

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

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Artaxerxes' Decree

Last week in Ezra 7 we finally met Ezra personally. He lived in Babylon after the time of Esther during the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia. He was a scribe, skilled in the Torah. He had set his heart on being a scholar of the Torah, a practitioner of the Torah and an expositor of the Torah. Two generations had passed since the original generation had returned, rebuilt the Temple and reinstated the sacrificial system. This generation was going apostate by intermarrying with foreign women and consequently under divine discipline. God's chosen instrument to return to the land was Ezra, a man who through Torah study, Torah practice and Torah teaching was prepared to convict that generation of their sin so they would confess their sin and be restored to fellowship and consequent blessing of God.

The year of his return was 458BC and he returned with God's providentially-supplied blessing through King Artaxerxes who had his own agenda for sending Ezra back to the land. Historically a confederation of Greek cities had formed a naval fleet in 460BC and upon sailing to Egypt had a great victory over the Persians, even capturing Memphis. This defeat left Persia's western coastal plains along the Mediterranean open to Greek incursions. In response King Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to return to the land in 458BC to "inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem," to make sure they were living accordance with the law of the God who dwelled in Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes' strategy was to elicit the help of the gods and goddesses along the Mediterranean coastline provinces. He believed that to secure the help of these gods and goddesses proper worship had to be re-instated and maintained. Ezra was the man of the hour, highly qualified to serve Artaxerxes as a sort of 'Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs.' His return would ensure the detection of any mal-worship and proper measures for correction necessary to please the God of Israel.

Thus we find in Ezra 7:11 the introduction to the decree of Artaxerxes on behalf of Ezra. **Now this is a copy of the decree which Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:** Ezra was chosen specifically because of his qualifications in the Torah which included the commandments and statutes **of the Lord.**

The decree begins in verse 12 and at this point the book switches to Aramaic again, the official correspondence language of the Persian Empire. It is one of the few places in the OT that deviates from the Hebrew. But here and in Ezra 4:8-6:18 and Dan 2:4b-7:28 the original text is in Aramaic. Since we have here an official Persian government correspondence it is written in the official language of such communications. Verse 12, **“Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace.** Notice **Artaxerxes** refers to himself by the title **king of kings.** This is the same title that God gave Nebuchadnezzar, the first and greatest Gentile king during the times of the Gentiles, in Dan 2:37 through Daniel who was given the interpretation of the four metal statue. That title was given under the understanding that it was the God of heaven who had given Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom and his power and his strength and his glory. That title will ultimately in time come to rest upon the Lord Jesus Christ in the kingdom after the times of the Gentiles has run its course. However, until that time the title has been used by great Gentile kings and appropriately so since God has given Gentile kings the right to rule during Israel’s discipline. Verse 12 also reveals ultimately what the king wants from **the God of heaven, perfect peace.** He wants perfect peace on his western front along the Mediterranean coastline from the threat of the Greeks. The **God of heaven** is the one who will supply it through Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of that God who is being sent to re-instate proper worship.

Verse 13, **And now 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.** Note that Ezra had the word of God in hand; he had a copy of the Torah and was able to carry it with him to Jerusalem since it outlined the

proper way to worship in the Temple. He is also given authorization to gather **any of the people of Israel and their priests and Levites** anywhere in the Persian Empire **who are willing to go to go to Jerusalem** with him. This may sound strange for the king to authorize another law code but the Persian kings did not have a problem with other law codes in their kingdom so far as they did not contradict Persian law. In fact they encouraged it in order to ensure the favor of the gods throughout the kingdom. The return of other people of Israel, priests and Levites would further the king's desire that the law Ezra carried in hand was implemented upon his return. Ezra would not be a one man show.

In verse 15 he shows how important this matter is to him by making a gift to the God of Israel out of the royal treasury, **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,** they sought by **silver and gold** to propitiate the God of Israel so that He would protect their western front. They show their ignorance concerning the God of Israel when they state that His **dwelling is in Jerusalem**. The **God of Israel** was not a local God who actually dwelled in a little Temple box in Jerusalem. When Solomon built the first Temple he proclaimed with great theological precision that the highest heaven could not contain Him, much less this house. Nonetheless **the king and his counselors** seek to propitiate this God to secure his protection by paying Him off.

Verse 16, more financial provision **with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon,** and beyond even all this **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,** and here he designates what the money is to be spent on since his interest is in securing proper worship of the God of Israel in Jerusalem. **Therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.** That basically covers the sacrificial system. It would be completely financed, ultimately by the Persian kingdom because it was a kingdom interest.

Verse 18, **“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. The goal here is to please the God who dwells in Jerusalem. Ezra and those who returned with him would know what is necessary to please this God so the rest of the money is put in their hands to be used at their discretion since they know what they are doing.

Verse 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.**

Either there were still some **utensils** that did not get returned 80 years earlier or else these **utensils** were a gift from the king in order to further elicit the protection of **the God of Jerusalem**, probably the latter, a further gift.

Verse 20, “**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.** Apparently the king made additional provisions for whatever was needed for the Temple. If the Temple was in disrepair or in need of new decorum, whatever was needed it was to be provided for **from the royal treasury.**

Verse 21, “**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, ²²even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.** Though these amounts are limited, up to certain amounts, these amounts are enormous. A talent weighs approximately 75 pounds. **100 talents of silver** according to the troy ounce system and at today’s price of silver per troy ounce as ~\$20 amounts to \$2.2 million and that amount was from **all the treasurers who are beyond the River Euphrates.** I don’t know how many **treasurers** there were **beyond the River** but there were multiple treasurers and they had at their disposal from each of them, the equivalent today of **up to \$2.2 million** as well as **100 kors of wheat** (600 bushels), **100 baths of wine** (600 gallons), **100 baths of oil** (600 gallons), **and salt as needed.** All this was so that proper worship would be restored in Jerusalem.

Why? We finally see clearly in verse 23, the king was providing all this financial backing in order to secure the Persian Empire, himself and his

ruling dynasty against the threat of the Greeks. **“Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.** The Persian king was earning, or trying to, the favor of the **God of heaven** who dwelled in Jerusalem so that his kingdom would be established and his throne and his dynasty forever. That was the desire of every ancient king, an eternal kingdom, throne and dynasty. Nobody likes to lose power. But only David was ever given a promise from the God of the universe ensuring such a kingdom, throne and dynasty.

Verse 24, as a perk toward securing this end the king and his counselors say, **“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.** So Ezra and the other categories of Levites; the priests, Levites, etc...would enjoy tax exempt status.

Now we have mentioned in verse 23 the **Nethinim**. Who are the **Nethinim**? Tradition says that they are servants that came into existence in the time of the Conquest of Joshua. Joshua 9 recounts how the Gibeonites, rather than resisting the Israelites, deceived them and told them they wanted to make a covenant with them. When Joshua asked where they were from they said from a very far off place. Consequently Joshua entered into a covenant with them to allow them to live. When it was found out that they were inhabitants of the land Joshua kept his covenant he was duped into making with them and enlisted them as wood choppers and water drawers for the mundane needs of the altar. Apparently this group of people persisted and over time their number was added to from captives taken in battle. Later they were formally given by David to the Levites and were thus called the **Nethinim**, **Hebrew meaning** “the given ones” (cf Ezra 8:20). They continued to carry out these menial tasks for the Levites even until the time of the Exile. We read in Ezra 2 that some of them returned with Zerubbabel at the first return (Ezra 2:70); others are here authorized to return with Ezra in the second return (7:24; 8:20). Sometimes they are referred to merely as “temple servants” in the English translation but they are the Nethinim and when we see them again I’ll point it out. They were foreigners who were involved in doing the menial tasks and labors necessary for the proper Temple worship. Along with the priests, the Levites, the singers and the doorkeepers they

would work to secure the king's interests and therefore would be tax-exempt government employees.

Verse 25, **“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**“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.”** If this is any indication of how concerned the Persian king was for the stability of his western front, and I think it is, then the Greek threat was significant. **Ezra** was being enlisted as the top scholar of the **wisdom of God** which he had **in his hand**. He was to take the Torah and on the basis of the wisdom in Torah **appoint magistrates and judges** in the province. Both of these administrative positions would be heavily involved in **judging all the people beyond the River**. The legislation on which they based their judgment was to be the Torah. Ezra was to secure individuals who would in fact follow a strict constructionist interpretation of the Torah. In the king's mind these magistrates and judges were essential to success. Ezra as the top scholar was given the authorization to **teach anyone** in the land **who** was ignorant of the laws of God in Torah so that they could live by them and the king's kingdom would prosper.

In verse 26 Ezra is given executive power to execute the judgments of the Torah. **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 or for imprisonment.** The king didn't know all the details of the Torah but his Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs did and so Ezra is the man of the hour to secure the king's interests against the Greek threat.

And yet, while all this is going on on the human plane in the king's mind ultimately on the divine plane it is to secure God's interests as revealed in His covenant program with Abraham and David; to maintain a Jewish presence and proper worship in the land so the Messiah could come. The remarkable thing about the chapter is that God was at work for the Jews through Gentile rulers. They are not all powerful, God is all powerful.

This turns out to be the precise thing that impressed Ezra in verse 27 as he gives his *barak*, his “blessing,” his “salute” to **the Lord, the God of our fathers**; referring back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He reaches all the way back to connect this work of the LORD God to the LORD God who worked on behalf of these ancient fathers. He is the same God who loveth and careth for Israel down through the corridors of time, He neither slumbers nor sleeps! He says, **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, 28and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king’s mighty princes.** I want you to observe who put this idea in **the king’s heart**, the king’s *lebab*, his mind, his thoughts. And how God did it in the historical circumstances is awesome. He did it by a series of complex historical movements. He moved the Greek navy against Persia in Egypt to take Memphis along the Nile River and then moved them north along the Mediterranean coastline. All this gave the Persian king concern for his western front. Combining this concern with the geography of his kingdom and his polytheistic beliefs he sought out the greatest living Torah scholar and commissioned him to return to the land to study, to practice and to teach the people of the land how to worship the LORD properly. And yet ultimately the LORD’s purpose for this was so that His people would be convicted of their sin, confess and be restored to covenant obedience in order to ensure His covenant program.

But the complexity of what we would call “circumstances” that God used to inject this thought in the king’s mind are anything but simple. It combined his background with historical events involving a foreign army along a particular geography. I want you to observe how complex it is because our lives and decisions operate under the same complexities. Many, many things are involved in influencing our minds in a given direction. We don’t just make a decision out of the clear blue. We weigh, we think, we consider many factors and out of that complex of factors we make a decision. That’s what King Artaxerxes did. God presented him with a number of factors and his evaluation of those factors resulted in the king having a desire **to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.** When you think about that it blows your socks off. It shows that our God truly is the Lord of history and Ezra knew it. **Blessed be the LORD** he says, who in verse 27 put this

thought in the king's mind which never would have been there and who in verse 28 **has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes.** God's covenantal favor was resting on Ezra in the presence of **the king, his counselors and all his mighty princes.** How awesome it must have been for Ezra to stand in the presence of great and mighty men and to know that he was standing there because of God's covenantal love. That's what lovingkindness refers to, it's God's *chesed* love, His loyal love based on the covenants, to know that God was working through you for His covenant purposes.

Can you imagine being Ezra? You are a scribe, you have been studying the Torah in Babylon for years and this was probably never on your radar? Go to Jerusalem to teach the word of God? Who could have known what God had in store for your life? You started off some little kid interested in the Torah, you grew to practicing the Torah and to teaching it in Babylon and then boom, one day the king's officials are knocking at your door and you are brought in before the greatest king in the world and his counselors and mighty princes and they inform you that you are going to go back to the land and do what you love and do best. You've got an all-expense paid job to study the Torah and teach it to others and you even get to pick your own employees. What Ezra basically got here was an all-expense paid government funded Torah teaching program with virtually unlimited assets and no governmental regulation. Can you imagine how encouraged he must have been? That's what he says in the middle of verse 28. **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.** Talk about encouragement! I even get to hand pick my own guys. And he knew who he wanted. If you ask me, he wanted men like himself, men who loved to study, practice and teach the Torah. It must have been marvelous to see that this is what God had planned for your life since before you were born. He knew all of His days before there even was one. And now it's coming to pass. So he **gathered certain leading men from Israel to go up.**

In 8:1-14 we see the men he gathered to go up. **Now these are the heads of their fathers' households and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes:** we could go through the whole list but we're not going to, let's just make a few observations, it was the year 458BC and first, observe that the first three

names in the list are members of the priestly or royal family. The first name in verse 2 is **Gershom**, he was a descendant of **the sons of Phinehas**. This Phinehas was a grandson of Aaron who demonstrated great zeal against immorality when the Moabites tempted the Israelites. His faithfulness received great praise from God. Gershom is mentioned here specifically as one who returned with Ezra because of his ancient father Phinehas' strong stance against immorality. It is not by accident that Gershom returned with Ezra, it is by design because he has a heritage of confronting immorality and is going to strengthen Ezra in confronting the intermarriages with foreign wives. The second name mentioned in verse 2 is **Daniel**, clearly not the one from the Book of Daniel but a descendant **of the sons of Ithamar**. Ithamar was a son of Aaron and along with Eleazar fulfilled the priesthood properly in contrast to Nadab and Abihu who were struck dead by God. So again this Daniel will be an indispensable asset in confronting the immorality of the intermarriages with foreign women. Third we find in verse 2 **Hattush**, a descendant **of the sons of David**. David was not priest but king, so Hattush is of the royal house of David from whom the Messiah would come. The remaining people listed from verse 3 on are men are leaders but they are not of priestly or royal genealogy.

Second observation, verses 1 and 3 indicate that all these men's genealogies were confirmed. You can tell they kept very strict genealogical records and that the genealogical records were important to them. We have been watching for a number of years a revival of interest in genealogies but the real genealogies of interest are the biblical genealogies because they trace the covenant promises of God. In other words they give a track record to God's faithfulness to His promises. How do we measure whether God was faithful to His promises or not without genealogical records? The Jews knew they were absolutely essential and thus kept careful genealogical records so that they would have measurable, quantifiable evidence that God had been faithful to His covenants.

Third observation, at the end of each verse starting in verse 3 all the way down to verse 14 you see a number of males who returned with the leader. If you add all the leaders (18) plus the numbers (1,496) you get 1,514 men.

Now when we come to verse 15 we see these 1,514 men along with wives and children all outside of Babylon packed and ready to go. He says, **Now I**

assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days. Apparently **for three days** Ezra was gathering information on those who were going, getting their genealogies, etc...in preparation for the departure. They were **at the river**, probably one of the streams that flowed into the Euphrates River, and if we followed that stream upstream we would come to the city of **Ahava**. We don't know where **Ahava** was but they gathered at the river that went up to **Ahava** in preparation for the departure.

For three days Ezra is gathering all their genealogical data, counting their number and so forth and he says, **and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there.** Uh oh, no Levites. You need Levites. Now the **Levites**, as I said before, that term can be used broadly or it can be used narrowly. When it's used broadly it includes all three categories; the high priest, the priests and the Levites in the narrow sense, meaning the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants. Obviously since he uses **Levites** here in tandem with some of the **priests** who were there he's using **Levites** in the narrow sense of singers, gatekeepers and temple servants. Apparently none of them were there and yet these people are needed for the proper operation of the Temple and so in verse 16 he sent for them.

The men he sent were already gathered in the camp so when he says **I sent for** and he gives this big long list of names you have to understand that there were probably several thousand people gathered in this camp and so these guys had to be found. Their names were **Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers.** The man he **sent them to**, verse 17, was named **Iddo**, he was **the leading man at the place Casiphia.** **Casiphia** is another place we don't know much about but it was apparently not too far away though because they're going to leave for Jerusalem nine days later. Ezra knew this man, he was a top man and he told the men he sent to **Iddo what to say to him and his brothers, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, that is, to bring ministers to us for the house of our God.** Ezra was in with some of the top men near Babylon. I imagine these top men dialogued about the word of God because that's what top men do, they hammer out and work out the Scriptures. So

Ezra knew he could depend on Iddo to supply what was lacking among the Levites because he was a top man.

Verse 18, **According to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men.** This **Sherebiah** has quite a pedigree tracing all the way back to Levi and Jacob who was renamed Israel but the emphasis is on his **insight**. He was a **man of insight**. This was quite a gift to Ezra; this would be a right hand man, this man had in the Hebrew what is known as *sekel*. This word means that he not only knew the law but he had intelligent knowledge of the reason for the laws and that he was able to think through a complex arrangement of laws that gave you the ability to deal wisely with judicial issues. The result of this kind of skill is obviously success.

And notice that Ezra immediately recognized Sherebiah as a tremendous gift of God. His coming proved once more to Ezra that **the good hand of our God was upon us**. Ezra was stacking up all the so-called circumstantial evidence; the king's decree, the king's provisions of gold and silver, the king's tax exempt status and now the arrival of Sherebiah; Ezra's conclusion was that this was the will of God. He was detecting what we call "providence," the unseen guiding hand of history. God had providentially brought Sherebiah into the caravan returning to Jerusalem and this was obviously an assurance to Ezra that God was giving them success. Along with Sherebiah came **his sons and brothers**, a total of 18 men, probably not too shabby themselves if they spent any time with Sherebiah.

And verse 19, **Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men; 20 and 220 of the temple servants whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name.** Remember we highlighted earlier the Nethinim and we said it means "the given ones." King **David** was the one who had formally given these temple servants to the service of the Temple. With these additional 261 men the total men listed in this chapter are 1,775. However, this was only the men. If each of these men was married and had one child the number who returned with Ezra would be over 5,000; if they each had two children the number who returned would be over 7,000. So it's not unrealistic to conceive that in all 5,000-10,000 people returned with Ezra.

So with everyone needed gathered at the River that leads to Ahava they're going to set off on their journey and we'll study the journey next time.

What can we learn this time? First, the obvious truth that begs us to recognize is that God loves Israel so much that He put this return expedition in King Artaxerxes' heart as well as all the funding necessary to do so. Out of his own royal treasury the King provided funds for the return and for the sacrifices, he designated local tax dollars up to certain limits to complete whatever was necessary to please the God of heaven and gave the priests tax exempt status. From his point of view they were serving an essential government interest, pleasing the God who dwelled in Jerusalem in order that the God of heaven would protect his kingdom and dynasty from the threat of the Greek navy. From God's point of view it was for His own interests, to return His people to Himself through conviction, confession and restoration to fellowship. Does God still work through Gentile powers on behalf of His people Israel? I think he already has. President Truman's recognition of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948 was a step toward end-times prophecy being fulfilled. Second. God loved His people so much that He raised up Ezra, the greatest scholar, practitioner and expositor of the Torah in the world at that time to return to the land and correct the people's sin. If God had not done this His people would have continued in their rebellion and come under the heavy hand of divine discipline, eventually being militarily defeated and kicked out of the land once more. With him God raised up men like Gershom who had a heritage of standing up against immorality, Daniel who had a heritage of being faithful to the priesthood, Hattush of the royal house of David and Sherebiah, a man of great insight into the Torah. All of these men would be instrumental in aiding Ezra when he returned to reform the people who were living in sin. Does God still do this for Israel? I think this is coming, in the future Tribulation he's going to send two witnesses as described in the Book of Revelation and they're going to be men like Ezra; scholars, practitioners and teachers of the word of God. Why? To do what Ezra did in his time, return the people to their God! We have much to look forward to. In many, many ways the future rebuilding of the Temple and reformation of the people retraces the steps of Ezra.

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