

FPFWC Christian Development



Justice and Adversity

February 2022

Winter Quarter

February 12, 2022

Lesson #2 – Ezra and the Law

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Ezra 7:1-10, 23-26

ICE BREAKER –

1. *Why is the Word of God so important for the believer?*
2. *What disciplines do you find helpful in motivating you to seek, do, and teach God's will?*

Key Verse: Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments. —Ezra 7:10

LESSON BACKGROUND

After the death of King Solomon in about 930 BC, the nation of Israel experienced political and religious upheaval. The 12 tribes of Israel were divided into 10 northern tribes (designated the kingdom of Israel) and 2 southern tribes (designated the kingdom of Judah; see 1 Kings 12:1–24; 2 Chronicles 10:1–11:4).

Following this division, the king of the kingdom of Israel established two places of worship—at Bethel, just 10 miles north of Jerusalem, and at Dan, farther to the north. At each location a golden calf was placed (1 Kings 12:28–29; 2 Kings 10:29). This act was a blatant disregard for what the Lord had prescribed regarding the place and manner of worship (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11). Idolatry such as this eventually led to the destruction and captivity of the kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians around 722 BC (see 2 Kings 17:5–6; 1 Chronicles 5:26).

The southern kingdom of Judah experienced a similar fate. After decades of immoral worship, in contradiction to the words of God's prophets, Jerusalem (the capital of Judah) was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC (2 Chronicles 36:14–20). During this conquest, Solomon's temple was destroyed and the people of Judah were exiled. The land of Judah was desolate—without its people, its king, its capital, and its temple.

Within this context, the book of Ezra described two waves of Jewish captives returning to their homeland. It is extremely important for understanding the book of Ezra to distinguish between the two waves. The first took place in about 538 BC after Cyrus, king of Persia and conqueror of Babylon, decreed that captives could return to Jerusalem to build a temple (Ezra 1:2; compare 2 Chronicles 36:22–23). These returnees first rebuilt the altar in 537 BC (Ezra 3:1–6), then began work on rebuilding the temple (3:7–13). After opposition (4:1–5) and a brief delay (4:24), the temple was completed in 516 BC (6:15).

Today's lesson focuses on those who returned to Judah in 458 BC, 80 years after the first return. This return was led by Ezra, an expert in God's law, whose life focused on proper worship of God.

Over a century had passed since the Babylonians had taken Ezra's ancestors captive. In the midst of their captivity, the foundation that undergirded the actions of Ezra and his people was their faith in God and hope to return to their homeland. Only in Jerusalem could Ezra and his people worship properly, at the rebuilt temple.

LESSON COMMENTARY

1. Journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (7:1–10)

7:1–10. The narrative first orients itself to what preceded it. The completion of the temple had occurred in 516 BC (6:15); however, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC (vv. 7–9). Thus, a span of 58 years had passed since the completion and dedication of the temple. Darius I reigned from 522–486 BC and was followed by Xerxes (486–465 BC), referred to as Ahasuerus in 4:6, which recorded opposition to the rebuilding of the foundations of the temple (Est 1:1–2; Herodotus 3.89; 7.138–239). Xerxes had married Esther, who secured the safety of the Jews by thwarting the plans of Haman (Est 7:1–10). The events associated with Esther occurred during the time between chaps. 6 and 7 of Ezra. Artaxerxes I ascended to the throne in 465 BC and reigned until 424 BC. Thus, if the events narrated in Ezr 7 occurred in the **seventh year of King Artaxerxes I**, this would place Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem in 458 BC (v. 7). The text provides a genealogy for **Ezra son of Seraiah** that traced his lineage back to Aaron the chief priest (1Ch 6:7–10). This provided spiritual legitimation for his mission and established continuity with the preexilic people of Israel. Ezra's home was in **Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses**. Thus, he was well-trained and capable of teaching the Israelites concerning the social implications of the Torah. In spite of the decree against the returned exiles (4:19–22), Ezra found favor with Artaxerxes I, and **the king granted** his request that he and others could return to Judah and Jerusalem—possibly to verify whether or not there was a subversive intent by the Judeans (4:21). A brief travelogue narrates the 118-day journey with its 11-day delay and concludes with Ezra and a new group of returned exiles arriving safely in **Jerusalem** (cf. 8:31). Once in Jerusalem, Ezra committed himself **to study the law, to practice it, and to teach** it to those living in Jerusalem. This provides an apt description of those who are likewise committed to God's mission (Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 130–1).

7:21–26. Artaxerxes I further legitimized Ezra's mission by allowing him to request resources from the **provinces beyond the River**. Ezra, who functioned as the royal patron's broker, did have set limits, a subtle reminder that it was Artaxerxes I who had allowed all of this to occur (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 12.3.3). The Persian king had now positioned himself as the patron of the Judeans in hope that their God would favor him and extend his reign in peace and prosperity even unto **his sons**. Furthermore, to ensure that **the God of heaven** would favor the king, he released the **servants of this house of God** from **tax, tribute or toll**. Thus the workers in the temple could offer their service without hindrance, distraction, or

delay. His task as the king's broker included a commission for Ezra to **appoint magistrates and judges** throughout the province. This would ensure that those who opposed the law of God or the law of the Persians would face appropriate consequences. Moreover, Ezra was to **teach** those who did not know the law. Artaxerxes rhetorically exerted imperial power in declaring that those who did not obey the conjoined laws of God and the Persians would face death, expulsion, imprisonment, or seizure of property (Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 108). Obedience to the emperor, religious devotion, and ethical behavior combined to provide legitimation for Ezra's mission as Artaxerxes' broker. The narrative, however, also provides an alternative explanation: legitimization for Ezra's mission came, he said, "because the good hand of his God was upon him" (7:9).

LESSON NUGGET – The people had lapsed into sin; and it was Ezra's task to bring them back to the Lord. One of the emphases in these chapters is hands. Ezra was a gifted man, but he could do nothing unless God's hand was upon him and the people traveling with him. God's hand is a providing, protecting, encouraging, and guiding hand.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*