

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 6**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **The Strong Hand (Ezra 7-8)**

Note that the thematic element that binds these chapters together is the repeated reference to the “hand” of God: 7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31.

#### **I. Purpose: The Intent of Ezra – Ezra 7:1-10**

##### **A. Time (Ezra 7:1): “After these things”**

The time is almost 60 years after the events narrated in chapter 6. Hence note how selective the writer is. Not all is told, but only what is significant for the people of God.<sup>1</sup>

Now the Book of Ezra places focus on different concerns: not only on *restored worship* (Ezra 1-6), but also on *reformed life* according to the law/word of God (Ezra 7-10).

##### **B. Credentials (Ezra 7:1-5)**

See 1 Chronicles 6:1-15. Also compare Ezra 2:59-63 on the importance of the documentation. See also Exod. 6:14-27. Note the “gaps” in the genealogy.

##### **C. Description (Ezra 7:6)**

*Mahir* is the word used to describe Ezra as a scribe. It means quick, speedy, and hence skilled (as opposed to cumbersome).

Note that according to this verse the Law of Moses is a divine gift (“had given”) and apparently complete. Here also we meet the first “hand of Yahweh” clause. So in this verse we have an assembly of realities: a completed revelation (torah of Moses) and an ongoing providence (hand of Yahweh), this latter operating in conjunction with human ingenuity/initiative (“all his request”).

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<sup>1</sup> See Williamson, *NBC*, 1994 ed., p. 430.

### D. Date (Ezra 7:7-9)

Assuming the text to be correct, the date is 458 B.C. According to Clines, Ezra departed April 8 and arrived August 4 of 458. Another proposal is based on emending the text of verse 7 to the 37<sup>th</sup> year (428 B.C.). Others have construed the 7<sup>th</sup> year as that of Artaxerxes II (= 398 B.C.).

### E. Design (Ezra 7:10)

Note the initial *ki* (for, because) in the Hebrew text. It explains why the good hand of his God was upon him (Ezra 7:9). God prospered the venture because of Ezra's purpose. This then is a warning against sloth and carelessness, and a sloppy view of grace.<sup>2</sup>

The subject comes before the verb in the Hebrew text, so there is some stress on "Ezra." On "setting the heart," the Hiphil of *kun* plus *leb*, see Psalm 78:8; 2 Chronicles 12:14; 20:33 (all negative); and 1 Samuel 7:3; 2 Chronicles 19:3; 30:19.

The language of verse 10 speaks of a ministry that is *focused in its objective* (set his heart) and *intense in its labor* (to seek). It is both *anchored* and *vigorous*, not content with a little ministerial piddling.

Note that Ezra purposes a total ministry: seek, do, teach; the cognitive, the experiential, and the didactic. Note that there are both *academic* and *existential* qualifications before teaching. The process, ever repeated, is: *concentration* (seek), *consistency* (do), *communication* (teach).

## II. Permission: The Decree of the King – Ezra 7:11-26

This decree of Artaxerxes gives more people permission to return to Judah, v 13, but there are several other concerns/purposes:

### A. Investigative (Ezra 7:14)

It was, in part, a "fact-finding" mission.

### B. Liturgical (Ezra 7:15-23)

So much had to do with the worship of the house of God, whether it was silver and gold from royalty, from others in Babylon or from the exiles themselves (Ezra 7:15-16), or the delivery of utensils to be used in the temple (Ezra 7:19).

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<sup>2</sup> See the sermon by Alec Motyer in *Christianity Today*, Nov. 23, 1962, pp. 5-7.

Needs for worship materials, etc., were to be met from the royal treasury (Ezra 7:20-22), up to 3 ¾ tons of silver, 650 bushels of wheat, 600 gallons of wine, 600 gallons of oil (*EBC*).

Note the royal concern in verse 23. Maybe the king was trying to cover “all his religious bases.” Still, according to Jeremiah 29:4-9, the exiles were to seek to benefit their captors and seek the welfare of the regime under which they existed.

### **C. Fiscal (Ezra 7:24)**

The Judean “clergy” were to be kept tax-free. Perhaps this was a cautionary note to Artaxerxes’ regional IRS agents.

### **D. Judicial (Ezra 7:25-26)**

The people in Transeuphrates were probably the Jews living there, as the last line or two of verse 25 indicates. Note that in verse 26, the law of Ezra’s God is also the law of the king.

In reference to verse 25b, Fensham (*NICOT*, 108) says: “Ezra’s mission was to teach them afresh the law of God and to discipline them to live according to it.” Hence, the focus of chapters 1-6 is the *temple*, while that of chapters 7-10 will be the *torah*.

## **III. Praise: The Grace of Yahweh – Ezra 7:27-28**

Here is a doxology in praise of Yahweh’s:

### **A. Covenant fidelity: “the God of our fathers”**

The God of the Bible is always a God with a record in history, a God with a past — in which he has proven faithful to those to whom he has made promises.

### **B. Subtle sovereignty: “who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart”**

King Artaxerxes may make the decree and grant the permission, but *why* does he do so? Because there is a King behind the king, one who turns the king’s heart whichever way he wants (Prov. 21:1). Yet Yahweh’s sovereignty is not always blatant—frequently it is hidden and subtle; often Yahweh chooses to carry out his decrees through the decrees and decisions of the lesser kings and rulers of the earth.

### C. Amazing goodness

Note in verse 28a the juxtaposition of the emphatic “and upon *me*” and all the biggies of the Persian empire (the king, his counselors, all the king’s mighty princes). There is something astounding in how this miniscule Judean could command such favor from the bureaucracy of Persia! Ezra revels in the thought.

### D. Providential encouragement, 28b

The verb is really “I strengthened myself.” But note the following clause that anchors this encouragement in the discernible ways of God favoring his plans.

David Clines has a provocative comment/reflection on this text:

It must have been difficult for those whose spirit the Chronicler regarded as having been “stirred” (1:5) by God in the days of Cyrus to return to Palestine from Babylonia not to imagine themselves more dedicated to the will of God than those who remained behind in Babylon. But from the descendants of those who remained in Babylon — through indifference or lack of courage or simply because God had not “stirred” their spirit — came the two great leaders of the Judean community, Ezra and Nehemiah. Even within the Babylonian community that had failed to respond to God’s act of deliverance from exile, and whose eyes were blind to the “new thing” God had done (Isa. 42:18ff.; 43:19), it was possible for Ezra to “set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it” (Ezr. 7:10). For God’s purposes included the Babylonian Jews also, and his directing and guarding “hand” (7:28) is upon a Jew who, from the point of view of the Judeans, has attained high office in the Persian government at the cost of “forgetting” Jerusalem (Ps. 137:5f.). Should Ezra not have left the Persian court long before the seventh year of Artaxerxes to throw in his lot with the returned exiles? Many Judeans may well have thought so. But it is before his own Master that he stands or falls (Rom. 14:4). God works out his purpose through men of mixed motives and characters not above suspicion — through ordinary human beings, that is to say.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary, 107.

#### IV. People: The Congregation of Israel – Ezra 8:1-20

##### A. The flicker of hope (Ezra 8:2)

Note Hattush of the sons of David (see the listing of Davidic/royal descendants in 1 Chron. 3:17-24). If you scrutinize that list carefully, it seems, as Fensham says,<sup>4</sup> that the main thread of the list is: Jehoiachin, Pedaiah, Zerubbabel, Hananiah, Shecaniah, Shemaiah, Hattush. Hattush is then the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. If Zerubbabel was born ca. 560 B.C., and if one allots approximately 25 years per generation, then Hattush appears here about 458 B.C., which fits the traditional date of Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem.

Note that the writer does not go ballistic over the presence of a Davidic descendant here — the emphasis is muted (McConville); but he does mention it/him. “Of the sons of David, Hattush.” Does this not somewhat parallel Matthew 1:12-16, where, during the exilic and post-exilic years, when the sky is often grey and the prospect drab, it is nevertheless clear that the Davidic covenant line keeps going and going? None of them reigns, yet the line continues until it surfaces in Jesus, the son of Mary. So here in Ezra 8, does not the mere mention of Hattush, a son of David, hint that the Davidic covenant, though presently eclipsed, is not dead and buried?

##### B. The power of genetics (Ezra 8:1-14)

Those who came back under Ezra tended to be from those families that had come back in 538 B.C. Note the following listing as it compares the list in Ezra 8 to that in Ezra 2:

8:3	Parosh	2:3
8:4	Pahath-moab	2:6
8:5	Zattu	2:8
8:6	Adin	2:15
8:7	Elam	2:7
8:8	Shephatiah	2:4
8:9	Joab	_____
8:10	Bani	2:10
8:11	Bebai	2:11
8:12	Azgad	2:12
8:13	Adonikam	2:13
8:14	Bigvai	2:14

The message here seems to be: don't trust in genetics (Matt. 3:9 is true), but don't despise genetics either. After all, covenant fidelity tends to run in families.

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<sup>4</sup> *NICOT*, 111

As McConville says:

Even over the generations, it was particular families that were to the fore in making the journey back to the land. Reading between the lines, we may discern here an example of that faith-in-action ... transmitted from generation to generation by those families which took seriously their religious and educative duties.<sup>5</sup>

Is there not a word of hope and encouragement here to godly fathers and mothers? Doesn't this help answer the question: What can I do for the kingdom of God? Answer: Indoctrinate your kids and lead a godly life among them.

### **C. The challenge of work (Ezra 8:15-20)**

Ezra faces a lack of Levites. So he sends ambassadors (v 16) to Casiphia (17). Who knows where that was. Apparently, it was a site near Babylon, perhaps a Judean study center? Note the acknowledgement of Yahweh's goodness in v 18a. The appeal nets a total of 38 Levites (vv 18-19) and 220 temple servants (v 20).

There was likely a level of comfort — even prosperity — for the exiles in Babylon. But if they (e.g., the Levites) were to go with Ezra back to Judea, they would leave a life where they may have had a good bit of autonomy from the “strict routines of the Temple” (Kidner) in Judea where life was not all fulfillment and fun. It's about as attractive perhaps as 2 Timothy 2:3: “Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

Once a Chicago bank asked for a letter of recommendation for a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house exuded over the young man. His father was a Cabot, his mother a Lowell. Further back there was a marvelous blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and others of Boston's elite. He was recommended heartily. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note notifying the investment operation that the information given was completely inadequate. It stated: “We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work.”<sup>6</sup>

That was the situation here. The prospect was not glamorous. It was just work. Does this passage, by implication, not address the western church today? Is not the attitude in the church all too frequently: Don't upset my usual comfort by making any demands of me? Stan Evers lowers his guns on this attitude: “Why is it that they feel that it is expecting too much for them after a day's work to get

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<sup>5</sup> *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, Daily Study Bible, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Peterson in *Leadership*.

involved in serving the Saviour who poured out his blood to redeem them from the torments of hell?”<sup>7</sup>

## **V. Protection: The Adventure of Faith -- Ezra 8:21-23,31-32**

### **A. The occasion of faith (Ezra 8:21b)**

They were undertaking a 900-mile journey. That was quite a peril to face. How fragile they seemed. One can imagine the “interest” they might have kindled when word got out that a caravan was about to leave with x-amount of goods (see Ezra 8:25-30). Could they afford to go without state-provided protection?

### **B. The profession of faith (Ezra 8:22b)**

Read the text! Here was the testimony of Ezra and company to the greatness and power of God.

### **C. The risk of faith (Ezra 8:22a)**

There are times when faith must take on flesh, when what is professed must be expressed in concrete situations. There are those times when we must reject all visible human help and risk all on God alone. When could we possibly be safer? But we often don't view it that way. We are like the terrified lady onboard ship in a terrific storm. She happened to pass the captain and asked, “Is there any hope, Captain?” to which he responded, “Our only hope is in God.” She turned more pale and gasped, “Are things really that bad?” (H. L. Ellison).

### **D. The expression of faith (Ezra 8:21a,23)**

They engaged in fasting and prayer seeking a safe journey. Ezra says their purpose also was to “humble ourselves” (see Lev. 16:29,31). This pleading and confession does not contradict their professed confidence, but is the expression of it.

As stated above, there are those times when faith gets pushed beyond the theoretical, times when faith must be tested. But if we have any choice in the matter — as apparently Ezra had here — how do we discern the difference between faith and folly? Am I believing God by not taking a military escort or am I simply being stupid? How do I know? Am I tempting God or trusting God? And how can I tell the difference? Or, to look at it from the other angle, am I acting in prudence or in unbelief?

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<sup>7</sup> *Doing a Great Work*, 76.

### **E. The vindication of faith (Ezra 8:31-32)**

Sounds like small potatoes — a safe journey. But for a defenseless group of Jews exposed to daily danger, it was proof of the strong protection of God. “Thus we came to Jerusalem” is for them one of the outstanding miracle stories of life.

### **VI. Propriety: The Urgency of Honesty – Ezra 8:24-30,33-34**

The inventory of verses 26-27 will come out a bit differently depending on the commentator. But the amounts on any scheme are substantial: 650 Talents of silver equals 49,000 lbs., or about 25 tons of silver (*EBC*); Clines says 19 tons. 100 Gold talents equals 7500 lbs., or 3 ¾ tons (per Clines, 3 tons). In any case, it's time for a Wells Fargo or Brinks armored truck to come rolling in.

The twelve leading priests Ezra entrusted with oversight of this wealth (Ezra 8:24) are called holy in verse 28, as were the utensils they guarded. In the latter case, “holy” means, in part, “off limits.” Note the vigilance that Ezra requires of these priests in verse 29.

The journey itself, as many have noted, is passed over in silence as to detail (cf. v. 32: “Thus we came to Jerusalem”). But the weighing out is clearly and carefully recorded (Ezra 8:33-34). Are we not right to see here Ezra's concern to make their honesty transparent? Is this not Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians 8:19-21 (cf. also Gal. 2:10; Rom. 15:25-27) when he rallies the Corinthians to contribute to the relief of Hebrew Christians in Judea? Is this not a broad-ranging principle of ministry: “always be scrupulous to give no one any reason to suspect you of improper conduct or procedures”?