes granted to him, we probably would be correct in assuming these are the things that he actually requested. But he requested largely because the amount of support that Artaxerxes gave him was immense. The wealth and all the stuff that he gave him was so favorable that it says here this was because of the good hand of God.

Now, the hand of God is a figure of speech for the providence of God, for God's

intervention, for God's blessing. And in this section of the book of Ezra, we encountered that expression or one like it more than half a dozen times. For example, right here in verse six, it says the king granted him all his requests according to the hand of the Lord, his God upon him.

Later in verse nine, it says that he made his journey successfully. It says, according to the good hand of his God that was upon him later in this chapter in verse twenty eight. It says, so I was encouraged as the hand of the Lord, my God was upon me and I gathered chief men to go with me.

Then in chapter eight, verse 18 says, then by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us the man of understanding. So by the providence of God in 822, it says, for I was ashamed to request of the king and escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road because we had spoken to the king saying the hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek him. So the hand of God again being God's protection, God's blessing in chapter eight, verse thirty one.

And says, and the hand of our God was upon us and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from the ambush along the road. The same expression is used one time in Nehemiah in chapter two. In verse eight, Nehemiah said, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel, which pertains to the temple for the city wall and for the house that I will occupy.

And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of God upon me. Now, of course, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible. They were divided artificially later on.

So we have about seven times in these books that it makes this reference to the hand of God upon them. And therefore, the strong emphasis is on God's sovereign intervention. And one can easily see that is the case when one reads later in this same chapter, chapter seven, the letter that Artaxerxes gave to Ezra, authorizing him to do almost anything he wanted with almost any amount of money from the king's treasure that he wished to take.

There was a limit, but there was a very, very high limit. And, you know, the favor that Ezra had from the king can hardly be accounted for by anything other than just God. You know, it says in Proverbs 21.

The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, even as the rivers of water he turns it withers over, he will. And this is no doubt an example of God turning the heart of the king to be very favorable, inexplicably favorable to Ezra to go and shore up the community of the Jews in Jerusalem. Why would the king of Persia have any interest in that? Well, there would be one reason in the king's mind, although we know from Ezra

that it was really God's sovereignty that caused him to be favorable.

But the king may have had some reasoning in his head that God exploited to make him make this choice. At this present time, the Assyrian Empire was threatened by revolts down in Egypt. And it would be to the king's advantage in Persia to have a buffer state between himself and Egypt that was favorable to him, that was beholden to him.

And therefore, there was some political advantage to the king of Persia to have Judah be a strong buffer between Egypt and the rest of the empire and also for Judah to be very thankful to the king of Persia and to be very loyal to him. So this could have something to do with what motivated Artaxerxes to act as he did. Another thing that comes out in his prayers or in his letter is that the Jews should pray for him.

And he may have hoped for the assistance of all the gods of the people that he conquered, including the God of Israel, to bless his kingdom. So these things seem to motivate Artaxerxes. And according to the good hand of the Lord, he granted all of Ezra's requests.

Verse seven, some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the Nethanyms came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. And this is what, 458 BC, I believe. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

Now, that was four months that took from the first day of the first month to the first day of the fifth month is four months. They traveled 900 miles on foot. Now, even with that distance, four months is a long time to take to make that kind of a journey.

But probably they went slowly because they had old people with them and children, perhaps, and women and were not able to travel at a rapid pace. So they got there safely. And it says on the first day of the first month, he began his journey from Babylon.

And on the first day of the fifth month, he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. Now, this is a great summary verse of the man's career.

You know, not very much detail is given about Ezra's career. He was very significant and he's still ministering even when you get to Nehemiah chapter eight. Some years after this period that we're looking at, he had a long ministry in Jerusalem and he was he along with Nehemiah provided spiritual guidance and reform and purified the community so that God wouldn't have to judge them.

But very little is said specifically about his activities. We have, for example, the only actual reform that is recorded in this book in chapters nine and 10 is that he caused people who had married wives that they should not have married to put them away. So

the breaking up of unlawful marriages was the only act of reform that's recorded on his part here.

Although in Nehemiah chapter eight, he also is seen being the one who's reading the law to the people and teaching the law to the people on the ceremony of tabernacles. But again, not much detail about his reforms, which extended over many decades. And he must have done a lot of reforming.

Yet this one verse summarizes pretty much his whole career, and it's a good summary. It really is, to my mind, a complete statement of what makes a person a good spiritual leader, what makes a person a good biblical leader and biblical teacher. It says Ezra had prepared his heart to do three things to seek the law of the Lord, which means to study it, to master it.

He had become an expert in it, as we find. And then to do it. And then to teach it in Israel.

So these are the things in the proper order that a person must do to be a spiritual leader. He must, first of all, heed the word of God. Now, we have the Bible.

There were limits to how much written scriptures were available in some of the early days in the Old Testament times. In the time of Christ, they only had the Old Testament scriptures, and we have now Old and New Testament scriptures. But even before there were the complete scriptures, the word of the Lord came through prophets and other people.

They didn't only have the written scriptures. They had the prophetic words. In this case, the scribes of Ezra's sort almost replaced the prophets.

There were prophets, but the scribe gave more daily guidance, it would appear, to the post-exilic community. And that daily guidance was the application of the law, the law that Moses had received from God and given to Israel. And Ezra had sought and studied the law.

Now, he'd done so because he had set his heart to do so. He had prepared his heart to do so. And this is a choice that someone makes.

They either choose or do not choose to make the word of God the focus of their life and the focus of their attention and of their study and of their meditation. And the Psalms, of course, were exhorted to meditate day and night on the law of the Lord. And he apparently had done that, too.

Seeking the law of the Lord, mastering the law of the Lord is not simply a matter of study, but also of meditation. Study simply familiarizes you with what it says. Meditation is the activity by which the law or the word of God and its application to your life is

presented to your thoughts and to your mind.

God brings application as you meditate day and night upon it. This is all part of seeking the law of the Lord. And I'm sure that Ezra had done much of that.

But he also wanted to do it. It's very important. This to do it falls in between seeking it and teaching it and seeking the law of the Lord.

If you're not intending to do it is a waste of your time. James said, do not be hearers of the word, only be doers of the word and not hearers only or else you're deceiving your own self. If you study the Bible, but you have no intention of obeying it, or maybe you have a half-hearted intention of obeying it, but you never carry it out.

Then you are you're actually the more condemned for having known more that you did not obey to him to whom much is given of him. Much will be required. And God expects us to do what he said.

Jesus gave those instructions to his disciples in the upper room and said, if you know these things, you're happy if you do them. And doing them is what is necessary. Jesus said, why do you call me Lord, Lord, and you don't do the things that I say.

So it's not a matter of simply hearing and reading and knowing and understanding what the Bible says. It's being determined to obey it to the doing it is the necessary part that makes studying it a value. But it's the doing it is also the prerequisite for the third thing, and that's teaching it.

You see, doing the word of God is the necessary link between study and teaching. You shouldn't study the Bible if you're not going to obey it. And you shouldn't teach it unless you are obeying it.

Obeying it is really what it's all about. Obedience to the word of God is the reason for study. And it's the qualification for teaching.

He set his heart, he prepared his heart to seek the Lord and to do it and to teach. And a person should not teach the word of God unless they have made it their goal in life to obey it. Now, nobody obeys it perfectly.

And so you can't really wait until you're sinless before you teach the word of God. You can't wait until you're completely you have all your ducks in a row and never make any mistakes. And your life is flawless before you teach us.

We'd never have any teachers. But it must be the determination of the one who teaches that it's even more important to him or her that he or she is living what they're going to say. I personally think that there's far more teachers and pastors and so forth who can tell you what the Bible says than there are who can show you what it looks like to obey

it.

And I think that the demonstration in a person's life has perhaps even more impact. Or maybe it's that which gives impact to the words of the teaching. If you hear somebody teaching a certain thing and holding a certain standard, but they don't care to obey it, then, of course, you have to wonder whether they believe it.

And if they don't seem to have conviction about the things they're saying because it doesn't make a rule for their own life and their own behavior, then their teaching is essentially empty, it seems to me. And here we have Ezra having all of his priorities in order. He wants to seek the law of the Lord and upon learning it, he wants to do it.

And upon doing it, he wants to teach others how to do it. He doesn't want to teach others how to do it before he's doing it, but he wants to do it first so that he can model and teach it. You do teach both by your modeling and by your words.

So these three things are what he had prepared his heart to do. And this is given as the explanation of why the good hand of God was upon him. That's how it reads.

According to the good hand of his God upon him for means because Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and so forth. So God bless this man's journey and bless this man's ministry because he had made these commitments. Now, it's strange because what we've read in verses one through ten are a summary of his journey from Persia to Jerusalem.

And it's covered. The journey is covered over in just a verse or two here. And we're told that some of the children of Israel, priests, Levites and singers and gatekeepers and so forth came with him.

And we tell about their leaving Persia on the first day of the first month and arriving in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month. But that journey is passed over without any detail given until chapter eight. This is just a summary statement.

We're going to go back in chapter eight and tell about that journey. So we've just been introduced to the fact of the journey in the first ten verses of this chapter. And then in chapter eight, we're going to read about the actual journey that they made during those four months.

Now, in between this material and that which is in chapter eight is this letter which was given to Ezra by Artaxerxes. Now, we are told in verse six that the king granted him all his requests. So what is granted is here enumerated in this letter.

And that must reflect what Ezra requested, how he got an audience with the king of Persia to lay out such audacious requests. And how you know how the king was persuaded to do this. The details are not given to us, except in the statement that the

good hand of God was upon him.

And that's really the only explanation that can be imagined for such abundant carte blanche that was given to Ezra by the king of Persia. It says in verse 11, now, this is the copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave Ezra, the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord. And of his statutes to Israel, and here's how the letter reads, it's actually addressed to Ezra.

Not to inform Ezra so much as perhaps just so Ezra could show this letter in the places where he needed to, you know, to cash in on what's being granted the letter. He could show that it was addressed to him and he was told that he could do these things. Artaxerxes, king of kings to Ezra, the priest, scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace and so forth.

I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites in my realm who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem may go with you. And wherever you are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the law of your God, which is in your hand. Now he's making this voluntary.

None of the Jews had to leave the realm of Persia. They could stay there, but if any wish to go, he was giving them permission with this letter to volunteer to go with him. And he mentions with the permission of the king and his seven counselors.

It's known from secular records that the kings of Persia had staff of seven counselors, just like our president has, you know, 10 cabinet members and a zillion czars. You know, they had seven counselors and the Persian kings had mentioned also in Daniel. And so we have historical authenticity here just in the details.

And whereas you are to carry the silver and the gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, and whereas all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests are to be freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem. Now, therefore, be careful to buy with this money, bowls, rams and lambs with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem. And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God.

Also, the articles that are given to you for the service of the house of your God deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. Apparently, some of the articles of the temple had failed to be delivered back to Jerusalem in the days of Cyrus. When Cyrus had made the decree allowing 50000 exiles to go back to Jerusalem, he had also brought out from the temple of the Babylonian God those articles from the Jewish temple that had been taken

by Nebuchadnezzar and Zerubbabel and Joshua were among the people.

They were allowed to take those back, but they must have found some more that had not been taken. So he gave them to Ezra to take back with him. He says in verse 20, and whatever more may be needed for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide pay for from the king's treasury.

And I, even I, Artaxerxes, the king, do issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the region beyond the river. That'd be everything, of course, on Israel's side of the Euphrates, which is a lot of territory that whatever Ezra, the priest, the scribe of the law of God of heaven may require of you. Let it be done diligently up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cores of wheat and 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil and salt without prescribed limit.

Now, these measurements, a talent is 75 pounds. So that's a lot of silver and gold. A core was six bushels.

And so he could ask for 600 bushels of wheat from any of the treasurers on the other side of the Euphrates and up to 100 baths of wine. A bath is six gallons. So 600 gallons of wine they could ask for.

So there's they could be well provided for, obviously, and no limit to the salt. Whatever amount of salt they wanted and salt was expensive in those days, it wasn't easy to come by salt. We have more modern high tech ways of purifying and separating salt from the ground and from the ocean.

But they didn't have those back then. It was very expensive. Salt was very precious.

Whatever 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? Also, we inform you that it shall not be lawful to impose tax, tribute or custom on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, nethinim or servants of this house of God. So I guess the tax exemption for church goes back that far.

And you, Ezra, according to your God given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the river. All such as know the laws of your God and teach those who do not know them. Now, everyone, not just the Jews, but everyone who is south and west of the Euphrates would be.

Ezra would have the power to appoint governors to those regions who would teach the law of God. And most of those people would be pagans. But Artaxerxes is so impressed with Ezra that he's given him full authority to rearrange the whole spiritual and political structure of that region, of that province that the Persians ruled over.

And we have to assume that since we only have a little bit recorded of what Ezra did,

that part that was not recorded probably had to do with actually traveling around those areas and appointing governors and making sure that the law of God was taught there. Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be death or banishment or confiscation of goods or imprisonment. In other words, whatever your law requires, whatever the penalties are for violation, I'm authorizing you to be able to do all of them up to and including the capital punishment.

Now, in this, the Persians gave greater latitude to the Jews to practice their religion than the Romans later did. The Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to govern their own people and to judge and punish lesser cases of law, but the Jews were not allowed by under the Romans to execute people. Capital punishment had to be approved of by the Roman officials and they didn't have the *carte blanche* that was given to Ezra here.

Ezra could exercise any penalty that the law required with the king's permission. Now, that letter is obviously a very generous apportionment to Ezra and therefore he says in verse 27, Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart to beautify the house of the Lord, which is in Jerusalem and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. So I was encouraged as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me and I gathered chief men of Israel to go up with me.

Now, it has told us in the first 10 verses about Ezra and his company's arrival in Jerusalem. But obviously, now that he's gone back to tell us about this letter that authorized his journey, he's gone back to the very beginning of the whole episode. He's got the letter in hand and so he tells us how he gathered chief men of Israel to go with him.

And in chapter 8, it tells us more of the details of that journey. The journey whose end and completion has already been reported in the first 10 verses of chapter 7 is now we flash back to see how that was how that developed. Now, I would point out that in verse 27.

Ezra says that God has put such a thing as this in the king's heart to beautify the house of the Lord. This expression to beautify the house Lord is found one of the place in scripture in Isaiah. And it's very possible.

I'd say probable that Ezra is thinking about Isaiah when he uses this unusual expression. Isaiah 60. And verse seven, this passage is talking about how God will bring the Gentiles.

To worship along with the Jews and its ultimate fulfillment is in the New Covenant era, our own our own time, but Ezra may have seen this Gentile king making these provisions for him to be a fulfillment of sorts to this to this prediction. For example, in chapter 60 of Isaiah, verse three, it says the Gentiles should come to your light and kings to the

brightness of your rising kings will be affected. Gentile kings will be affected by the light of God's glory among the Jews.

And in this passage in verse seven, it says all the flocks of Keter shall be gathered together to you. The Rams of Nebbioth shall minister to you. They shall ascend with acceptance on my altar and I will glorify the house of my glory.

The word glorify here is the same as the word beautify. He says, I will beautify my house or glorify my house. Now, God will glorify his house through the offerings brought from the Gentiles.

That's what Isaiah says. Now, as I said, I believe Isaiah's prophecy has its ultimate fulfillment in the church. God's house today is the body of Christ.

We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a house that is being contributed to largely by Gentiles. We are the living stones that make up this house and are even our service and our gifts and so forth to God are building up this house.

And offering spiritual sacrifices and so forth, I believe that Isaiah's words have a spiritual fulfillment, but the Jews and their prophets, whenever they spoke about the return of the exiles from Babylon, they saw this as a type of the messianic age. This is also true when they spoke about the Exodus. There are two times in Israel's history when God had had them extended period away from their own promised land and then brought them back somewhat miraculously.

One of those times is, of course, when they spent those years in Egypt. God had had Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the promised land, but they went down into Egypt and the people were separated from the land for hundreds of years. Then in the Exodus, God miraculously brought them back to their land and established them there.

Then, much later, they were carried away into Babylon and they were kept away from their land against their will then. But God miraculously raised up Cyrus and put it in his heart and our exerts his heart to make decrees to restore people to their land and rebuild the temple. So twice God restored the Jews to their land from pagan lands.

And the Exodus and the return of the exiles from Babylon forever afterward to the Jewish mind was an emblem of the messianic age. At least it was to the prophets, because Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and other prophets make reference to this. They predict because they didn't live to see it, but they predict the return of the exiles from Babylon.

And in the very passages where they're predicting this return, they go on and talk about how the Messiah will reign. They morph these passages about the return of the exiles into passages about the messianic kingdom because they see the return of the exiles from Babylon, the deliverance of the salvation of Israel from Babylon, as they also saw the Exodus, the salvation of Israel from Egypt, as both of them are types and shadows of

the salvation of God's people from sin through the Messiah. So Ezra seems to see Artaxerxes' favorable attitude and the generosity of his giving these great abundant wealth and gifts to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem as probably he sees it as a fulfillment of Isaiah 60, verse 7, where that special terminology is used the only other place.

And Isaiah, of course, wrote considerably earlier than Ezra's time, like 300 years earlier. Now. It says, so I was encouraged.

At the end of verse 28. As the hand of the Lord, my God was upon me and I and I gathered chief men of Israel to go up with me. And in chapter eight, he lists the families that went with him, says these are the heads of their father's houses.

And this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes. Of the sons of Phineas. Gershom of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel and of the sons of David, Hattush.

Now, Phineas and Ithamar were the two branches of the priestly line. After Nadab and Abihu had died in that incident when the temple opened or the tabernacle opened the first day in Leviticus chapter 10, there were four sons of Aaron. Two of them were destroyed that day by their in their sacrilegious behavior.

And then the remaining priests who would ever forever afterwards come would be from the lines of Phineas and Ithamar. And so we have some from those two branches. Then also from David, we assume this means King David, but he wasn't a priest.

Yet, it almost seems like his someone from his line is also being included in the priesthood for reasons that may not be easy to understand. But we do know that David was a man whose life definitely was outside the box in terms of Jewish orthodoxy. I mean, he ate the showbread.

I mean, only priests are supposed to that. David wasn't supposed to do that, but he ate the showbread and that was considered to be OK. You know, he is the one who moved the ark to Jerusalem.

He's he seemed to be almost given the status of a priest. Not quite. Anyway, David has a descendant who seems to be of this this priestly leadership of the sons of Shekinah, of the sons of Pirosh, Zechariah.

And registered with him were one hundred and fifty males of the sons of Pahath Moab, Elihu and I, the son of Zerahiah and with him two hundred males. And it goes on, of course, of these different names. The names are not going to be important for us to remember or to know.

It's just a list. And it has the numbers of persons in each group in verse five, three

hundred males in verse six, fifty males in verse seven, seventy males, verse eight, eighty males, nine, two hundred and eighteen males. And verse ten, one hundred and sixty males in eleven.

It says twenty eight males, one hundred and ten males in verse twelve, sixty males in verse thirteen and seventy males in verse fourteen. Along with these different heads of families. Now, this is only the males, so there were probably as many females.

And since these would not all be unmarried people, they probably had children with them, too. So it is thought that the total number, if you include women and children, that went back to them was perhaps approaching five thousand. Now, that's a pretty big company, but not anywhere near as big as the company that went back with Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel took back fifty thousand. So this is only a tenth the size of the group that went back with Zerubbabel earlier. Now, verse 15 talks about some others who went with him.

Basically, thirty eight Levitical families went with him, says in verse 15. Now, I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava. This river is not really a river, but probably a canal.

There were a lot of canals that carried water between the Euphrates and various populated areas. The river Kibar, where Ezekiel saw his visions, was probably one of those canals. Ahava is believed by scholars to have been one of those canals off of the Euphrates.

And he says, I gathered these people there and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests and found none of the Levites there, none of the sons of Levi there. Strangely, there were priests, but we're talking about the lesser clergy.

We're talking about the Levites who are not priests. And there were there were non-Levites. There were other tribes, but for some reason there were no Levites in the group.

And he couldn't go back without any Levites. So he says, then I sent for Eleazar, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, another Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshulam, leaders, also for Jorib and Elnathan, another Elnathan, apparently lots of Elnathans in this group, men of understanding. And I gave them a command for Edo, the chief man at the place of Cassiphia.

No one knows where Cassiphia was, but but apparently it was a place where he expected to find plenty of Levites. Maybe it was a like a Levitical city in the exile. And I told them what they should say to Edo and his brethren, the Nethanim at the place Cassiphia, and that they should bring us servants for the house of our God.

Then by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding of the sons of Mali, the son of Levi, and son of Israel named Cherubiah with his sons and brothers, 18 men. And Heshabiah and with him Jeshiaiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, 20 men. Also the Nethanim, who I mentioned were Gibeonites, who had been part of that Canaanite people that made that agreement by deceiving Joshua.

They were the Nethanim and had become loyal servants in Israel. Woodcutters and water bearers is what they were doing. It says also the Nethanim whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites, 220 Nethanim, all of them were designated by name.

Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from him the right way for us and our little ones and our possessions. For I was ashamed to request of the king and escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road because we had spoken to the king saying, the hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all those who forsake him. So we fasted and entreated our God for this and he answered our prayer.

Now this is kind of humorous almost that ordinarily when you travel with tons of gold and tons of silver over a period of 900 miles, you got to watch out for raiding, you know, nomadic Bedouin thieves and brigands and so forth. You have to have a military escort for that kind of an entourage. And in fact Nehemiah when he went from Persia to Jerusalem did ask the king and received such a military escort.

We read about that in Nehemiah chapter 2 verses 7 through 9. However, Ezra didn't feel comfortable asking, not because he thought it wouldn't be granted. The king had granted him all his requests up to this point. They asked for a military escort would actually be a reasonable request, you know, so that the money that the king gave wouldn't be stolen.

But Ezra, the reason he didn't want to ask is not because he thought he was asking too much but because he thought it would contradict what he had boasted about God. He had boasted to the king that his God takes care of his people and he seemed like, you know, if I say that and then I ask for Persian soldiers to keep us safe, how consistent is that going to look? And so he said I boasted in God and we're going to just depend on God and show the king of Persia that in fact God does take care of us. We're going to be unprotected on this long journey where, you know, carrying tons of silver and gold and yet we're going to fast and pray that God will protect us.

And he did. It says he answered our prayer. It says that in verse 23.

It also says it in verse 31 where it says then we departed from the river of Ahava on the

12th day of the first month to go to Jerusalem and the hand of our God was upon us. He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road. This doesn't mean that they never experienced any.

They may have. There may have been groups that tried to ambush them or enemies attacked them but God delivered them from them just as he delivered Israel when they came out of Egypt. They didn't have a military escort and they were even attacked by the Amalekites but God delivered from them.

And so we don't know really if there were people who attacked them but could not defeat them or if God simply prevented them from encountering such opposition. But they recognized that was the answer to their prayer. It certainly would have to be seen that way because they would be a very attractive target to robbers with their women and children and their riches and so forth.

It wouldn't be hard for a large group of nomadic tribesmen to come and take advantage of them. Verse 24, then I separated 12 of the leaders of the priests, Sherabiah, Hashabiah and 10 of their brethren with them and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, the articles of the offering of the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes and all Israel who were present had offered. I even weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver.

That is 25 tons. 25 tons of silver. I don't know what the price of silver is today but I'll bet it's something like 30 pounds, \$30 an ounce.

That's, what is it, 44? Yeah, it's going up and up. In fact, I heard that gold is like \$1,800 today. Amazing, wow.

That's a good sign for people who own gold, a bad sign for virtually everybody else. The economy's in bad shape. But when you consider that that's counting in ounces, this is counting in tons.

Tons of silver, 25 tons of silver and 100 talents or that's three and a quarter tons of gold and plus gold basins and silver articles and things like that. These were committed to the hands of the priests to keep in safekeeping on the journey. In verse 28, I said to them, you are holy to the Lord.

The articles are holy also. That is, the priests and the articles are dedicated to the Lord and therefore it's appropriate that holy men should carry the holy articles. However, they'd better act holy with all that money.

It says, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the Lord God of your fathers. Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers houses of Israel in Jerusalem in the chambers of the house of the Lord. Now, I said, I know the weight of this stuff and you're going to weigh it

when we get to the other end too.

So make sure none of it disappears anywhere. So the priests and the Levites received the silver and the gold and the articles by weight to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God. Then we departed from the river Ahava on the 12th day of the first month to go to Jerusalem and the hand of our God was upon us and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.

So we came to Jerusalem and stayed there three days. Just rested probably from their journey for three days before they got down to the business that they came for. Now on the fourth day, the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of God by the hand of Meremoth, the son of Uriah, the priest, and with him was Eliezer, the son of Phineas.

With them were the Levites, Jehoshabad, the son of Jeshua, and Noodiah, the son of Benueh. With the number and weight of everything, all the weight was written down at that time. The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the Lord God of Israel, 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, and 12 male goats as a sin offering.

All this was a burnt offering to the Lord and they delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps. The satraps were the Persian governors over Persian provinces and the governors in the region beyond the river. So they gave support to the people and the house of God.

So this is basically the details of Ezra's journey. We will find in the remaining two chapters of this book of how he dealt with infractions of the law in one notable case that is given. We probably should assume that there are other types of infractions that he dealt with similarly and this may be just given as an example of them.

But we'll take a break at this point and take the other chapters when we come back.