

EZRA

Lesson 12, Chapters 6 and 7

It is a fascinating and unique style of the Holy Bible to thoroughly, carefully, and some times to expansively document God's instructions to a Prophet or a King or to His people in general (as with the Law of Moses), but then instead of elaborating on His worshippers doing what God ordained it is merely stated that they did. And so we find that to be the case with the rebuilding of the Temple. After much dramatic build up in the first few chapters of Ezra as to the need for a new Temple, the unsettling political circumstances surrounding the delay in building it, and God's great displeasure with the Jews' procrastination and hand wringing, which He viewed as a lack of sincerity and repentance, suddenly in chapter 6 we hear that in keeping with the command of God the Judahites got back to work and finished it. No fanfare, no details, no glorification of those who participated; only a matter of fact record that it was built and what immediately followed its reconstruction.

Let's continue in Ezra chapter 6 by re-reading part of it, starting at verse 13.

RE-READ EZRA CHAPTER 6:13 – end

After **Tatnai** the vice-regent of the Beyond the River Province where Judah was located had accomplished a thorough investigation to see if the Jews had the proper government authorization for the Temple rebuilding project, he sent a letter to Persian King Darius outlining what he had observed. He asked that the King would have the records libraries of the Persians gleaned to see if perhaps a written record from King Cyrus could corroborate (or invalidate) Zerubbabel's claims that King Cyrus had ordered that the Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuilt their Temple. Indeed in the records city of Ecbatana an official memorandum under King Cyrus's name was found that fully agreed with what Zerubbabel had told **Tatnai**.

And so to add his own authority and personal stamp to the matter (as kings often do), King

Darius informed **Tatnai** that not only were the Jews to be allowed to complete work on their Temple without interference or supervision by Persian governmental bureaucrats, but that the Beyond the River Provincial district was to supply the Jews with the needed funds, in addition to whatever was needed for ongoing daily operations. I'm sure Zerubbabel and his companions could have been knocked over with a feather at this news. After all, to this point they had been bullied, threatened, and completely frustrated for so many years in their efforts to build a new House of God. But this latest Persian King was even more enthusiastic and supportive of the Jews' rebuilding project than Cyrus. Not only was there complete absence of bigotry against them, it seems the king actually had some kind of mysterious unexplained admiration for the Jews. What else could this mean than it was the favor of the God of Israel to supernaturally cause the gentile king of the most expansive empire that the world had ever known to show such kindness and concern for these worshippers of Yehoveh?

Here I'd like to remind us all that in Haggai chapter 2, God's favor was promised if only the Jews would take courage, obey God and build His Temple:

Haggai 2:15-19 CJB

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

¹⁶ 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.

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

¹⁸ '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:

¹⁹ 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."

God kept His word and as usual He kept it in ways that neither Zerubbabel nor the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah could ever imagine. Who could have guessed that a Persian official would come to investigate the rebuilding project, once again throwing it into doubt, but that the current Persian king would enthusiastically support it to such a great extent that he even vowed a curse against anyone who might think to interfere with it! When God makes a promise, it is sealed and it will happen. God is the God of everyone, not just the Hebrews. What a great comfort to us all. But the promise is also conditional on His people trusting Him and being obedient even in the face of opposition and challenge.

In but the briefest of statements the editor of Ezra says that once they began their work again, the Jews proceeded steadily and didn't stop until the Temple was completed. We are thrown a bit of a curve however in verse 14 when we're informed that while it was the God of Israel who was really behind the rebuilding, nonetheless earthly kings were involved and gave their approval. And the 3 kings listed were Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. Cyrus and Darius make sense as they are front and center in the story of the rebuilding of the Temple. But why is Artaxerxes mentioned? We'll be hearing more about him in the next chapter of Ezra, but Artaxerxes came to power many years after the Temple was completed. I searched through the recorded thoughts of many fine Bible scholars about the inclusion of Artaxerxes in this list and frankly none of their theories passed the smell test for me. Probably the best (and most humble) conclusion was by F. Charles Fensham who, in his brilliant commentary on the Book of Ezra, suggested that our modern logic is not the same as for these ancient Jewish writers. And while we can guess upon all manner of possibilities for Artaxerxes' name appearing here, none can be proven. That we find the same statement about Artaxerxes not only in the Hebrew texts but also in the Greek Septuagint that was written nearly 3 centuries before Christ was born says that there was likely no copyist error nor have we created a poor modern English translation of the Hebrew words and somehow lost its meaning. The ancient editor is completely competent in his history, and accurate so far as any archeological finds have proven, concerning the Book of Ezra. The appearance of the name Artaxerxes was intended and achieved some purpose that is not clear to us.

Verse 15 explains that in the month of Adar (the 12th month of the year, at least as concerns the Hebrew religious calendar), in the 6th year of Darius' reign, the Temple was finally finished and formally inaugurated into service. Since chapter 4 verse 24 says that the work on the Temple was halted until sometime in the 2nd year of Darius's reign, then we know that once work began again it took a little over 4 years to complete. The year was 515 B.C. (by the

modern Gregorian calendar).

Verse 17 gives us the tally of the sacrificial animals that were used, and also explains that 12 goats were offered up on behalf of all Israel. We discussed last week that here we find the beginnings of Judah's belief that as of now they were, and had the right to represent, all 12 tribes of Israel, even though historically and factually they only represented Judah and Benjamin. This pleasant fiction would become cemented into Jewish Tradition and to this day most Jews still hold to it (even though with the re-emergence of the 10 Lost Tribes the fallacy of it is being exposed, and it generally is not a welcomed discovery).

After a purification ceremony and many sacrifices to ritually cleanse and consecrate the building into service, next the Priests and Levites were purified and consecrated. The final words of verse 18 say the consecration was "As written in the Book of Moses", meaning they would have followed the ritual purification laws of Exodus 29, Leviticus 8, and Numbers 3 and 8.

Either by good fortune or by plan, the month following the completion and dedication of the Temple was the month of Nisan: the 1st month of the religious calendar year. And so they celebrated **Pesach**, Passover, on the Torah-ordained day, the 14th. Let me give you a brief Hebrew grammar lesson that might add a bit to your understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Notice how after verse 19 states that they celebrated Passover verse 20 begins in most English translations (including the CJB) with the words, "**For** the priests and Levites had purified themselves....." In Hebrew the word that is almost always translated into English as "for" is **ki** and that is what we find here. However **ki** is a connecting word; when it is placed at the beginning of a sentence, it is meant to connect the action of that sentence to the previous one. So rather than how it seems in our English translations that merely 2 separate facts were announced in these 2 verses (first that they celebrated Passover, and second that the priests and Levites were ritually cleansed), what is really being said is that they celebrated Passover BECAUSE the priests and Levites had been purified. In other words, if they had not gotten around to purifying the Levites and priests yet, then they could NOT have celebrated Passover. So for those of you who study Biblical Hebrew, just remember that most of the time we'd be better off translating **ki** as meaning "because" or "due to" rather than "for".

The meaning of verses 19 and 20 then extends to verse 21 as it begins, "So they slaughtered

the Pesach lambs for all the people...” In other words, because the Levites and Priests were made ritually clean and they were ordained into service, this is what allowed them to be able to slaughter the lambs that were the central feature of Passover. If they couldn't slaughter the lambs at the Temple then they couldn't do Passover. Small change, but it adds significant meaning in that nothing could happen at the Temple until the Priests and Levites had been ritually purified.

The text continues that all the people who had returned from exile along with all those who had renounced the filthy practices of the nations living in the land joined in eating the Passover lambs. This is referring to two groups of people: the returning Jews, and also some others whose identity is somewhat ambiguous. We've already learned that many Jews were left in Judah by Nebuchadnezzar to be caretakers; and that many of these had intermarried with gentiles and/or began mixing the pagan worship of gentiles who had moved in to the land with their own Torah-based worship. I think that the idea is that this 2nd group is inclusive of both of these situations, whereby a person who had gone astray in some way now renounced those perverted ways to rejoin the purer ways that the Jewish leadership was attempting to re-establish. And so they were allowed to participate in the Feast of Pesach.

And, as the Torah commands, after eating the Pesach lamb they celebrated the Feast of Matza that begins the next day, Nisan (also called Aviv) 15th. What I like is that it emphasizes the joy with which they celebrated these springtime Biblical feasts. No doubt the joy comes from having been unable to celebrate them for so long, but also because joy OUGHT to be the tone that these feasts are celebrated in because they signify deliverance from slavery and oppression. For the Jews of ancient times, it was from the oppression of being slaves in Egypt (and lately captives of Babylon). But for modern Believers who make Yeshua the Lord of our lives, we should celebrate these same feasts and do them with joy because we've been delivered from being slaves to sin and oppressed by Satan, into eternal fellowship with God. I regret that it's been less than 2 decades since I finally came to understand that these so-called **Jewish** Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were for me too, as a gentile Believer. In fact, by all rights these feasts now may have even more meaning and purpose to me than to my dear Jewish friends who aren't yet Believers because I have appropriated the ultimate spiritual meaning of these feasts in Messiah, while they still observe them mostly as Tradition. I long to celebrate these feasts with my Jewish brethren in the same spirit; and I long for all Christians to see what a sad error it was to throw these God-ordained feasts out and to replace them with shallow manmade customs.

Let's move on to Ezra chapter 7.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 7 all

We take a significant leap in time between the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7; about 57 years.

Chapter 7 begins at a time (458 B.C.) that is well after the completion of the Temple in 515 B.C., and the purpose of these final chapters of Ezra is to finally introduce the namesake of this book. So notice something important: while Ezra is almost invariably spoken of as being pivotal in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, in fact he came to Judah long after it was completed and in operation.

Let me give you an easy marker to get the sense of the timing. The Temple was completed around 35 or 40 years **before** the time of Esther. And Ezra came to Jerusalem about 20 years **after** the story of Esther and Mordecai saving the Jews of the Persian Empire from genocide at the hands of the evil Haman. Darius was the King when the Temple was completed; Xerxes was the King at the time of Esther; and now Xerxes' son Artaxerxes is the King when Ezra immigrates to Judah. So a lot of time has passed since the Temple was rebuilt and put back into operation, lots has gone on in the Persian Empire, and there's been plenty of time for the zealotry for purity in worship and lifestyle of the Jews in Judah to deteriorate; and it has. So the real purpose for Ezra coming to Judah is not at all connected with rebuilding the Temple. Rather Ezra is the leader of a reform movement to restore the proper worship of God, the proper observance of priestly ritual in the Temple, and the proper obedience of priests and lay Jews to the Torah of God instead of to the many manmade doctrines of convenience and tolerance that had grown up in Judah as an accommodation to the gentiles who lived in and around Judah, and to their Persian government.

Chapter 7 begins with a substantial genealogy of Ezra. Let's talk about that for a minute because it is typical of Biblical genealogies, including that of Yeshua. Notice how it begins with saying the Ezra is the "son of" Seraiah, and then continues with a list of more than a dozen additional "son of" names. And since Aaron is the final name on the list, and Eleazar is the 2nd to the last (Eleazar is indeed one of Aaron's sons), what we immediately learn is that the point

is to show that Ezra is a legitimate priest. Only Aaron's son Eleazar represents the priestly line; his other sons produced what the Bible calls Levites, who are non-priests but are qualified to be Temple blue collar workers.

However, Aaron lived 800 years before Ezra, so it is obvious that far more than the 16 generations mentioned here came and went during that long time period. In fact, Ezra is not the biological son of Seraiah as this genealogy would seem to claim. Seraiah lived before the Babylonian exile and this of itself proves that Ezra could not have been his son (at least as we think of son in the modern Western world). Almost certainly the point of listing Seraiah was to show which branch of the priestly line Ezra belonged to.

Thus there are a couple of important things for us to understand: first is that "son of" (**ben** in Hebrew) has a much more expansive meaning in the Bible than how we use the term today. That is, in modern times a son is only 1 generation apart from his biological father. But in ancient times the term more meant "descended from". Thus it was especially common in Biblical genealogy to use "son of" when referring to a relationship between a Bible character and his grandfather. And that is because the ancients tended to live in large extended family units, and especially in the Middle East because the most elder male was the unquestioned leader and authority, then he was also the living patriarch to whom all those born into the family were seen as connected to and were to be identified with.

So the point is that in modern times we see genealogy as an exact science that is incomplete and full of gaps if we can't list every single generation from us to as far back as we're trying to go in our family history. But to the ancient Hebrews a genealogy was purpose driven and so the list could vary slightly depending on what it was trying to convey to the reader. Thus many Bible commentators (especially liberal and the high critical academics) will accuse the Biblical genealogy lists as being either inaccurate or fabricated because they skip generations and call someone "son of" when there is no way that person could have been the direct father to the person being called his son. And this is what happens when we try to stuff the modern Western mindset back into the Bible. Essentially Christian scholars have for centuries decided that the Bible ought to conform to modern Western literary and societal structure, or those passages are simply wrong and need to be reinterpreted. And why do they do this? Because the Hebrew origins of the Bible is not something they want, and so to try to understand the Bible in its original Hebrew context is seen as either irrelevant or a danger to our gentile New Testament faith.

Seraiah was either Ezra's great or great-great grandfather. And the purpose of taking this particular genealogical list back to Eleazar and Aaron was to establish Ezra's priestly credentials, not who his biological parents were, nor where he stood as regards rights of inheritance, nor whether he was a firstborn, nor for any other reason. This general understanding of how Hebrew genealogical lists work applies to all genealogies in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. A complete genealogy without gaps is rare, and when we do find it, it will only cover a very few generations.

The name Ezra is actually a contraction, in the same way that Yeshua is a contraction of *Y'hoshua*. Ezra is a contraction of *Azariah* and it means "the Lord has helped". Ezra represents a critical transitional figure in the progress of Judah, much the same way that Samuel was. That is, Samuel was a one-of-a-kind hybrid Prophet, Priest, and Judge who ushered in the era of the Kings by anointing Saul as first King of Israel. What we're soon going to learn about Ezra is that he was a unique kind of Priest and Torah teacher. Why is that important? Because this helps to reveal one aspect of the formative days of the new religion of the Jews: Judaism. I won't review because it would take too long, but recall that what today we call Judaism began in Babylon, and then really began to take firm root in Persia. The exiled Jews, without Temple or Priesthood and thus with no way to be ritually cleansed nor could they have their sins atoned for nor could they observe any law of the Torah that involved the Temple or sacrifice, began to devise their own ways around the problem. Houses of worship, prayer and fellowship that in time became known as synagogues were established. Non-priests, or at least non-practicing priests, typically were the leaders of these synagogues. What did they teach? It's not clear, but what is clear is that by the time of Esther the Jews in Persia weren't much interested in, and had little familiarity with, the Laws of Moses.

When Ezra returned it was well after Esther's era, the people who had returned to Judah had little idea of what was contained in God's Word even though the Temple had been in operation for almost 60 years, and the Priesthood was functioning in some fashion. The notion that had been brought back with the Jews from their exile was that they had the latitude to kind of make-it-up-as-they-go and it had become a permanent part of Jewish society. It was the priests whose God-given duty it was to teach the people His Torah; no one else was given the authority. But in the person of Ezra we have a non-practicing priest whose chosen ambition became devotion to Torah study and Torah teaching. Thus we find the beginnings of an office or class of people who had religious authority, but who were not attached to the Temple as serving priests, yet somehow they became the supreme authorities and teachers of God's Word and of His Law.

In Christ's day we hear of the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Torah Teachers who were the accepted authorities of Judaism when it came to knowledge of the Law and of the Scriptures in general. But as Judaism progressed, and it became more and more Tradition-based and less and less Holy Scripture based, we see the emergence of the Rabbis. And while even today the Rabbis refer to themselves as Torah Teachers, and their disciples as Torah Students, in fact they are not usually studying Scripture but instead are studying and beholden to the Talmud and to Halakah; the Rabbinical laws of Traditional Judaism. And because whether Jew or gentile we're all humans and subject to the same frailties and temptations, Christianity veered off onto the same path as Judaism until today Christianity is less and less about God's Word and more and more about accepting each denomination's doctrines and traditions.

So Ezra was a wise and skilled expert in the Law of Moses, he operated outside of the priesthood, and he apparently lived in the City of Babel where there was a great concentration of Jews who had chosen to remain in Babylon and not migrate to their historic homeland, Judah. Later we'll find out that Ezra's cohort Nehemiah would come from Susa, the Persian governmental capital. Apparently Ezra was some sort of recognized leader and authority or the King of Persia would have had no reason to become involved with his return to Jerusalem, since no permission was needed for Jews to migrate to Judah. Rather it is clear that Ezra wanted and needed royal authority to go to Jerusalem in order to assume a role of religious authority over the Jewish population and the Temple. After all, Judah already had a Jewish governor and a High Priest; so upon Ezra's appearance there would be competition and rivalry to control the Temple and to guide the Jewish people. Whatever it was that he asked the King for, the King granted it to him in writing so that few would want to challenge him.

Ezra didn't go alone. Like with Zerubbabel so many years earlier, because he was a leader of some stature, he was able to assemble an entourage to go with him. And not surprisingly, since Ezra was of certified priestly bloodlines, he recruited priests and Levites of various job duties to go to Judah with him. While the words aren't here to say so, no doubt essentially what Ezra was doing was taking a hand-picked team with him that he intended on taking over the Temple operations with; people that would be loyal to him and his teachings and not to the priests who were currently running the Temple operations.

History tells us that this was quite a dangerous time in this part of the empire. Egypt was in full rebellion against Artaxerxes and the highways were risky to travel on. This is why we hear in verse 9 that God's good hand was upon him; Ezra made it to Judah safely when he easily could have been attacked by rebels along the way. He started his journey in the 7th year of

Artaxerxes' reign (458 B.C.) on the 1st day of the 1st month of the year. The first month is Nisan, the same month as Passover. He left from the city of Babel and did not arrive in Jerusalem until the 1st day of the 5th month; exactly a 4 month journey. We'll find out later that he was slightly delayed due to difficulty recruiting some Levites that he felt were needed.

Verse 10 begins with the words, "**For** Ezra had set his heart on studying and practicing the Torah of Adonai...." Several things I want to comment on to bring today's lesson to a conclusion. First, as with our brief Hebrew grammar lesson near the beginning of the talk today, this verse begins with the connecting word **ki**. So the idea is that the REASON that (in verse 9) God's good hand was upon Ezra so as to give him traveling mercies to arrive safely in Jerusalem was **because** Ezra had set his heart on God's Torah, both to learn it and to live it. That little word **ki** can have a large effect on how we understand Scripture. And so we see that God's assurance of safe travel and Ezra's sincere intent to study and live by God's Torah was a cause and effect scenario. And this is something that modern day Believers need to take to heart. As much as the Western Church seems to be deathly afraid of carrying out God's commandments as our obligation of good works in case it might be construed as legalism, in fact the Biblical promise of divine blessing is contingent on our doing the good works that God's laws prescribe. Naturally it must all come from a sincere trust and love for the Lord; but nonetheless tangibly doing His will as opposed to just knowing it is a natural part of our relationship with Him.

Second is that while the Hebrew word **lev** is properly translated here to "heart", remember as we've discussed numerous times that when the term heart is used in the Bible it means something entirely different than what it means to modern Westerners. We have adopted a meaning for heart as an indication of feelings and emotions. However in the Bible the heart has nothing to do with feelings and emotions, it is referring to our intellects. And this is because until around the 4th century A.D. it was generally believed that the heart organ is where human thought took place. It was the liver and kidneys where it was deemed that our various emotions resided. So a much better English translation would be that Ezra set his **mind** (instead of his heart) on studying and practicing God's Torah.

And finally, it is important to understand that this verse is telling us that Ezra was not merely a student of God's Word, but most clearly was a person who practiced what he preached. He didn't study for the sake of occupation or mental exercise, or to acquire a vocation or a position of authority. He studied because he trusted God and in my opinion he compared what was being practiced as the Jewish religion of that era (earliest Judaism) to what the Torah actually said, and he knew something was amiss. He wanted to know the truth so that he could

do it; he didn't want to learn and practice a bunch of doctrines and traditions that had an aura of piousness but were far from God's commandments and principles.

H.G.M. Williamson in his commentary on the Book of Ezra said it most eloquently: ***“He (Ezra) is a model reformer in that what he taught, he first lived. And what he lived he first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct, and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness”.***

We'll continue with chapter 7 next time.