

### EZRA

#### Lesson 13, Chapter 7

I've stated on more than one occasion during our study of the Book of Ezra that it feels as though we are traveling through a time warp and reliving the Book of Ezra in our day. As we found to begin chapter 7 last week, the issue of the Temple regarding Ezra's role is not how it is often portrayed: that Ezra was the one who finally managed to bring about its reconstruction. Rather, when Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the Temple had been completed and set into operation years earlier in 515 B.C; that is, it had been built, furnished and was functioning for more than 50 years prior to Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem.

So the first issue dealt with regarding the Temple (simply getting it rebuilt), was finally accomplished but it was only because the Lord sent two prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) to goad the reluctant Jews into ignoring the outside political pressures and threats from nearby nations and communities, and instead to trust in the Lord that building the Temple would bring forth a blessing and not more tribulation upon the Jewish people. And since this Temple would eventually be destroyed almost 6 centuries later (by the Romans), and to this day has never been replaced, we find the modern Jews right back in the same situation as those ancient Jews and responding in the same way. They WANT the Temple rebuilt; God demands that the Temple be rebuilt; but the political leaders of Israel won't do it, and the wealthy are comfortable and ambivalent because they are fearful of the political opposition from friend and foe alike and of course because it could spark a regional conflict if not a world war.

And thus as we meet together today in August of 2014, Israel has once again been attacked and so is once again at war (this time with the terrorist group Hamas, which the citizens of Gaza willingly elected to govern them). The unrest within Israel fomented by those who ought not be allowed to live in God's Kingdom land in the first place (Muslims who bow down to a false god), the constant attacks from Israel's nearby enemies, and the out and out hatred and anti-Semitism of Europe and most of the United Nations' membership just emphasizes that disobedience and unfaithfulness by God's people brings nothing but confusion and travail.

Let us never forget that this dynamic of enemies (especially from Gaza) being a permanent thorn in Israel's side was ordained by the Lord as a consequence and punishment for the people of Israel long ago not being obedient by ridding the Promised Land of all those who were in opposition to God's people. Although I originally had planned to finish Ezra chapter 7 and get well into chapter 8, we won't get quite that far as I cannot ignore the current war condition in Israel and the never ending threats and attacks by their neighbors, and the regular kisses of deception by their so-called friends. And so we need to be reminded of how, Biblically and spiritually speaking, this all came about so that we have the context for understanding what is happening in Ezra's day, and today, and what to expect tomorrow.

Open your Bibles to the Book of Judges.

**READ JUDGES 2:1 – 4, 20 – 23. JUDGES 3:1 – 5**

What we read here is that because Joshua and the tribal leaders of Israel did not expel all the peoples and nations from the Promised Land that the Lord told them to (they only expelled some of them), the Lord determined to allow certain of these opposing nations to remain indefinitely in order to test Israel. And the nations called out are mainly the land occupied by the Philistines (the southernmost coastline of Canaan), and the land along the northernmost coastline of Canaan, and the inland area from Mt. Hermon to the hills of Lebanon. Today these areas are known as Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Further, even the name of the enemy people (the Philistines) remains in our modern time. The Greek word for Philistines is Palestinians. God's promises stand whether they are for punishment or for blessing. And as anyone who knows much about the history of modern Israel realizes, the people of the former Philistine territory (especially Gaza), and of that land towards Mt. Hermon (Syria) and for the last two or more decades Lebanon (now virtually controlled by the formidable terrorist group Hezbollah) has never quit attacking and harassing Israel and openly declares that their goal is Israel's complete annihilation.

Europe, the UN and of late the USA have made it clear that they are more interested in finding a peaceful arrangement of coexistence with the Muslim controlled nations than they are with standing with God's people and nation, Israel. So Israel finds itself in the exact fix that the Lord

said He would put them in on account of disobedience, as found in the Book of Judges. What, ideally, can change this terrible situation? The model for reform and return to God's favor is at the heart of what we've been studying in the Book of Ezra. And specifically we read the reformation formula in the Prophets Zechariah and Haggai who prophesied during this time.

### **Zechariah 1:1-6 CJB**

**<sup>CJB</sup> Zechariah 1:1 *In the eighth month of the second year of Daryavesh, the following message from ADONAI came to Z'kharyah the son of Berekhyah, the son of 'Iddo, the prophet:***

**<sup>2</sup> *"ADONAI was extremely angry with your ancestors.***

**<sup>3</sup> *Therefore, tell them that ADONAI-Tzva'ot says this: "'Return to me," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot, "and I will return to you," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.***

**<sup>4</sup> *"Don't be like your ancestors. The earlier prophets proclaimed to them, 'ADONAI-Tzva'ot says to turn back now from your evil ways and deeds'; but they didn't listen or pay attention to me," says ADONAI.***

**<sup>5</sup> *"Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?***

**<sup>6</sup> *But my words and my laws, which I ordered my servants the prophets, overtook your ancestors, didn't they? Then they turned and said, 'ADONAI has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as he intended to do.'"***

### **Haggai 2:15-22 CJB**

**<sup>15</sup> Now, please, from this day on, keep this in mind: before you began laying stones on each other to rebuild the temple of ADONAI,**

**<sup>16</sup> throughout that whole time, when someone approached a twenty-measure pile [of grain], he found only ten; and when he came to the winepress to draw out fifty measures, there were only twenty.**

**<sup>17</sup> I struck you with blasting winds, mildew and hail on everything your hands produced; but you still wouldn't return to me,' says ADONAI.**

**<sup>18</sup> 'So please keep this in mind, from this day on, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day the foundation of ADONAI's temple was laid, consider this:**

**<sup>19</sup> there's no longer any seed in the barn, is there? and the vine, fig tree, pomegranate tree and olive tree have produced nothing yet, right? However, from this day on, I will bless you.'"**

**<sup>20</sup> The word of ADONAI came a second time to Hagai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, as follows:**

**<sup>21</sup> "Tell Z'rubavel, governor of Y'hudah, 'I will shake the heavens and the earth,**

**<sup>22</sup> I will overturn the thrones of kingdoms, I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and I will overturn the chariots and the people riding in them; the horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.**

And what we find is that a sincere return to God is required if Israel's position before God is to change; and that the visible and tangible sign of that sincerity is the rebuilding of His House: the Temple. He says that the moment the foundation of the Temple is laid the curse of unrest, tribulation, and struggle will end and be replaced with blessing and abundance. Further the Lord says that He will overturn the thrones of kingdoms (nations opposed to Israel). And then there is this small phrase to end verse 22: the soldiers for those wicked nations will fall "Each by the sword of his brother". In other words, the enemy shall fight among themselves and essentially destroy one another.

Who has emerged as Israel's true enemy and will no doubt be so until Messiah returns? Islam. And what do we see among the adherents to Islam? Hatred and war between the various factions of Islam as they kill one another by the thousands on a near daily basis. They hate one another almost as much as they hate Israel. And this is precisely as promised by God.

But for modern day Jews, rather than take God's Word to them to heart, we find that the Temple Mount that belongs to Israel is open for their pagan enemies to visit but closed to Jews (at the order of the Israeli government). And although many in Israel cry out to rebuilt the Temple so that they can return to God and resume fellowship with Him, and even though all the preparations, furnishings, and ritual implements needed have been completed and are in storage, Israel's government refuses to reconstruct the Temple because they fear not only the wrath of the Muslim world but also political backlash from Western governments and especially that of the United States.

I know of no God-sent Prophets in recent times urging Israel to be obedient and faithful and to trust God enough to ignore what their eyes see and ears hear and instead to rely on God's power. But as the courageous ones among the Jews who have lobbied to build the Temple know from studying Holy Scripture, no more divine instruction or warning is needed and it seems likely that no more is forthcoming. All that is left is for Israel to choose to obey or to continue to disobey what is written. They must decide to continue in the wicked ways of their ancestors (that caused all this turmoil in the first place), or they must turn and follow God.

But Christians and Messianics, we are hardly in the clear. In conjunction with God's commandments to Israel to be obedient and to expel God's enemies from the land and to build His House, is God's commandment that Christ's ekklesia, what we call the Church, is to enthusiastically and whole-heartedly stand with Israel and urge them to follow what they know they're supposed to do, but up to now haven't. Sadly, prophecy appears to tell us that not until the predicted period of Tribulation in the latter days will the Temple finally be rebuilt, and it looks very much like it will be at the behest of the Anti-Christ who will deceive everyone and once the Temple is built at his order, he will enter the Holy of Holies and declare himself to be God. But I openly admit that while the bulk of Biblical evidence leans that direction, no Scripture passage directly says words to that effect. So, we'll have to wait and see just what circumstances come about that makes Temple reconstruction happen (and the most critical situation that will have to be dealt with is what to do with the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque that currently sit on the Temple Mount).

As we continue now with Ezra chapter 7, the situation is that although the Temple is built and functioning, Ezra is coming from Babel with authorization from the King of Persia to reform the Priesthood, the Levites, and the laypeople of Judah. In the 30 or so years since the Temple was rebuilt with Zerubbabel at the helm, something has gone terribly wrong.

We were introduced to the person Ezra as we made it to verse 10 last week, and we found that his abbreviated genealogy was structured to prove that he had credentials as a priest that extend all the way back to Aaron (800 years earlier). And yet, even though Ezra was an expert on the Torah, there is no evidence that he had ever acted in the typical capacity of a priest, and as we'll soon see when he arrived back in Jerusalem even though he had authority over the Priesthood, there was already a High Priest in place and Ezra in no way became the new High Priest. We also do not find him in charge of ritual. So even though he is by hereditary rights a priest, he is going to operate somewhat above the priesthood, with authority over the priesthood, yet not within customary Torah-prescribed priestly functions.

Thus much like Samuel who transitioned Israel from the era of being governed by Judges to being governed by Kings, we find that Ezra is also a transitional figure who creates a new office of leadership called Torah Teachers. And this fits right in with the new customs and traditions of ritual and worship that the Jews had created up in Babylon and brought back with them in their return from exile. Thus Torah Teachers will play a major role in the development of Judaism because they operate independently of the Priesthood. The upshot is that the over time the authority of the Priesthood to righteously administer the Law was weakened because now others who were not of the tribe of Levi (the tribe authorized by God to protect His Word, officiate rituals, serve Him directly and administer justice) would be looked to by the people as the experts of God's Laws as expressed in the Torah. Therefore the Priests would be mainly used for ritual functions. Ritual functions is an important thing for sure, but when actual knowledge of the Torah is separated from those who are ordained to do the Torah ordained rituals at the Temple, that is a formula for error and finally disaster. It is hard to understate what an important development with long range implications that we see happening here in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezra.

And since Judaism and Christianity developed in nearly parallel manner, it is no wonder that in modern times Church leaders and Pastors have but minimal actual working knowledge of God's Word, and instead are trained in Seminaries to focus mostly on performing Church and administrative functions.

### RE-READ EZRA CHAPTER 7: 11 – end

True to form for the Book of Ezra, verse 11 is a kind of preface that explains that what follows is the letter of authorization that King Artaxerxes sent along with Ezra on his migration to Judah. So while the preface is written in Hebrew, the text of the King's letter changes to Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire. Note in verse 11 that Ezra is given two titles: priest (*cohen*) and scribe (*caphar*). But more specifically he is called *hacaphar dabar mitzvot Yehoveh*. Most literally it means "the scribe of the words of the commandments of Yehoveh". The meaning of the term scribe evolved throughout the several Biblical eras and the context makes it very clear that in modern terms the word scribe is here meant as a person who is an expert and a teacher (in this case of the Torah). And of course "the words of the commandments of Yehoveh" mean God's commandments, which we could rightly translate in English as either the Law of Moses or the Torah. Thus while the CJB translation is not a word for word literal translation, it is a good and well-rendered dynamic translation that gives us the meaning in modern terms that Bible students can understand. Ezra was a teacher of the Torah, of God's laws, not of Tradition (a most important distinction). He was also of a priestly line, and therefore is rightly a priest. And yet we will not hear of him ever performing common priestly functions. The point of highlighting that he is a hereditary priest is to give him credibility to deal with the Priesthood in Jerusalem. And that he is a Torah teacher gives him the credibility to teach the Jews the proper understanding of God's Word and even to correct and reform the rituals of the Temple if needed.

Verse 12 simply verifies that anyone who sees themselves as part of Israel and who wants to migrate from anywhere in the Persian Empire to Jerusalem is free to go. This was originally King Cyrus's policy, and there is no indication that since his day had that policy ever changed. Thus this is important to keep in mind as we think about the Book of Esther, for instance, and all those Jews in the Persian Empire because they chose by their own free will not to return to Judah. And even when Haman was going to have them killed, they STILL could have packed up and left (after all the plan to kill the Jews was formally announced and distributed in every language a year in advance!); but we don't hear of any Jews leaving. It reminds one so much of the pre-WWII days when anti-Semitism was at a fever pitch throughout parts of Europe, especially Germany, and yet most of the Jewish population made the conscious decision to hang on and remain even though there were options to leave. That decision was catastrophic.



And today we see that anti-Semitism has risen once again throughout much of Europe and even with a welcoming Jewish State to flee to any time they choose, the vast majority of Jews choose to stay put in their European communities and hope for the best. Once people have settled down, established a home, a family, a business or occupation, and made deep community ties it is only a few who would choose to do something as drastic as to leave their country for another, regardless of the perceived dangers. The Jews have proved themselves infamous at refusing to see the handwriting on the wall; denying that gentiles would seriously attempt to harm them in mass, and this because it makes no sense to them. But therein lays the problem; when one sets aside the spiritual and sees only through carnal eyes, self-deception inevitably follows.

I want us to think for a minute why in verse 12 that the King would list those who could return to Judah in terms of 3 different classes of people: Israel, the priests and the Levites. It can only be that Ezra himself must have had a hand in writing this letter, which really amounts to a royal decree. Speaking of Israel, the priests and Levites as 3 separate groups is a technical matter that only Jews would understand. And even so, it becomes clear that because of their exile to Babylon, and because the priesthood had essentially stopped functioning while in exile, and because new manmade customs and traditions had been created among the Jews to accommodate having no Temple and therefore no operable Priesthood, the God-ordained meaning of these important technical terms of God's Torah began to blur. Yet apparently it was still understood that Israel (here meaning the common citizens, the lay people) were entirely separate from the Priests, who were separate from the Levites. This is a very good time to recollect that at Mt. Sinai during their exodus from Egypt, the Lord divided and separated the tribe of Levi away from the other tribes of Israel so far that they were not to be counted as among their brethren.

**<sup>CJB</sup> Numbers 8:14 *In this way you will separate the L'vi'im from the people of Isra'el, and the L'vi'im will belong to me.***

But in the Book of Numbers the term Levites was still a general reference to the tribe of Levi (all tribal members of Levi without exception). However in addition to this disturbing and unexpected removal of the Tribe of Levi from the other Tribes of Israel by the Lord, those Levites who belonged to the clan of Eleazar (Eleazar was Aaron's 3<sup>rd</sup> son) were divided and separated away from the remainder of their Levite tribal brothers and ordained as God's Priests. Thus Priests and Levites (although technically they were all from the Tribe of Levi) became two separate and distinct categories of Temple workers. The Priests could perform Temple rituals, but the other category, the Levites, could not. The Levites were blue-collar



Temple workers who worked for the Priests. Keep this in mind as we go forward because shortly this is going to play a significant role in our story.

Verse 13 explains the reason for this formal written royal decree from Artaxerxes: Ezra was to be the chief examiner of how the Temple and Jewish society in Judah was (or was not) properly following and applying God's Law. In other words, Ezra was to evaluate if the laypeople, Priests and Levites who had some time ago migrated back to Judah were being properly Torah observant. Let's pause and ask ourselves a question: why would Ezra and also the King think that such an inquiry was needed? Obviously the King wouldn't know Torah observance if he was hit in the face with it. So it had to be that Ezra, the Torah scholar par excellence, had become aware that whatever was being practiced by the Jews in Judah it was far from what was ordained in God's Torah, and so his zealotness for the Lord and concern for religious propriety led him to obtain royal approval to go down there and get things straightened out.

A rich gift of silver and gold given by the king and his royal court was to be taken on the journey. But in addition more silver and gold collected from various donors in the vicinity of Babel were also to be taken to be used for Temple purposes. All of these donations were entirely voluntary. And then verse 17 outlines the use for this treasure of silver and gold; it is to be used to purchase sacrificial animals and other items used for Temple service. Verse 18 offers Ezra some leeway since the final tally he will go with isn't yet known as the letter from the King is prepared. So if the sum allows for it, and there is more than enough for all the sacrifices, then Ezra can use his discretion on how to spend the remainder. However, says verse 19, all of it is earmarked for the Temple; it is not for personal or any other use. By saying this, it means that Ezra will be held accountable, and further it is a warning to other Persian officials not to try to skim a little off the top or get their piece of the pie (a rather customary practice of politicians forever).

But even more, says verse 20, if at some point **more** money is needed it can be obtained from the Persian treasury. However as we learned in the previous chapter, in reality the funds are to come not from the national Persian treasury but only from taxes collected in the Beyond the River satrapy, of which Judah was but one of the provinces. Even so, what Ezra was given was beyond generous.

Now in verse 21 a direct order is given to the various levels of officials in the Beyond the River satrapy. This means that this order extends beyond the governor of Judah and all of Judah's officials. So in addition to the silver and gold already allotted, Ezra can ask for and receive up to about 7000 pounds of silver, 500 bushels of wheat, 500 gallons of wine, and 500 gallons of olive oil, along with unlimited amounts of salt. By now salt was available rather inexpensively but still it had to be mined with human labor and therefore was not free.

And then we see the ulterior motive for King Artaxerxes' largesse; in verse 23 he says that he wants to be sure that nothing offensive is done against the Temple of the God of Heaven (the Jerusalem Temple) because he doesn't want wrath to come against himself or the Persian Empire. This is not some throw away phrase. The King very much believed in the power of the various gods worshipped by the many different ethnic groups that comprised his kingdom. And his motto was: better safe than sorry. Pay them all, show respect for them all, and therefore the king and his empire ought to prosper. The God in Heaven in Jerusalem wasn't special to Artaxerxes (so far as we know); this God was just another of many.

And then in another show of respect for the Temple none of the Priests, Levites or Temple workers of any kind were to be taxed, or should they pay any kind of tribute, or pay any kind of toll (meaning as they journeyed through the roadways they didn't have to pay local taxes for the privilege of travel "protection").

To further demonstrate Ezra's high commission he is given all authority to appoint the judicial officials NOT just over the people of Judah, but over the satrapy of Beyond the River. So it certainly appears that Ezra had exceptional authority not only over the Temple and the Priesthood, but even beyond the province of Judah and all of its people; however there was one large caveat. The people over who the judges he appoints had authority not over everyone but only over worshippers of the God of Israel (mostly Jews).

Let's back away from this story for a moment and understand that although King Artaxerxes was certainly being magnanimous in all of his favorable decrees on behalf of Ezra and the Jewish people, he also had his own agenda. Judah, at the moment, was of critical importance to the king because of its strategic location. Egypt was at this very moment in full rebellion and Judah lay just north of Egypt. Unless Egypt wanted to go the long way around and travel on the east side of the Jordan River in order to threaten the Persian cities, they would have to

traverse the province of Judah. Judah needed to be squarely in the king's pocket, and be a reliable partner who would willingly block any movement of Egyptian military through this key province. Obviously Ezra was a hand-picked representative of Artaxerxes and Ezra was essentially given power ABOVE the leader of the secular part of society (the provincial governor) as well as power ABOVE the High Priest (the leader of the religious part of Jewish society). So the king trusted Ezra, and needed him in order to maintain good relations with the Judahites so as to keep Judah in the Persian sphere of influence. Thus he gave the Judahites exceptional autonomy and privileges so that they would not be tempted to accept any overtures to join with Egypt in rebellion. We'll see this authority hierarchy change a bit as Nehemiah comes into the picture.

The Persian kings tended to be enlightened monarchs, who were satisfied that various provinces could follow their own customary laws provided they also followed Persian law. And no doubt Ezra proved to the king that the Torah laws were no threat to Persian laws. Thus the idea is not that Ezra would be allowed to lord over all people in the satrapy of Beyond the River as to their religious practices, but he would be the final authority on the religious practices of the Jews (and any person who voluntarily worshipped the God of the Jews). Thus the king finishes up his royal decree with a curse that anyone refuses to obey the religious law (as determined exclusively by Ezra), and anyone who refuses to obey the law of the King of Persia (Persian law) was to be judged and punished up to and including death.

I hope you see the extent of power and authority put into the hands of Ezra, and the tremendous degree of trust that the King of Persia and his royal court must have placed in him. This man was no petty official; Ezra's reach was long and his decisions were final. The decisions couldn't even be disputed by the appointed Persian authorities UNLESS Ezra was breaking Persian law. Thus it is all the more appropriate that when the Biblical text returns to the Hebrew language in verse 27 that we hear Ezra profusely praising Yehoveh that He would "put such a thing as this" in the heart (the mind) of the King of the Persian Empire. Indeed!

It is appropriate that this chapter would end by explaining that the God of Israel would influence the pagan gentile Artaxerxes. This is a principle that is easy to set aside and instead believe that the only folks whose minds are influenced by the Lord are His worshippers. From the Pharaoh of the exodus now to King Artaxerxes of Persia we see the principle repeated that Yehoveh knows no boundaries; He is the God of all human beings and will influence anyone that He deems will advance His will on earth. So never stop praying even for terrorist leaders to hear the voice of the God of Israel. It could lead to their just destruction for the benefit of God's people or it could lead to their unmerited salvation as they become part of God's

people. As hard as it may be to swallow sometimes, God created them too, and He is available to be their Lord and Savior anytime they are ready to yield to Him.

The final verse of chapter 7 really belongs as the first verse of chapter 8. Because now the subject changes and the scene shifts to Ezra organizing for the arduous and dangerous journey from Babel to Jerusalem.

We'll deal with that next time.