



Ezra - Chapter Eight

III Ezra 7:1-8:36 - Ezra the Priest Comes to Jerusalem to Establish the Law of Moses (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Eight

This chapter gives a more extended account of Ezra's return to Jerusalem. Readers learn of those who returned with Ezra (vv.1-14), of how he recruited additional priests (vv.15-20), of their prayer for the journey (vv.21-23), and of Ezra's provision for the temple (vv.24-36).

III.b Ezra 8:1-36 - Ezra and a New Wave of Returnees bring Gifts for the Temple

Refer to the chapter summary above.

III.b.i Ezra 8:1-14 - Heads of Families Who Returned with Ezra

The party that returned with Ezra was a considerable addition to the community in Judah, especially in terms of the priesthood.

¹ These are their family heads, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of King Artaxerxes: ² Of the descendants of Phinehas, Gershom. Of Ithamar, Daniel. Of David, Hattush, ³ of the descendants of Shecaniah. Of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered one hundred and fifty males. ⁴ Of the descendants of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred males. ⁵ Of the descendants of Zattu, Shecaniah son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males. ⁶ Of the descendants of Adin, Ebed son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males. ⁷ Of the descendants of Elam, Jeshaiiah son of Athaliah, and with him seventy

males. ⁸ Of the descendants of Shephatiah, Zebadiah son of Michael, and with him eighty males. ⁹ Of the descendants of Joab, Obadiah son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males. ¹⁰ Of the descendants of Bani, Shelomith son of Josiphiah, and with him one hundred and sixty males. ¹¹ Of the descendants of Bebai, Zechariah son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males. ¹² Of the descendants of Azgad, Johanan son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred and ten males. ¹³ Of the descendants of Adonikam, those who came later, their names being Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah, and with them sixty males. ¹⁴ Of the descendants of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with them seventy males.

Ezra 8:1-14

The party is numbered here according to their family heads. Here Ezra begins to retell the account that was summarised in Ezra 7:1-10.

Their genealogy refers to their formal registration in the list of those returning as registered, which translates the same Hebrew word.

There are two priestly divisions, namely, Phinehas the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron: <<*When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation*>> (Numbers 25:7), and Ithamar: <<*Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests – Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar*>> (Exodus 28:1). Eleazar and Ithamar were the remaining sons of Aaron following the judgement on Nadab and Abihu, which is recorded in Leviticus 10:1-7. Ezra himself was of the line of Phinehas; refer to Ezra 7:5.

Daniel is otherwise unknown, and is not the Daniel who was carried off to Babylon in 605 BC: <<*In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it*>> (Daniel 1:1), and: <<*Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah*>> (Daniel 1:6), for this is now 458 BC.

Daniel calls it the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, apparently using the Babylonian system for counting the length of a reign, while Jeremiah 25:1 calls it the fourth year, using the Jewish system. Reigns could be counted from the beginning of the New Year preceding a king’s ascension, or from the actual date of ascension, or from the beginning of the New Year following his ascension; the third system was used in Babylon.

A third division is a line of David, i.e. Hattush; refer to 1 Chronicles Chapter 3. Ezra's party therefore aims to replenish the priesthood, and perhaps also to renew the claims of the Davidic house to rule in Judah.

Shecaniah. There are three men listed with this name in Scripture, the first served in the days of King Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 31:15), the second is mentioned in Ezra 8:5, and the third in Ezra 10:2. They were all different men, as may be seen from their different genealogies.

The interest of this prominent list of names and numbers lies in the fact that, in every case but one, these groups are joining, at long last, the descendants of the pioneers from Babylonia eighty years before.

Of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered one hundred and fifty males. Adding the counts of the male members of the group together, there was a total count of at least 1,496 men in the group. Adding an estimated number of women and children (v.21), it can be surmised that the total number of the party coming with Ezra in the days of King Artaxerxes was something between 6,000 to 7,000 people.

III.b.ii Ezra 8:15-20 - Servants for the Temple

The men who were going to serve in the temple gathered together in order for Ezra to review them. There were also a number of ordinary citizens gathered who wanted to return to the land God had given them.

¹⁵ I gathered them by the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped for three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the descendants of Levi.

Ezra 8:15

Ezra was definitely the leader of this group, and in more than a spiritual sense. He led the expedition. The party camped outside Babylon by the river that runs to Ahava, no doubt one of the network of canals extending from the Euphrates. Ezra discovered that, although he had priests with him, there were none of the descendants of Levi, i.e. the lower order of clergy, the Levites. There had only been a relatively few Levites in the first migration in comparison to the priesthood as well: <<*The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the descendants of Hodaviah, seventy-four*>> (Ezra 2:40).

The Levites were different from the priests, being the larger tribe from which the family of priests, who were the direct descendants of Aaron. These were the essential workers for the system of temple worship that Ezra was to promote. Perhaps the Levites were generally too comfortable with their lives in Babylonia to go back to Jerusalem. Perhaps they were not willing to come back

to their ancestral temple duties that put them under the authority of the priests. Whatever the reason was, Ezra had the money and the authority he needed, but not the right men. A rabbinic midrash on Psalm 137 relates the legend that there were Levites in the caravan but that they were not qualified to officiate because when Nebuchadnezzar had ordered them to sing for him the songs of Zion, 'they refused and bit off the ends of their fingers, so that they could not play on the harps.' Again, this is only a legend.

¹⁶ Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, who were leaders, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were wise, ¹⁷ and sent them to Iddo, the leader at the place called Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his colleagues the temple servants at Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God.

Ezra 8:16-17

Nothing is known of Iddo or of Casiphia, to which Ezra's delegation is sent. His title of leader, literally the head of the rest, is either by ecclesiastical order or government, which the Persian kings allowed to the Jews; or by some grant or commission from the king. Casiphia was apparently a place where Levites and temple servants (refer to 1 Chronicles 9:2 and Ezra 2:43-54) might be expected to be found, and perhaps where they continued to be trained for the day when there would be a temple again in Jerusalem.

Ezra sent back to Babylonia for Levites to come and join the work in Jerusalem. He did not accept the initial failure of Levites to join the group but kept appealing for help. Ezra planned carefully in the Levite recruitment effort. He specifically chose the recruiters - nine leaders, and two men of understanding to make the appeal as persuasive as possible. Then he carefully instructed the recruiters as to what they should say, and directed them to whom they should specifically make the appeal to, i.e. to Iddo and his colleagues. Indeed, the good hand of God was upon the recruitment effort, but it was also upon the planning of it.

¹⁸ Since the gracious hand of our God was upon us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the descendants of Mahli son of Levi son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, with his sons and kin, eighteen; ¹⁹ also Hashabiah and with him Jeshaiiah of the descendants of Merari, with his kin and their sons, twenty; ²⁰ 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.

Ezra 8:18-20

They brought us a man of discretion or of understanding, namely Sherebiah. This man responded to the call and led a delegation of Levites. He is named only in Ezra and Nehemiah and not in any of the genealogies of the Chronicler.

Mahli and Merari belong to the same Levitical family, Merari being a son of Levi: <<*To Merari belonged the clan of the Mahlites and the clan of the Mushites: these are the clans of Merari*>> (Numbers 3:33).

These were all mentioned by name. The number of those who responded to Ezra's call is small and therefore easy to name, but they were symbolically important for the nation's future.

III.b.iii Ezra 8:21-23 - Fasting and Prayer for Protection

Ezra did not wish to ask the king to provide soldiers to protect them for the journey and so the people fasted, trusting that the Lord would care for his own.

²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions.

Ezra 8:21

Then I proclaimed a fast. Ezra understood the spiritual power of fasting, as a demonstration of single-minded devotion to God and his cause. Therefore he called a fast, and saw that <<*he listened to our entreaty*>> (v.23). The custom of fasting grew in importance in the exile as part of a spirit of penitence: <<*Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads*>> (Nehemiah 9:1), and: <<*In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes*>> (Esther 4:3).

As with any spiritual discipline or duty it is possible to fast without the right heart and to trust it as an empty ritual, apart from its true spiritual reality. Real fasting - fasting that is partnered with real repentance, and is not only about image: <<*The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"*>> (Luke 18:11-13) - has great power before God.

That we might deny ourselves or humble ourselves. This implied a deliberate penitential attitude, as on the Day of Atonement: <<*It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute for ever*>> (Leviticus 16:31). Yet the prayer (vv.22-23) chiefly expresses the people's trust in God as they sought to demonstrate his reality to the Persian king. The king's ongoing support, they knew, may depend on his belief in the reality and power of the God of Israel.

To seek from him a safe journey for ourselves. Safe journey is literally 'a straight way' unimpeded by obstacles and dangers: <<*Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me*>> (Psalm 5:8), <<*Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies*>> (Psalm 27:11), and: <<*he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town*>> (Psalm 107:7).

²² For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him.

Ezra 8:22

For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way. Ezra had previously expressed great confidence in the hand of God upon him and his expedition. He did not want to contradict these prior words with later actions, in asking the king for an escort of soldiers and horsemen. They needed protection because the danger was real. There was a constant threat of robbers and bandits, especially because they were transporting so many valuables. Yet because of their dependence on God, expressed through prayer and fasting, God protected them.

His power and his wrath are against all who forsake him, which was recognised by Darius who requested prayer: <<*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 6:10), as did Artaxerxes: <<*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*>> (Ezra 7:23). It is worth contrasting Ezra's policy here with Nehemiah's: <<*Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me*>> (Nehemiah 2:9).

²³ So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

Ezra 8:23

And he listened to our entreaty. God's oversight of the events of history is the background against which this entire book is written (v.31); refer also to the comment made on Ezra 1:1.

III.b.iv Ezra 8:24-30 - Gifts for the Temple

Ezra entrusts the offerings that he has gathered for the temple to the priests who are with him so that they may transport them safely to the temple.

²⁴ Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kin with them. ²⁵ 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, his counsellors, his lords, and all Israel there present had offered; ²⁶ I weighed out into their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and one hundred silver vessels worth * talents, and one hundred talents of gold, ²⁷ twenty gold bowls worth a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine polished bronze as precious as gold.

* The number of talents is omitted from the original text.

Ezra 8:24-27

I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels. Ezra divided the valuables among the leading priests, making each of them responsible for their allocation. They were responsible then to keep them safe and secure until they arrived in Jerusalem and then delivered them to the leaders of the priests and Levites there.

The amounts of silver and gold are extraordinarily large, the silver weighing around 21.6 tons or 22 tonnes, and the gold 3.3 tons or 3.4 tonnes.

The offering for the house of our God that the king, his counsellors, his lords, and all Israel there present had offered. The offerings for the temple not only came from the Jews who were remaining behind but who still wished to make a contribution to their temple in Jerusalem, it also came from the king and his nobility. This is an indication of how they viewed this powerful God of a distant nation.

Twenty gold bowls worth a thousand darics. A daric was a gold coin used throughout the Persian Empire. Introduced by Darius I at the end of the 6th Century BC, it weighed about 0.3 ounces or 8.5 grams. Beginning in the second half of the 5th Century BC, these coins with Hebrew letters on them appear in Judah. Several of them bear the name of the Persian province Yehud, i.e. Judah, which probably indicates that the province had some freedom to mint its own coins.



A typical daric

²⁸ And I said to them, ‘You are holy to the Lord, and the vessels are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill-offering to the Lord, the God of your ancestors.

Ezra 8:28

The priests themselves are holy to the Lord: <<Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, so that they may serve me as priests>> (Exodus 29:1a), namely, set aside for his service, and the precious metals and vessels have been donated into the holy sphere, and so they are also holy; refer to Exodus 30:26-29 for the law on consecrated utensils.

²⁹ Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of families in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the Lord.’ ³⁰ So the priests and the Levites took over the silver, the gold, and the vessels as they were weighed out, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.

Ezra 8:29-30

The holy vessels are rightly entrusted to the priests; they will remain in priestly possession until handed over to their counterparts in the temple itself.

III.b.v Ezra 8:31-36 - The Return to Jerusalem

The journey to Jerusalem is undertaken, the valuable items given into the temple and the people come with their worship offerings to the Lord in thanksgiving for their safe return.

³¹ Then we left the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem; the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes along the way.

Ezra 8:31

The group sets out on the twelfth day of the first month, i.e. Nisan or March/April; the plan to leave on the first day: <<*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*>> (Ezra 7:9) had been delayed by the need to send for more Levites.

The hand of our God was upon us. Ezra here repeated what is now a familiar phrase. God's hand was indeed upon them to protect, guide, and bless them. God never fails those who act in full dependence on him and therefore in complete independence of all others.

He delivered us from the hand of the enemy. Whether there were actual attacks on the group is not said, but God's protection on the journey makes this departure from Babylonia resemble the ancient exodus of Israel from Egypt; refer to Exodus 17:8-13 and the comments made on Ezra 1:1 and those made on v.21, v.22 and v.23 above.

³² We came to Jerusalem and remained there for three days.

Ezra 8:32

We came to Jerusalem. So ended the long journey from Babylonia to Jerusalem; this was on the first day of the fifth month of Ab, or July/August, so the journey of roughly 900 miles or 1,448 km lasted nearly four months; refer to the comment made on Ezra 7:9. Ezra - together with the entire group - was now in the Promised Land and in the land promised to their ancestors.

³³ On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver, the gold, and the vessels were weighed into the hands of the priest Meremoth son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui.

³⁴ The total was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

Ezra 8:33-34

On the fourth day. After a three day rest (v.32), the treasures for the temple were handed over to the priests as planned (vv.28-30).

The silver, the gold, and the vessels were weighed. Those in Jerusalem expected a proper accounting for what had been sent from Babylonia. It could be considered that this was more to prove the integrity of the men in Ezra's expedition than to disprove it. It was also a legal requirement under Persian legislation.

The total was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded. They did it all with a careful accounting, as is fitting for good stewardship of precious things.

According to Babylonian tradition, almost every transaction, including sales and marriages, had to be recorded in writing. Ezra may have had to send back a signed certification of the delivery of the treasures.

³⁵ 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.

Ezra 8:35

The returned exiles, offered burnt-offerings to the God of Israel. These burnt-offerings were to propitiate for general sin and to show dedication unto the Lord. The entire animal was burnt as a sacrifice to God. For these former exiles it was a first chance to see and worship at the rebuilt temple, and their sacrifices resemble those made at its dedication: <<*The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin-offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel*>> (Ezra 6:16-17).

Twelve bulls for all Israel. Although the people represented there may have been predominately only from Judah and Benjamin, they still offered a bullock for every tribe, as if present. It is also possible that there were some individuals present from some or all the other ten tribes, possibly even some families of each. Refer to the comment made on Ezra 6:16-17.

The reason for offering ninety-six rams and seventy-seven lambs is not so obvious, whatever conjectures about the perfect numbers it may seem to invite, for many play with the numbers twelve and seven respectively, both of which had significant connotations for the Jews at the time. Some commentators believe it was part of Ezra's quest for national unity.

And as a sin-offering twelve male goats. The sin-offering was made mostly for the idea of purification, especially for specific acts of transgression. Taking both

sacrifices together, they addressed both the general problem of sin and unspecified but specific sins.

³⁶ They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River; and they supported the people and the house of God.

Ezra 8:36

They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors. As well as his personal copy of the king's decree, Ezra would have had documents for the local government officials with their instructions regarding this group of travellers and the support they were entitled to in Jerusalem. A satrap was a governor of a satrapy or province, such as Beyond the River. The double expression here of satraps and governors is a way of referring to the governing officials, who continue to have a good relationship with the community in Judæa.

They supported the people and the house of God. This is a reminder of the great purpose of Ezra's expedition. In the final two chapters Ezra administers strict correction as a reformer; but he did not come primarily as a disciplinarian. He came to give support to the people and the house of God, and only dealt with the problems of sin and compromise as necessary in the course of this greater goal.

In this respect, there are those who see Ezra as a type of and forerunner to Jesus: <<I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world>> (John 12:47).