



## Ezra - Chapter Seven

### Summary of Chapter Seven

This chapter describes how Artaxerxes gave Ezra the authority to establish the Mosaic Law in the province of Yehud, i.e. Judæa, to appoint magistrates to administer that law, and to provide for the further adornment of the temple. One of the remarkable points Artaxerxes makes in the letter of authority that he gives to Ezra is that he recognises that it was the Lord God who had stirred him to make this decision to allow Ezra and others to return to their homeland.

### **III Ezra 7:1-8:36 - Ezra the Priest Comes to Jerusalem to Establish the Law of Moses**

The narrative now skips to a time 57 years later, when Ezra the scribe is commissioned by King Artaxerxes to establish the Torah of Moses in the Jerusalem community. This section recounts Ezra's commission, his journey, and his companions.

#### **III.a Ezra 7:1-28 - King Artaxerxes gives Ezra Authority to Establish the Mosaic Law**

Refer to the chapter summary above.

##### **III.a.i Ezra 7:1-10 - The Coming and Work of Ezra**

Ezra could trace his ancestry through some of the key priests in Israel right the way back to Aaron, thus making his claim to priesthood secure. Not only that, but he had studied the Law of Moses whilst in Babylon and therefore was an expert teacher and the ideal person to return to Jerusalem to equip others for service.

<sup>1</sup> After this, in the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, <sup>2</sup> son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, <sup>3</sup> son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, <sup>4</sup> son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, <sup>5</sup> son of Abishua, son of

Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of the chief priest Aaron – <sup>6</sup> 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 upon him. <sup>7</sup> Some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants also went up to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

### Ezra 7:1-7

After this. Some 60 largely uneventful years passed between Ezra Chapters 6 and 7. The ruler of Persia at the end of that period was Artaxerxes, who is also known to history as Artaxerxes Longimanus, the successor to Xerxes, the king who married Esther. The events of the Book of Esther took place between Chapters 6 and 7.

Ezra is introduced first as a priest, his lineage going back to the chief priest Aaron, the brother of Moses; refer to Exodus 4:14 and 28:1-2. Although several of his ancestors are listed there are some generations omitted which is quite common in Jewish genealogy.

Seraiah was the last High Priest before the captivity.

Zadok was a priest under David whom Solomon appointed chief priest in place of Abiathar because the latter had supported the rebel Adonijah; refer to 1 Kings 1:7-8 and 2:35. Ezekiel regarded the Zadokites as free from idolatry: <<***But the levitical priests, the descendants of Zadok, who kept the charge of my sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from me, shall come near to me to minister to me; and they shall attend me to offer me the fat and the blood, says the Lord God. It is they who shall enter my sanctuary, it is they who shall approach my table, to minister to me, and they shall keep my charge***>> (Ezekiel 44:15-16). Zadokites held the office of high priest until 171 BC. The Sadducees were named after Zadok, and the Qumran community looked for the restoration of the Zadokite priesthood.

Hilkiah was the priest during the time of Josiah and was the one who discovered the Book of Deuteronomy that had been neglected for so many years; refer to 2 Kings Chapter 22.

Azariah also served as priest under Solomon: <<***King Solomon was king over all Israel, and these were his high officials: Azariah son of Zadok was the priest***>> (1 Kings 4:1-2).

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was the one whose zeal abated the plague that the Lord had brought upon the Israelites in their great sin of worshipping the Baal of Peor and engaging with foreign women as part of the process: <<***When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the***>>

*congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Nevertheless, those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites'>> (Numbers 25:7-11).*

This Ezra went up from Babylonia. Ezra was one of the later Jews who returned from the captivity to Judæa and Jerusalem. Although there was a first great return described in Ezra Chapters 1-2, there were also many others who returned in the years following. His name stands very high in Jewish tradition, where he came to be regarded as a second Moses, and indeed it was he, more than any other man, who stamped Israel with its lasting character as the people of the Lord.

Ezra is also a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses. No doubt God raised up a scribe with expert knowledge of the law because, after 70 years of exile, the people badly need instruction in how to live according to the Law of Moses. Ezra had apparently asked the king for permission and resources to go to Jerusalem.

A scribe might sound like a glorified secretary, someone who simply writes. That is not the idea of this description of Ezra. For the Jewish culture of that day, a skilled scribe was an expert in the Law of Moses, someone who was like a highly trained lawyer in the Word of God. Scribes were important and influential, and one might say that they had three main duties: to preserve the Word of God, to teach the Word of God, and to administrate the Word of God, in the sense of interpreting and applying it.

As messengers of the will of God, they took the place of the prophets, with this difference: instead of receiving new revelations, they explained and applied the old. Of this new order, Ezra was at once the founder and type.

By the time of Jesus there were many scribes and they were respected as lawyers of the law of God among most of the Jews of that time. However, they had degenerated greatly from the ideal originally established by Ezra, so much so that they were active opponents of Jesus and his ministry, becoming targets of his rebukes: *<<for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes>>* (Matthew 7:29); refer also to Matthew Chapter 23.

Artaxerxes is supportive, again at the prompting of God, who gives favour to Ezra: and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him; refer to the comments made on Ezra 1:1 and 6:14 for God stirring up Cyrus and Darius respectively. He comes with a new wave of migrants, priests, laity, and Levites, including singers and gatekeepers; refer to the comment made on Ezra 2:36-58. The return of exiles did not happen all at once.

<sup>8</sup> They came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. <sup>9</sup> On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him. <sup>10</sup> For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

### Ezra 7:8-10

He comes in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, i.e. 458 BC – 57 years after the temple dedication.

On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem had taken nearly four months. It was about 900 miles or 1,448 km as they would have taken a circuitous route to the west before crossing the Euphrates and turning south. This was a slow pace, probably because the caravan included children and elderly people. Ezra 8:31 indicates that there was an eleven day delay before departure as Ezra had to send for more Levites.

For the gracious hand of his God was upon him. Ezra credited his successful four month journey to God's good hand of blessing being upon him. This short summary of the expedition gives no hint of the initial disappointment and delay, the fasting and prayer, and the dangers of such a journey, which will emerge in the full account.

Ezra's mission was to teach God's statutes and ordinances, i.e. the extensive laws of God given to Moses in addition to the Ten Commandments: <<*So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you*>> (Deuteronomy 4:1), and: <<*Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently*>> (Deuteronomy 5:1), under the general rubric of the Law of the Lord, Hebrew *torah*. These are contained throughout Exodus to Deuteronomy, especially in Exodus Chapters 20-23, the Book of Leviticus, and Deuteronomy Chapters 12-26. Readers are told nothing of how this mission came to be in Ezra's heart.

The terms study, do, and teach, indeed, the whole account of Ezra Chapters 7-10, present Ezra as the ideal priest in Israel, whose task is to lead God's people in worship and holiness of life: <<*They teach Jacob your ordinances, and Israel your law; they place incense before you, and whole burnt-offerings on your altar*>> (Deuteronomy 33:10): his ministry stems from a faithful life; refer to Malachi 2:1-9 and 1 Timothy 4:6-16.

It might be said that this threefold intention is essential in anyone who wants to make an impact on others with the Word of God.

- First, to seek the Law of the Lord. This means that full impact with God's Word is made by those who diligently seek after his Word and fellowship with God in his Word.
- Second, to do it. This means that full impact with God's Word is made by those who are not only hearers of the Word, but actual doers of the Word. It has to be lived, not only known.
- Third, to teach. This means that full impact with God's Word is made by those who actually teach it to others. What has been learned in the seeking and the doing must be put into effect through the teaching of God's Word.

### III.a.ii Ezra 7:11-28 - The Letter of Artaxerxes to Ezra

The Persian King recognises the position of Ezra as a priest and teacher of the law and so he writes a letter authorising Ezra to return to Jerusalem with any others who freely wish to return with him. The letter also makes provision for Ezra to raise the funds necessary to purchase all that is required to worship the Lord when they come to the temple.

This subsection tells how Artaxerxes supported Ezra by commissioning him and providing further for the temple. The text of the letter (vv.12-26) is in Aramaic.

Artaxerxes turns to the needs of the temple, perhaps showing his own perception of Ezra's task, in accordance with Cyrus's original decree in 538 BC, 80 years earlier; refer to the comment made on Ezra 1:1.

<sup>11</sup> This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to the priest Ezra, the scribe, a scholar of the text of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: <sup>12</sup> 'Artaxerxes, king of kings, to the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven: Peace. And now <sup>13</sup> I decree that any of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom who freely offers to go to Jerusalem may go with you.

#### Ezra 7:11-13

This is a copy of the letter. The king's decree is in the form of a letter addressed to the priest Ezra, which could be used to enforce the king's command. Originals would have been placed in the Persian archives and one would be carried by Ezra for him to show to other officials as required. Further copies would have been made that could be retained by such officials and this would be one of those that was being copied into the chapter at this point.

The title king of kings was used by kings of Persia and expresses their sovereignty over many subject peoples. Daniel referred to Nebuchadnezzar with this same title: <<*You, O king, the king of kings – to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory, into whose hand he has given human beings, wherever they live, the wild animals of the field, and the birds of the air, and whom he has established as ruler over them all – you are the head of gold*>> (Daniel 2:37-38). Ultimately, the title is given to Jesus: <<*On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’*>> (Revelation 19:16).

Ezra is called the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, which possibly refers to a kind of responsibility for Jewish affairs that he already held in Babylon. Ezra was indeed more than a glorified secretary or copyist. He was a well trained expert in the Word of God.

The decree echoes that of Cyrus in authorising any Jews who wish to go to Jerusalem in Ezra 1:3. With this, Artaxerxes hoped to encourage others to go with Ezra to increase the chance of his success and to strengthen the province of Judæa.

<sup>14</sup> For you are sent by the king and his seven counsellors to make inquiries about Judæa and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, <sup>15</sup> and also to convey the silver and gold that the king and his counsellors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, <sup>16</sup> 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, given willingly for the house of their God in Jerusalem.

#### Ezra 7:14-16

The commission to make inquiries about Judæa and Jerusalem according to the law of your God no doubt reflects Ezra’s own priority, and perhaps his belief that the law is not being properly kept. It also shows he was actually sent by Artaxerxes to gather information for the king and his seven counsellors, who gave money for the temple and permit Ezra to gather further resources in the whole province of Babylonia, perhaps from non-Jews as well as Jews. Elsewhere, the seven counsellors are named: <<*Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king’s procedure towards all who were versed in law and custom, and those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king, and sat first in the kingdom)*>> (Esther 1:13-14). These may not be precisely the same individuals but it certainly points to a sevenfold council of advisors.

The silver and gold are used as part of a prophecy pointing towards the coming Messiah: <<*Collect silver and gold from the exiles – from Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah – who have arrived from Babylon; and go the same day to the house of Josiah son of Zephaniah. Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak; say to him: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord*>> (Zechariah 6:10-12).

<sup>17</sup> With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, and their grain-offerings and their drink-offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem.

<sup>18</sup> Whatever seems good to you and your colleagues to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God.

### Ezra 7:17-18

With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy. Ezra carried with him government money that was meant to advance the interests of Artaxerxes. This money was to be spent on sacrificial animals and the promotion of temple worship at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

Whatever seems good to you and your colleagues to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. The provision specifies the temple worship but also leaves extensive discretion to Ezra in his expenditure. He was to use the money wisely but was given latitude to use it as he felt was appropriate within his commission.

<sup>19</sup> The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. <sup>20</sup> And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which you are responsible for providing, you may provide out of the king's treasury.

### Ezra 7:19-20

The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God. Artaxerxes adds these to the temple treasures originally returned by Cyrus, apparently as his own gift, and finally allows Ezra to take whatever he needs from the king's treasury, i.e. from public funds.

At the start of the exile the Lord had said these vessels would be returned to their rightful place: <<*thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem: They shall be carried to Babylon, and there they shall stay, until the day when I give attention to them, says the Lord. Then I will bring them up and restore them to this place*>> (Jeremiah 27:21-22).

<sup>21</sup> 'I, King Artaxerxes, decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence,  
<sup>22</sup> up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cors of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and unlimited salt.

### Ezra 7:21-22

The decree now specifically addresses the royal treasury officials in the province Beyond the River, compelling them to make provision for Ezra up to specified limits.

The talent was about 75 lbs or 34 kg, and the amount of silver specified has been estimated at between a quarter and a third of all the annual taxation raised in the province Beyond the River. The king was certainly placing a lot of emphasis in ensuring that Judæa became a successful part of the province.

The wheat, wine, and oil would have been used for grain-offerings, for drink-offerings, and for the lamp kept lit in the temple: <<*You shall further command the Israelites to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn regularly*>> (Exodus 27:20), and: <<*Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, so that they may serve me as priests. Take one young bull and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil. You shall make them of choice wheat flour*>> (Exodus 29:1-2). With a cor at 48 gallons or 220 litres, and a bath at 5 gallons or 23 litres, the quantities would have supplied the temple's needs for perhaps two years.

Salt, supplied without limit, was for preservation and seasoning: <<*and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy*>> (Exodus 30:35), and: <<*You shall not omit from your grain-offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt*>> (Leviticus 2:13).

<sup>23</sup> Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, or wrath will come upon the realm of the king and his heirs. <sup>24</sup> We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on any of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

## Ezra 7:23-24

Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven. In all this, it is seen that Artaxerxes went to great lengths to promote the operations of the temple in Jerusalem.

In making these provisions (v.22), the king may actually intend to ward off the wrath of the God of heaven against the king and his heirs, i.e. his own kingdom, present and future; King Darius had stipulated something similar in his day: <<*Whatever is needed – young bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt-offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require – let that be given to them day by day without fail, so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children*>> (Ezra 6:9-10). This shows the motive of Artaxerxes. Like other monarchs of the Persian Empire, he wanted to placate the gods of the people and the territory that they had conquered. He believed it was good and safe policy for his kingdom to do this.

We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on any of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God. To promote the work of the temple in Jerusalem, Artaxerxes commanded that priests and other workers at the temple be given tax exempt status.

<sup>25</sup> ‘And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. <sup>26</sup> All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgement be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment.’

## Ezra 7:25-26

Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess. The king is giving Ezra powers beyond that of the normal provincial governors. As seen with men like the loyal and efficient Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River under King Darius, it was normal to write a formal petition to the king asking for him to make decrees on such matters. Here, Ezra can make such decisions for himself.

Appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God. The land was to have a judicial system based on God’s law and therefore, if carried out faithfully, it would be true justice indeed in all matters: <<*Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien*>> (Deuteronomy 1:16), and: <<*Our law does not judge*

*people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?>>* (John 7:51).

You shall teach those who do not know them. Artaxerxes gave Ezra authority to teach this generation of returned exiles. Yet he also gave authority - perhaps too much authority - to punish those who did not observe the law of your God and the law of the king.

Later passages show that Ezra was primarily a priest and scholar rather than an administrator. Yet the assurance that God had called him and had opened the doors gave Ezra the courage and strength to undertake this great task.

<sup>27</sup> Blessed be the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, <sup>28</sup> and who extended to me 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 upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

#### Ezra 7:27-28

Blessed be the Lord, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king to glorify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. Ezra knew that such generous and broad support and authority could only be granted by God. God stirred up the heart of King Cyrus as noted in Ezra 1:1 and the associated comments. Later, he did the same with Darius; refer to Ezra 6:1-12.

To glorify the house of the Lord. The author uses the same terms as: *<<All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house>>* (Isaiah 60:7), indicating that he sees this event as fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah uses the language of his times to portray the exalted spiritual destiny of God's people. These same words are used here to describe the mission on which the Persian king sent him to Jerusalem, portraying that mission as part of the fulfilment of this passage.

I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was upon me. The narrative turns to the first person singular, indicating that the account is now taken from Ezra's own writings. Ezra was certainly encouraged; not so by the king's support but more so because it was all clear evidence of God's support and blessing. Ezra found great encouragement in knowing that the hand of the Lord was upon him. This is a recurrent theme in Chapters 7 and 8.

I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me. This is not a reference to any men necessarily descended from the former northern kingdom. Anyone returning to Judæa is now considered a member of a reunited Israel - one nation, one God.