

EZRA AND THE LAW

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezra 7:1-10, 23-26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezra 7:1-26

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Ezra 7:1-10, 23-26

I. Ezra's Qualifications

Ezra 7:1-6

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,

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:

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

1a. *These things* refers to the events of Ezra 6: the completion and dedication of the rebuilt temple. Most scholars put approximately 57 years between the events of Ezra 6 and the events of today's text.

1b. In antiquity there were three Persian rulers with the name *Artaxerxes*. This one is Artaxerxes I, who reigned 465–424 BC. Since the other two reigned much later, there was no need for Ezra to distinguish among them. Artaxerxes I is the same in-

dividual who would later send Nehemiah to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1).

1c. The genealogy traced the ancestry of *Ezra* back to Aaron, the first high priest, and validated Ezra's role as priest.

The genealogy relates Ezra to several priests with the expression *son of*, an idiom meaning "descendant."

In the Old Testament, at least 11 individuals were named *Seraiah*. The individual mentioned here was likely the high priest when Nebuchadnezzar's forces captured and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC.

The Old Testament mentions more than 20 individuals with the name *Azariah*, including a second individual in Ezra's genealogy. This name likely refers to a priest and official in the service of King Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:2).

In 622 BC, during the reign of King Josiah, the high priest *Hilkiah* found the Book of the Law (see 2 Kings 22:3, 8).

2. Some 14 individuals in the Old Testament share the name *Shallum*.

3-4. For further detail about the ancestral background of the tribe of Levi, one might turn to 1 Chronicles 6:1-81, where a detailed genealogy lists the relatives of Levi and Aaron. Some names from Ezra 7 are omitted in that genealogy. Their lack of inclusion is not an issue as it was uncommon to list every member of every generation.

5. Beyond his service as high priest

from the tribe of Levi, very little is known about *Abishua*.

Upon seeing Israel's sin with Baalpeor, *Phinehas* is recorded to have killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman. His act of violence was seen as an act of righteousness, turning away the wrath of the Lord and establishing a "covenant of peace" (Numbers 25:11-12)

Eleazar followed in his father's priestly duties upon Aaron's death and assisted Joshua in distributing land to the tribes.

Biblical genealogies stand as historical record and are essential to show the validity of certain roles. For Ezra, they validated his role as leader and priest of his people.

6a. With Ezra's role validated, the narrative turns to his specific task: leading a journey *from Babylon* to Jerusalem. The distance between the two cities was approximately 880 miles.

6b. Ezra was more than a priest. He is described as a *scribe*, or scholar, of *the law of Moses*. As the legal scholars of the day, scribes were highly regarded as they studied the law given to Moses, provided accurate interpretation, and taught it to others.

The ease with which Ezra understood the complex nuances of law is indicated by his description as a *ready* scribe.

Ezra's focus did not lie with the law's editorial foundations; he was not concerned with whether there were multiple authors of the law over several centuries. Instead, his focus lay with the reality that it was *the Lord God of Israel* who *had given* the law.

6c. As *the king* granted Ezra's requests and needs for the upcoming journey, it seems that Artaxerxes's attitude had changed. Elsewhere, the king ordered that work on rebuilding the city of Jerusalem stop until he issued a new decree (Ezra 4:21). However, the king changed his opinion and supported Ezra's journey. Artaxerxes even contributed great quantities of silver and gold for the work in Je-

rusalem (8:25-27). Ezra prepared for this moment, knew the needs of the journey, requisitioned necessary resources, and secured the complete confidence of the king.

II. Ezra's Journey

Ezra 7:7-10

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king.

8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

7. The total number of those who traveled *to Jerusalem* numbered fewer than 2,000 (Ezra 8:1-14). This group included the *priests* and the *Levites*, individuals necessary for proper worship in the newly built temple; *singers* and *porters*, necessary for rightly ordered worship; and other *children of Israel*.

The *Nethinims* were individuals who had given their lives to work and minister in the temple in a non-priestly manner (see 1 Chronicles 9:2).

8. As a careful scribe, Ezra gives additional information about the chronology of the trip. The entire journey took place *in the seventh year of the king*, Artaxerxes, corresponding to 458 BC.

9a. The journey *from Babylon* began on *the first day of the first month*, the Jewish month of Nisan (late March to early

April). Ezra arrived in *Jerusalem* on the first day of the fifth month, the Jewish month of Ab.

As the Jewish calendar is based on lunar months, each month is approximately 29.5 days. Therefore, the travel time was approximately 118 days, including Sabbath Days for rest. Because this group likely included animals, children (Ezra 8:21), and cargo (8:24-30), those would have necessitated a slower rate of travel: approximately nine miles a day.

9b. The arrival of the travelers to Jerusalem gave evidence that the providence and blessing of *the good hand of his God* was upon Ezra

10. Ezra's role as a scribe and teacher is seen by the ways *the law of the Lord* affected his life and the lives of others. It was not enough that he wanted to seek God's law. The desire to do God's law implied a full understanding of the law's life-changing affect. Ezra's dedication to his calling undoubtedly changed Israel for the better and encouraged proper worship as the travelers returned to their homeland.

III. Ezra's Obligations

Ezra 7:23-26

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

24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not.

26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

23. Whether Artaxerxes regarded Israel's *God* as the one, true God is undetermined. However, at the very least, he held a high regard for the Israelites' God. The king ordered obedience to the commands of God as they related to *the house* of God. The expression *the God of heaven* admits that Ezra's God is not just the God of Israel; this God is much greater, and Artaxerxes recognizes the scope of God's domain.

24. It was customary for the Persians not to levy taxes on priests of any kind of religious order. Before Ezra, Persian King Darius the Great exempted servants of the cult of Apollo from paying taxes and *tribute* to the state. Artaxerxes continued that precedent to include all who served at the temple in Jerusalem.

25. Artaxerxes had developed a very high regard for *Ezra* and empowered Ezra to establish just and consistent guidance on *the laws of . . . God*. Undoubtedly, Ezra's identity as an expert on God's laws allowed him to accurately know and teach others in the same regard.

The river refers to the Euphrates River. This highlights the geographic extent of the Persian Empire which stretched from the Euphrates to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, and from northern Syria to the border of Egypt.

26. In a surprising move, Artaxerxes required people to obey both *the law of the king* and *the law of thy God*. Years before, Darius the Great made a similar demand, requiring obedience to "the God of heaven" and the word of the king (Ezra 6:9-12).

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

EZRA AND THE LAW

Into the Lesson

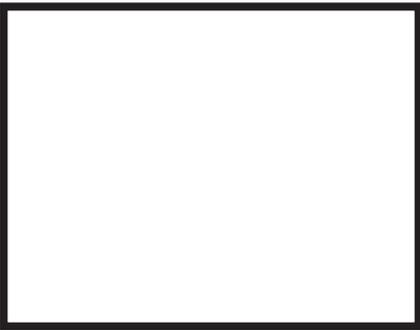
Write down what has been passed down through the generations of your family in these areas:

Physical Trait / Character Quality / Family Heirloom

Inheriting traits, troubles, and trinkets from our ancestors is nothing new. But there's something valuable to learn in this regard from today's text.

Into the Word

Read Ezra 7:1-5. Create a depiction of Ezra's lineage in the space.



What did the people in Ezra's lineage have in common?

Why were such roots important to the returned exiles?

Read Ezra 7:6-10. What was the significance of God's hand in these verses as they relate to the king's granting Ezra's requests and Ezra's safe arrival in Jerusalem?

Read Ezra 7:23-26. Choose a scribe and write a job description, in modern-day format, based on what Ezra was given authority to do and what he did not have authority to do.

Into Life

What spiritual beliefs and practices have been passed down to you from spiritual or physical ancestors?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Follow Ezra's example!