

Ezra 7-10 – Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

I. THE RETURN UNDER ZERUBBABEL • Chs. 1–6

Last Wednesday we covered chs. 1-3 which recounts the first return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon after 70 years of captivity.

The Persian king Cyrus the Great issued a proclamation for them to return & rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

Last Sunday we skimmed chs 4-6 which tell us of the opposition the returnees faced from the Samaritans who didn't want to lose their control over the region of Judah.

They complained to the Persian kings who issued a stop-work order.

But when the prophets Haggai & Zechariah called them back to work by the command of God, the Jews began again to rebuild.

And investigation into the court records at the Persian court proved not only that Cyrus had issued the original proclamation but that they Samaritans were to help provide the resources the Jews needed.

Zerubbabel, a descendant of the royal line of David was the one who led the first return of some 50,000 Jews.

Then, 80 years later, Ezra led a second return of a few thousand.

It might be helpful to see a list of the Persian kings since their names come into the record here.

Cyrus the Great

Cambyses

Darius the Great

Xerxes I

Artaxerxes I = 464-423 BC

II. THE RETURN UNDER EZRA • Chs. 7–10

A. Generous Authorization by Artaxerxes • Ch. 7

¹ Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

He goes on & gives the rest of his genealogy all the way back to Aaron the high priest & brother of Moses.

Before we read it – Seraiah was the high priest taken into captivity by the Babylonians about 150 years before.

Which means it's unlikely he was Ezra's father. More likely he was his great grandfather.

It's common in Jewish genealogies to condense generations & omit those names that aren't important.

In ancient Hebrew, the phrase, "son of" often means descended from.

Ezra skips his father & grandfather because as exiles in Babylon they weren't allowed to perform their function as high priests.

He jumps all the way back to the last high priest we know about – Seraiah, the one taken into exile by the Babylonians.

² the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, ³ the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, ⁴ the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, ⁵ the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest

Ezra has an illustrious genealogy as a member of the high priest's family.

⁶ 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 request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

Not able to fill his role as a high priest in Babylon, Ezra had turned to a diligent study of the Law of Moses – the Torah.

A scribe was a scholar, teacher & lawyer all rolled into one.

Trained in the art of writing, scribes were charged with the task of *duplicating* the scrolls of God's Word that wore out.

Because they spent so much time pouring over the scriptures, they became the teachers and the ones who were turned to when someone needed to know what God said about a matter.

Ezra had a special gift as a teacher & scholar.

And God's favor was with him as he set his heart to seek God by devoting himself to God's Word.

This phrase, "the hand of the LORD his God upon him," becomes a refrain marking God's blessing in Ezra.

⁷ Some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Nethinim [temple servants] came up to Jerusalem in the 7th year of King Artaxerxes.

458 BC – 80 years after the first return led by Zerubbabel.

⁸ And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the 5th month, which was in the 7th year of the king. ⁹ On the 1st day of the 1st month he began *his* journey from Babylon, and on the 1st day of the 5th month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

The Spring to Summer trip of about a thousand miles from Babylon to Jerusalem took 4 months.

That means they averaged about 8 miles a day. Not bad for a party of thousands.

¹⁰ 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.

This is an important comment because it marks a major turning point in the history of Israel.

Under Moses, when the covenant between Israel & God was first forged, the Law played the central role.

What made Israel unique was that she was a nation whose entire life was shaped by God's Word.

But once Israel settled in the Promised Land & the temple was built The Word

of God was replaced by temple ritual as the central religious focal point. Man-made rituals eclipsed simple obedience to what God said. Then the people turned from even the pretense of worshipping God to serving idols. And as judgment, the Assyrians & Babylonians conquered & deported them. There in exile in Babylon, Ezra pondered his people's sad history and squandered potential. As he read God's Word, the reason for all that had happened became crystal. God's people had forsaken God's Word. The key to the nation's renewal and blessing was to return to the Word. Note the order of Ezra's application of the Word – First he studied it himself. Then he put it to work in his own life. And once he was living it, he taught it to others. This is the way it ought always to be; learn it, live it, share it.

In Judaism, Ezra is likened to Moses in terms of his importance. He's given this status because he's the one who returned the Torah to its place of prominence after being neglected by Israel for nearly a thousand years. There were individuals like David, Samuel & the prophets who loved God's word but they were isolated cases in a nation that had largely forsaken the Word. Ezra understood that the Word of God had to be at the center of everything if Israel was to survive and thrive. And after 150 year now in Babylon, the Jews had all but forgotten Moses & the Torah.

Orthodox Jews credit Ezra with forming the *Great Assembly* of scholars and prophets when he returned to Jerusalem.

This was the forerunner of the Sanhedrin.

The Great Assembly is credited with establishing many of the features of traditional Judaism.

Ezra is referred to by rabbis as the “flower that appears on the earth” because he began the Springtime of historical Judaism.

11 This is a 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:

The original was kept in the royal archives.

12 Artaxerxes, king of kings,

Which as the ruler of an empire that covered *dozens* of kingdoms, he was.

To Ezra the priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven: Perfect peace, and so forth.

The original didn't say “and so forth.” It contained the actual words which were boilerplate verbiage for this kind of thing.

13 I issue a decree that all those of the people of Israel and the priests and Levites in my realm, who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 And whereas you are being sent by the king and his 7 counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, with regard

to the Law of your God which *is* in your hand;

This mention of 7 counselors is a fun little remark affirming the authenticity of this passage.

For now we know the Persian kings had a royal cabinet of 7 special advisors.

¹⁵ and *whereas you are* to carry the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling *is* in Jerusalem; ¹⁶ and *whereas* all the silver and gold that you may find in all the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, *are to be* freely offered for the house of their God in Jerusalem— ¹⁷ now therefore, be careful to buy with this money bulls, 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.

Artaxerxes was reaching back here to the original proclamation of Cyrus who 80 years before allowed the Jews to return to rebuild the temple and to worship there – asking that God would bless HIM for allowing them to do so.

Artaxerxes encourages a new wave of exiles to return and worship – so that their Persian masters will be blessed.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And whatever more may be needed for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide, pay *for it* from the king's treasury. ²¹ And I, even I, Artaxerxes the king, issue a decree to all the treasurers who *are in the region* beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, may require of you, let it be done diligently, ²² up to 100 talents of silver,

4 tons

100 kors of wheat,

750 bushels

100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil,

600 gallons

and salt without prescribed limit.

Because the process for making salt was so costly, it was a precious commodity.

²³ Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it diligently be done for the house of the God of heaven. For why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?

That Ezra received this commission from Artaxerxes means he played some role in his court.

The king had great trust in Ezra, so much so, that as we see in the next verses,

He gave him the authority to appoint officials in Jerusalem.

He gave Ezra a measure of autonomy that was unusual.

But Artaxerxes knew Ezra wouldn't abuse that authority because his life was governed by God.

Artaxerxes comment here about obeying God so that his realm would not fall under God's wrath may hint at the fact that Ezra had shown him the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12 – "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.

As the Persian king, Artaxerxes was well aware of how history so far had proven that promise out.

The Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Ammonites, Amorites, Syrians, Assyrians, and Babylonians had all perished after they'd set themselves against God's people.

No wonder Artaxerxes encouraged this return and funded it from the royal coffers. It was a good investment.

24 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. 25 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. 26 Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment.

This is an amazing authorization of power.

Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission to use God's Word as the basis of civil law, just so long as it didn't interfere with Persian law.

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, 28 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 leading men of Israel to go up with me.

Friends, here's *another* encouraging example of how God can take a pagan ruler – a man *sick* with power! and use him to His ends.

B. Register of Those Who Returned • 8:1–14

1 These are the heads of their fathers' houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of King Artaxerxes:

In vs. 2-14 we get the list.

Just shy of 1500 men are numbered. Adding in women & children, this group was probably around 5,000.

C. Account of the Trip to Jerusalem • 8:15–36

15 Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there 3 days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there. 16 Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leaders; also for Joiarib and Elnathan, men of

understanding.

Elnathan must have been a popular name.

17 And I gave them a command for Iddo the chief man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say to Iddo and his brethren the Nethinim at the place Casiphia—that they should bring us servants for the house of our God. 18 Then, by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, with his sons and brothers, 18 men; 19 and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, 20 men; 20 also of the Nethinim, whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites, 220 Nethinim. All of them were designated by name.

Ezra gathered the returnees at a special place where they could spend a few days preparing themselves spiritually for the journey.

As he made his way around the camp, he realized not a single Levite had answered the summons.

So he sent a message to a leader of the Nethinim, the temple servants, a guy named Iddo, to round up some Levites and join them.

Iddo persuaded 38 Levites & 220 more Nethinim to return.

Ezra needed the assistance of the Levites because one of their roles was to teach God's Word.

That would be the center of his program when he arrived in Jerusalem.

21 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 all our possessions. 22 For I was ashamed to request of the king an 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.”

What Ezra said to the Persians was true.

But now that they were about to embark on a dangerous road. He didn't want to presume upon the protection & blessing of God without asking for it in sincerity.

23 So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer. 24 And I separated 12 of the leaders of the priests—Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and 10 of their brethren with them— 25 and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel who were present, had offered. 26 I weighed into their hand 650 talents of silver,

25 tons!

silver articles weighing 100 talents,

4 tons

100 talents of gold, ²⁷ 20 gold basins *worth* a thousand drachmas, and 2 vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold. ²⁸ And I said to them, “You *are* holy to the LORD; the articles *are* holy also; and the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers. ²⁹ 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.” ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the 12th day of the 1st 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.

In ch. 7 Ezra said they began on the 1st day of the 1st month but here he says they set out from Ahava on the 12th day.

They set out on the 1st to go to their meeting place on the river of Ahava, then spent 11 days there waiting for the Levites to join them then fasting & prayers in preparation to depart.

³² So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there 3 days. ³³ Now on the 4th day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui, ³⁴ with the number *and* weight of everything. All the weight was written down at that time. ³⁵ The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the 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. ³⁶ And they delivered the king’s orders to the king’s satraps and the governors *in the region* beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God.

Ezra’s letter was shown to the Persian officials who complied with it’s requirements.

Now Ezra goes to work.

D. Mixed Marriages & Ezra’s Prayer of Confession • Ch. 9

¹ When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ² For they have taken some of their daughters *as* wives for

themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.”

Not long after Ezra arrived with authority to administrate the affairs of Jerusalem, some of the leaders faith to God came to him with a disturbing report.

Many of both the religious and civil leaders had taken pagan wives.

They told Ezra this because they knew it was prohibited by the Law.

God repeatedly forbade His people from making covenants with other nations & from marrying their children.

The reason was because Israel was to be holy unto the Lord and these covenants & marriages would seduce them into the worship of idols and debauched practices that would destroy them.

That’s exactly what had happened and why the nation had been defeated & deported.

When Ezra heard it was already starting all over again, he was devastated!

³ So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. ⁴ Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

Ezra was so emotionally shaken by the news of intermarriage with pagans that he tore his clothes and yanked out his hair.

His example of distress was so remarkable it moved those who were sensitive to spiritual things to a similar distress and they joined him.

⁵ At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. ⁶ And I said: “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than *our* heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. ⁷ Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, *and* our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as *it is* this day. ⁸ And now for a little while grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg [toe hold] in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. ⁹ For we *were* slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. ¹⁰ And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, ¹¹ which You commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with

their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity. ¹² Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave *it* as an inheritance to your children forever.'

Ezra doesn't quote from any one passage in Exodus thru Deuteronomy.

In an even more telling manner of his familiarity with the Torah, he sums up *all* the passages that prohibit Israel's marriages with pagans.

Ezra is stunned that after all the goodness & faithfulness God has shown His people they would turn from Him so soon and in such an obvious way.

He demonstrates here the astonishment that so often marks those who love & follow God when confronted by the willful rebellion of those who claim to believe but disobey in some obvious way.

As rational beings, we look for a reason why people do what they do.

But there's no reason for sin! Sure it's appealing as it tempts us.

But if we stop to consider the deceit of sin and it's real consequences, sin is revealed for the foolishness it is.

Just as there are physical laws that govern the universe, so there are moral and spiritual laws.

If you break a physical law, like gravity, there's no avoiding the result.

If you break a physical law once because you didn't know – that's simple ignorance.

If you keep breaking it, and expect to get a different result – that's insanity!

What's true of physical law is true of spiritual law.

If you break it once due to a lack of knowledge, we can chalk it up to simple ignorance.

But if you keep doing the same thing and expect a different result – that's spiritual insanity!

And there's no explaining it.

We probably all know people who are fairly likeable, but they just don't get it when it comes to sin.

They keep making foolish choices, doing things that you know they know aren't right, but they think it's going to work out for them.

It doesn't. They are forever in need of some to rescue them, to get them out of a jam, to pay their bills, to give them a car, to let them have a room— whatever!

You watch these people and wonder when they will ever get it!

Ezra had to be thinking that about his people.

“We've already been down this road folks. What are you doing? Do you want to lose everything again?”

We'll end our study here because I want to pick it up at this point Sunday.