

## Chapter Seven

The one theme which runs through chapter seven is the qualifications, or credentials, of the man Ezra. A new age is being born. As in the days of Moses, or David, or Elijah, or Jesus, attention must be focused on the question of legitimacy, or authority, of the new leader or new forms. Of course the forms need no confirmation: they are simply those from the time of Moses, being reinstated; but the man must be subjected to scrutiny.

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Ezra put so much emphasis on his credentials? Who would have questioned these?
2. Why do you suppose Ezra wanted to go on this mission?
3. What qualifications did he have for the assignment?
4. What help did he get from God?

### OUTLINE

Through chapters 7 - 10 we see Ezra's involvement in the restoration of Israel and its religious forms.

#### III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (7:1—10:44)

A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.

1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing (vss. 1-10).
2. Authorization from King Artaxerxes (vss. 11-26).
3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance (vss. 27-28).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

#### III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (7:1—10:44)

A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.

1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing.

TEXT, 7:1-10

- 1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah,

- son of Hilkiah,  
 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub,  
 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth,  
 4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki,  
 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.  
 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.  
 7 And some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.  
 8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.  
 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.  
 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

### COMMENT

In the fifty-seven-year break between the close of chapter six (515 B.C.) and the beginning of chapter seven (458 B.C.), the events of the book of Esther have taken place. Israel has been spared once more, and has responded by introducing the Feast of Purim.

*Verse 1* takes up the story then with Artaxerxes (Longimanus), son of the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. This is a different Artaxerxes from the one mentioned in 4:7. Ezra for the first time is mentioned as a participant of the events in the book. In this section he lists at least six qualifications or credentials which authorized his action. (1) In verses 1 through 5 he traces his ancestry back to Aaron, from whom all priests must be

descended. Like many of the genealogies of the O.T., it included only the more significant names; there are frequent omissions. By reversing the order of the names in Ezra 7:1-5 and comparing them with those in I Chr. 6:7-14, it will be seen that Ezra includes one name not in Chronicles, and Chronicles has seven names not in Ezra. "Son of" therefore often indicated "descended of" in the language of their time.

For example, in verse 1 Ezra is called the son of Seraiah. Seraiah is mentioned as the high priest during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, several generations before (II Ki. 25:6-10, 18-21). Ezra was a priest; this is specifically stated in verse 11, and in 10:10. Josephus<sup>1</sup> calls him the principal priest among the Jews in Babylonia, which is called Babylon in our next verse. It is to be observed, however, that the Bible text never calls him the high priest; the holder of that office is not named.

(2) *Verse 6* speaks of his personal skill in handling the law of Moses. This is the first mention of a scribe in the Bible: an order which Ezra may have helped to create. It would be his function not simply to make copies of the law, but to be an expositor of its meaning. The scribes are frequently mentioned in the N.T.

We note also the assertion that God had given the law to Moses.

(3) *Verse 6* continues by testifying that his authority came from the king, who approved his request for permission to go.

(4) *Verse 6* then adds the information that he had the favor of God Himself, and this had caused the king to approve of him.

(5) *Verses 7 to 9* say that he passed the pragmatic test: he succeeded. The group which accompanied him is described in *verse 7* as containing much the same kinds of people as in the first band, in chapter two.

*Verse 8* states the time of their arrival, just four months after their departure as stated in *verse 9*. This was a reasonable amount of time for an expedition made up of people of various ages, although it is reported that merchants would make the trip in twenty-five days.<sup>2</sup> Total distance was about 900 miles, which

1. *Antiquities*, XI, 5.1, p. 271.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 641.

would indicate a speed averaging nine miles a day.<sup>3</sup>

(6) In *verse 10*, there is the further authority that comes from adequate preparation. Three things Ezra had set his heart (i.e., mind, as also in vs. 27)<sup>4</sup> to do, and these are models for any who would serve God today. He determined to begin intellectually by studying God's law. Added to that was action: to obey, or do, or practice it. Then he would share it with others; he would teach these statutes and ordinances to his brethren.

## 2. The letter of Artaxerxes

TEXT; 7:11-26

- 11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:
- 12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now
- 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.
- 14 "Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand,
- 15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem,
- 16 with all the silver and gold which you shall find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem;
- 17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls,

3. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 72.

4. In the O.T., the heart thinks and makes decisions: the feeling comes from the abdomen.

- rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their libations and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.
- 18 "And whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God.
- 19 "Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem.
- 20 "And the rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.
- 21 "And I, even I King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently,
- 22 even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.
- 23 "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, lest there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.
- 24 "We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God.
- 25 "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them.
- 26 "And whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment."

### COMMENT

*Verse 11* introduces us to Artaxerxes' letter giving Ezra his authority. Ezra is identified in full, by both of his positions, as a priest and a scribe.

*Verse 12* is the salutation of the letter. Verses 12 through 26 are in Aramaic, indicating again that Ezra has inserted an official document. Artaxerxes is called king of kings, a title he may have borrowed from the Babylonians (Dan. 2:37).

*Verses 13 and 14* are the heart of the letter, declaring authorization for Ezra to go, and to be accompanied by as many as desired, of his brethren.

*Verse 14* has a reference to the structure of the government; the seven counsellors are also referred to in Esther 1:14.

*Verses 15 to 20* portray the articles which they were to transport back to their homeland. *Verse 15* emphasizes that the king and his counsellors made a healthy contribution; this is another recognition by the state of the value which religion has in maintaining a wholesome society.

*Verse 16* adds to this the free-will offerings particularly of their remaining brethren in Babylon, plus what they could find throughout the province: probably contributions from Babylonian individuals and businesses as a gesture of good will to these people who had been their neighbors for the past few generations.

*Verse 17* recommends that they purchase necessary materials for sacrifice; the king could have learned from Ezra what would be acceptable; the list resembles that in 6:9.

*Verse 18* gives them some leeway to make personal decisions, in harmony with the pleasure of their God, in the use of any superfluous funds for the decoration of the Temple. There is always a place for a little extra flourish in worship.

*Verse 19* specifies that these articles must be faithfully delivered in Jerusalem.

*Verse 20* gives authorization to call upon the royal treasury for any additional funds which they may need. The royal treasury would belong to the king himself; thus they are promised access to the highest government source of all.

*Verses 21 to 24* give instructions to all the treasurers of the surrounding provinces to give Ezra their co-operation, within certain financial limits as specified.

The 100 silver talents of *verse 22* would come to a weight of

650 pounds;<sup>5</sup> the 100 kors of wheat would be 1167 bushels; the 100 baths of wine, 900 gallons; the same amount of oil; and don't spare the salt!

These governments would have a ready store of such supplies to assist the travelers because much of their taxes were collected in produce rather than money.

*Verse 23* explains the reason for this generosity: the Persian ruler would hesitate to incur the wrath of any deity lest his kingdom suffer the consequences. In fact, "Egyptian records reveal both Persian interest in the sacrificial cultus of their subjects and Persian generosity in supporting it."<sup>6</sup>

It was also their policy to try to keep their subject peoples contented, to assure the continued peace and prosperity of their empire. It may, indeed, be that God approved and blessed this policy, for "In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, B.C. 458, the tide of success turned for Persia against the Athenians in Egypt."<sup>7</sup>

*Verse 24* adds the further support to the cause of religion that all of Israel's religious officials be totally exempted from taxation.

The last part of the letter, *verses 25 and 26*, were addressed directly to Ezra.

In *verse 25*, he was to be guided by the wisdom (i.e., laws) of God in appointing rulers and judges throughout his country. In this way Ezra was placed over all the Jews, that is, those who knew the law of his God. He could also instruct those who were ignorant<sup>8</sup> of these laws; either he was given authority to seek to recover all Jews who had backslidden and had forsaken the law, or to proselytize all others within their country's borders who had other religions. In many ways these scriptures describe the Persian government as one of the most generous and enlightened of ancient times.

*Verse 26* gave Ezra the right to employ the full weight of

5. These figures are taken from *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 629.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ellicott's Commentary on The Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p. 473.

8. See "Word Studies," end of this chapter.

government to punish all who violated either the religious or the civil law. The description which we have of Ezra's character suggests that he would be reluctant to use such powers.

### 3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance

TEXT, 7:27, 28

- 27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem,  
28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

### COMMENT

In *verse 27* Ezra pours out his heart in gratitude to God for inciting the king to do so much for the Temple at Jerusalem. Note the personal tone of these words!

*Verse 28* continues Ezra's thanks, now for God's graciousness to him personally. Because the hand of God was upon him to bless (for the opposite expression, where the hand of God is against someone, see Ruth 1:13), Ezra was strengthened and encouraged to lead the band of returnees back to their homeland.

The reference to leading men from Israel is taken to be a designation of laymen, as opposed to Levites:<sup>9</sup> see Ezra 2:2, 7:13. The next chapter will begin with this distinction.

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<sup>9</sup> H. E. Ryle, D.D., *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra and Nehemiah," p. 98.

## WORD STUDIES

**SCRIBE:** (vs. 6): to scratch, scrape, write; thus a secretary or scribe; then it became a designation of one skilled in the sacred books and in the law.

**TEACH** (vs. 10): Lamad (“Talmud” comes from this word). To beat with a rod, chastise, hence to train, teach, accustom. It is the name of the twelfth letter of the Hebrew or Aramaic alphabets, and in its early form it looked like a whip. This is apparently a recognition that to be taught, one must often be willing to accept some discomfort and discipline.

**TEACH** (vs. 25): Yeda: to cause to see, perceive, understand, know. Our word, “idea,” may come from it.

**IGNORANT** (vs. 25): not to know (see above). Some are ignorant because they have had no opportunity to know. Of course, some have rejected the opportunity to know (Hos. 4:6). One who simply does not know is an excellent prospect for teaching. This would be a good description of Gentiles, in the O.T.

(This is a different word from that used of “sins of ignorance” [Lev. 4:2], which indicates wandering or straying unconsciously.)

## SUMMARY

Ezra chose to go up to Israel from Babylonia, taking more of the exiles with him. He was qualified as a leader since he was a priest, descended from Aaron. He had further prepared himself by study and practice, that he might be a leader of his people. God gave him favor before the king, who recognized his capabilities, approved his mission, and contributed substantially to the fund for supplies and furnishings for the Temple. Ezra proved his qualifications because the trip was successful; he brought the returning exiles, with the contributions from both the government and private sources, to Israel.

King Artaxerxes furnished Ezra with a letter permitting the transportation of all these materials, and ordering the full

co-operation of the neighboring tribes in the province in providing supplies for the expedition. Ezra is then put in charge of selecting officials and judges to govern Israel and to teach his religion throughout the community. Ezra expressed his gratitude to God, whose will he saw being done in all of this.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the king who commissioned Ezra to go to Israel?
2. List the three goals that Ezra had set for his life.
3. What responsibilities of government were placed upon Ezra?
4. What two reasons did Ezra have to be thankful to God?