

EZRA

Lesson 15, Chapter 8 continued

We took some time last week to back away and get a broad perspective of the Book of Ezra that spans from chapters 1 through 7, before beginning the home stretch of chapters 8, 9, and 10. Our purpose is not merely to know the history of the times but to drink in the deep spiritual understanding and God-principles that are there for the seeing if we'll open ourselves to the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the Holy Spirit.

The divine theme that we focused on last time was that God's grace is brought about on this earth by means of a co-operative venture with human beings. This is best illustrated in our Messiah's composition as being both human and deity, and so is not such a difficult concept to embrace as theory; however it becomes much more challenging to put it into practice because doing so leaves behind any reliance upon navigating our way through our lives based solely on passive prayer and then waiting. And here especially starting at chapter 8 in Ezra we see this principle front and center. But there was also an accompanying principle we discussed that is not so easy to accept let alone to act upon. It is that as human beings we are the ones who have formulated all sorts of manmade traditions and doctrines over the centuries, which have twisted and at times replaced God's laws and commandments, and thus we are also the ones charged with making the reforms. And indeed the story of Ezra is the story of a man who was moved by the Spirit of God to become a Torah scholar not for the purpose of mere knowledge, but to lead a reform movement. Ezra learned and believed God's Word, personally lived God's Word, and observed that the religious beliefs and practices of his fellow Jews in both the Persian Diaspora and in the operation of God's Temple in Jerusalem were falling dreadfully short.

If we look carefully at the Bible we find that the so-called Bumper Sticker Theology of watered-down, casual, 21st century Christianity is not a new phenomenon. Rather we find at the end of the Book of Daniel, all throughout the Book of Esther, and at the root of the reason for Ezra's journey to Judah, was a widespread ignorance of the Torah that led to a watered-down, casual, early 5th century B.C. Judaism. This somewhat deliberate ignorance of the Torah began at the top, with the Levitical Priesthood. And if the Priests didn't know the Torah, they couldn't teach it to the people. And if the Priests didn't constantly remind the people of the importance of the Torah why would the people care about it? Thus Jewish cultural traditions and customs arose that substituted for true Biblical worship and observances and after a few years these customs become the unchallenged norm. For anyone to seriously delve into the

matter would open a Pandora's Box of trouble and upset because it would challenge the accepted teachings of the embedded religious establishment.

When Christ tried to pry open this same Box and to expose all its error and falsehood and carnality not quite 5 centuries later, He was met with stiff resistance from almost every Jewish religious faction because each established group had too much skin in the game to simply allow their authority, status and credibility to be overthrown by some uneducated blue-collar craftsman from the Galilee.

The threat that Yeshua posed to the religious establishment became so serious in their eyes that false charges were trumped up against him by the High Priest and the Sanhedrin and he was essentially murdered under the premise of justice and protection for the souls of the Jewish people. Thus the journey that we'll find Ezra undertaking in order to impose his Torah-based reforms upon the highest ranking Jewish religious authority, from the High Priest himself on down, was not going to be appreciated. No doubt Ezra expected this and understood that reform is inherently a very public indictment against the leaders of the current institution and thus will be fought against (sometimes violently) by those not willing to have their authority challenged. Therefore he wisely enlisted the official backing of King Artaxerxes to back him up, and the King gave Ezra the power to name his own team of judges, officials, Priests and Levites.

So let's make this personal for a second. For all of you who would call yourselves Messianic or Hebrew Roots Christians, and by God's grace the scales have fallen off and you have come to see the need to accept all of God's Word in our faith (not just the parts that uphold certain agenda-driven doctrines); and you grasp the irreplaceable value of the Torah of God as the foundation for that faith, if it is not clear to you yet please realize that the reason for the push back from the established Judeo-Christian religious institution that all of us are experiencing is because whether we've thought of ourselves in such a way or not, we are viewed by that leadership as unwelcomed reformers and thus adversaries. And the decision we'll all face sooner or later (as did Ezra and his followers) is whether it is better to continue the good fight (in all of its messiness and uncertainties) and let the chips fall where they may; or to capitulate to the traditional institutional norms and revert to the practices and beliefs that most of us came from.

Let's open our Bibles and take up Ezra's journey.

READ EZRA 7:28 – 8:14

I started at the end of what most Bibles label as Chapter 7 verse 28 because that verse really belongs as the opening verse of chapter 8.

We get a long listing of folks who were recruited and volunteered to go with Ezra back to Judah. Notice how the words of the passage have Ezra describing these folks as key men of Israel. I'll bring this issue up to you occasionally as it seems appropriate to instill the important understanding that a tradition arose up in Babylon (then Persia) that those Jewish survivors from the exile of Judah to Babylon ought to be counted as the surviving remnant of all Israel. And all Israel means all 12 tribes. This tradition is as much historical fantasy as it is error. The Jews of Babylon who returned to Judah represented mostly one tribe (Judah) along with another tribe (Benjamin) that had largely assimilated into it. However the other 10 tribes are the ones that history dubs the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel. Those are the 10 tribes who resided outside of the Kingdom of Judah, up to the north of the Promised Land, and who some 130 years prior to the Jews being exiled from Judah had been deported from their 10 tribal districts and scattered all over the Asian continent and into North Africa by the Assyrians. Was there some insignificant number of members of those 10 tribes who had somehow joined up with Judah and/or Benjamin and perhaps ventured back to Judah with some of the Jewish returnees? Yes, it is possible if not likely. But that is not at all a true rejoining of the 12 tribes, anymore than does a few grains of sand make a beach. Nor does a handful of folks from the 10 tribes joining up with Judah somehow endow the tribe of Judah with the authorization to hold itself up as the representative and remnant of all the tribes of Israel. And (although we won't go there right now), Ezekiel 37 explains when and under what circumstances that the 10 tribes finally will return to the Promised Land and rejoin their brothers from Judah; and it will NOT be until the Latter Days and until AFTER Israel was reborn as a sovereign Jewish State. And thus the rejoining of tribes as envisioned by Ezekiel, but that Judah incorrectly deemed to have already happened (as they returned from Babylon) is actually occurring today, in our time.

Bottom line: what we see written in Ezra and in some later Bible books that assumes this new claim of Judaism as representing all Israel, is correctly recorded in the Bible just as they believed it. It is only that this belief is an agenda-driven tradition, born in Babylon, and is not historical reality.

Even so Ezra seems to have embraced this tradition and so he made copious use of the number 12 as symbolism in order to establish it as irrefutable belief that Judah now consisted of all 12 Israelite tribes. Notice in the first 14 verses of chapter 8 that we'll find a total of 15 family groups listed. The first 2 groups are priests, the 3rd group is Jewish royalty, but the next 12 groups are common Jewish families. I've done my own research and found numerous claims by Bible teachers that the names represented by each of these 12 families of common Jews can be identified to a specific Israelite tribe (attempting to justify the use of the number 12). However there is no reasonable evidence of this; it is just a guess. If anything these names can be found as common family names from the tribe of Judah, but by no means are these names indicative of historical family names of the 10 lost tribes. There is no legitimate, discernable connection between this list of names and the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

Because in chapter 7 Ezra's personal genealogy was taken all the way back to Aaron, then in

like-kind in chapter 8 the highly abbreviated family genealogy of the two priestly families who signed up to return with Ezra were also designed to show their connection going back to Aaron. Pinchas (also written in some English versions as Phinehas) is the son of Eleazar who is the son of Aaron. Thus Pinchas is in the High Priestly line. Note that in our abbreviated genealogy it jumps all the way from Pinchas (Aaron's grandson) to Gershom. Gershom is the head of the priestly family that is teaming up with Ezra. So well over a couple of dozen generations are skipped over in this genealogy.

Then the next priestly family line represented (still in verse 2) is of the regular priests (they are not qualified to be **High** priests). This genealogy traces their line back as far as Ithamar, who is a son of Aaron. And the currently living head of that family is a fellow named Daniel. Once again more than a couple of dozen generations are simply skipped over between Daniel and Ithamar. Why? We discussed the issue of Biblical genealogy before but very quickly: it is rare in the Bible that genealogies are complete and without gaps and that is because that was never the intention. In fact the same genealogy found for the same person in 2 or more separate listings in the Bible can be somewhat different. And that is because in the Bible ALL genealogical listings are purpose driven. The goal is not to present an exhaustive, precise genealogy as is commonly done in modern times. Our modern Western goal is to correctly list every family member, in précised order, as far back as we possibly can; but its purpose is only a general one and it is to establish a reference list of all related family members that can be used however we see fit.

But the goal of genealogies for ancient people, such as the Hebrews, was not the same. They sought to establish some kind of specific purpose for a genealogical relationship. It could be to establish their right to property inheritance; or maybe that they were in an advantageous royal line; or that they had come from an especially admired family and simply wanted the status. The reasons are many. Here Ezra was seeking to establish that the two families of priests that he recruited were legitimately representative of BOTH classes of priests that could then be used to establish one family line as the High Priests (the family of Gershom) and the other as the family line of the regular priests (the family of Daniel).

The 3rd group of families is interesting because the genealogy is designed to connect a fellow named Hatush with King David. This Hatush can be found in a more complete genealogy as listed in 1Chronicles 3. What is interesting is that he is part of the family of Zerubbabel; the same Zerubbabel who we read about in earlier chapters that had led the first group of returnees back to Judah and who led the reconstruction efforts of the Temple. But what is the point of establishing Hatush as part of King David's royal family? It is impossible to know for certain. Is it possible that Ezra would try to replace the current governor of Judah with Hatush, thus having a member of King David's family as the head of Judah? But Hatush certainly would not have been a king (the only king allowed in the Persian Empire was the King of Persia). Might Ezra have in mind to identify and re-establish a royal line of David in hopes of a future day when a Jewish king might sit upon the throne of a once-again sovereign Jewish nation? And by the way, history proves that never from the time of Nebuchadnezzar until the

year 1948 following WWII would there again be a sovereign Jewish nation. Or was bringing Hatush along just a symbolic gesture to have a genuine royal descendant of David return to Judah to sort of help refocus the Jews back to the Holy Scriptures and to the prophecies concerning King David?

After following the line of King David we get what I fully believe was the symbolic use of 12 for the number of common Jewish families that Ezra chose to go back with him to Judah. And we see that we get somewhat of a census that tells us how many returned as family members of each group. And notice that the typical Hebrew method of only listing male family members is used, so that means that there would have been women and children in addition. Also notice that most of the numbers are round numbers like 150 or 60 or 70. There's too many round numbers to believe that these are precise numbers. These are approximations, as is common in the Bible.

What is important to see is that about 1500 males from the common Jewish families are listed so the total number of those family members who were on the caravan with Ezra was about 5,000. No numbers are given for the two priestly families or David's royal family, so there is no point in guessing. Likely, however, it was a relatively small number.

Let's read some more of Ezra chapter 8.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 8:15 – 23

Back in chapter 7 there was a brief mention of Ezra's journey to Jerusalem beginning at the City of Babel, and giving the departure date as the 1st day of the 1st month in the 7th year of the reign of King Artaxerxes. But here we receive more data. First Ezra traveled from Babel to a place called the Ahava River. This place is completely unknown however very likely it was one of the several manmade canals along the Euphrates River. For whatever reason this place became the rallying point for all the families to assemble.

That they camped there for 3 days makes perfect sense. There was no bus schedule in that era. So 3 days leeway was built-in, which at the same time gave Ezra a chance to "review the troops" so to speak, meet some of the leaders that he hadn't up to this point, and to size up their preparations. He instantly discovered that no Levites were to be found.

It is much easier to understand the Bible, retain what happened, and to apply its principles when we can relate to the people who form its cast of characters. So we need to ask ourselves a simple question; from an overall perspective, what would have been an attraction for these exiles to volunteer to return to Judah? Those who had great religious zealotness, or thought

they needed to reclaim hereditary family land in Judah would have gone years earlier. All the people encamped with Ezra at the Ahava River were established residents of various Persian cities. All had some type of ongoing business or tradecraft. They were living in comfortable homes, theirs was an enlightened society with a functioning government, and they had established families. What would have been their incentive to want to move?

Even the trip to Judah was going to be long and dangerous. It is highly unlikely that any had ever been there before, so they didn't know what they would face. They would be like pioneers in a wagon train, hoping for the best but not knowing what they would face when they arrived.

While their motives aren't addressed, I think the way the narrative is written makes it self evident. This group was headed up by the religious reformer Ezra. This move was about going to where God said they belonged; both from a sense of the place they should live in and also in **how** they should live in relationship with Him. Notice that Ezra's group consisted of a supreme leader who was a Torah expert (Ezra), priests, and 12 families of lay people who represented the 12 tribes of the Wilderness Journey. Their mindset had to be as it was with the Israelites leaving Egypt; this was their God-led exodus to the land promised to Abraham.

And because this was framed as the 2nd exodus, Ezra's group had to be constructed to the same standards that God gave to Moses for his group. Ezra had the High priest family, the regular priest family, and the number of families needed to represent the 12 tribes; but they were missing one key piece. They had no Levites. I have little doubt that this group of about 5,000 souls sensed, as did Ezra, that something had gone wrong with their relationship with the Lord during their time away from His Kingdom land. And the great Torah Teacher Ezra must have pointed out to these family leaders in God's Word that what they sensed was indeed a Holy calling, even if they didn't know exactly what to do about it.

The lack of any Levites was a show-stopper until it was remedied so Ezra assembled a group of 11 men to seek out a fellow named **Iddo** at a place called **Kasifya**. There are lots of unanswered questions about who Iddo is and what Kasifya is. While consensus is never proof, nonetheless most Jewish and Christian scholars think that **Kasifya** must be a place where some kind of sanctuary or worship center existed, and thus it was known that Levites resided there. Some academics are bothered by the repetition of names in the contingent of men who were sent to **Kasifya**. **Elnatan** is used 3 times, and **Yariv** 2 times. Our CJB Bibles muddle the two uses of the name **Yariv** because the second time it says **Yoyariv**. But in fact in Hebrew the spelling of the two is identical. So because of the repetition some critical scholars say this list is corrupted; I don't think so. These were common names for that time and notice that none included the "**ben**" (son of) such and such designation to help make a distinction between them. These ancient folks were similar to us in that large families tended to reuse favored names (we often add Sr., Jr., the 3rd or the 4th to a series of common family names that are passed down generation to generation).

Ezra told the 11 to go as a delegation to **Kasifya** and to approach **Iddo**, who was probably in charge of the religious activity that went on at this religious center; like the head of a commune. **Iddo** agreed to their request and apparently convinced a number of young Levite men to become part of the group going back to Judah (no doubt appealing to their spiritual sensitivities). We find that 38 Levites responded to the call as well as 220 Temple servants who are called **Nethinim** in Hebrew. I realize that the CJB says 200, but I think that's a misprint. The Hebrew spells out 220 and most other Bible versions say the same.

Just as Levites were essentially the servants to the Priests, so were the **Nethinim** the servants to the Levites. While the Torah specifies the Levites as servants to the Priests, no servants are ordained for the Levites. And interestingly we are told that this practice of supplying the Levites with their own kind of servants began with King David and had been carried on as a tradition ever since. That a larger number of **Nethinim** were willing to go probably says that their lives weren't nearly as comfortable as the Levites they served.

Once again we see a brief statement of genealogy that identifies two legitimate Levite families: that of **Machli** and the other of **Merari**. Apparently even the **Nethinim** (the lowly Temple workers) had written proof that they were descended from the families first assigned by King David for the task. But because there were so many of them, and they were at the bottom end of the Temple servants' scale, the writer of the Book of Ezra didn't see fit to notate their names or genealogy (but did tell us that their names were officially recorded).

So now that Ezra had a sufficient number of Levites to complete his Exodus look-alike marching formation, he was ready to go. But wisely the matter was put before the Lord in prayer and supplication. A fast was proclaimed to "humble ourselves before God" to ask for a safe journey. I want to remind you of how different Ezra's act was than what was recorded of Esther telling the Jews of Susa to fast; and it is important that we should pay close attention to the contrast.

Recall what the verse recorded about Esther and her fast:

^{CJB} Esther 4:16 "Go, assemble all the Jews to be found in Shushan, and have them fast for me, neither eating nor drinking for three days, night and day; also I and the girls attending me will fast the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

No mention of prayer and no mention of going before the Lord. This as opposed to Ezra wanting to fast so as to "humble ourselves before God". Our eyes and our minds tend to read in, or assume, that Esther's fast included prayer to God; but neither prayer nor God is mentioned. Considering the context of the entire book of Esther, and of what we know of

Ezra's time from other Bible books and records, and what Ezra observed of his fellow Jews and his response to devote himself to learning the Torah and taking what he learned as a platform to reform the religion of the Jews, I think we should NOT assume that any prayer at all was meant to be included in Esther's fast.

I think for Esther and the Jews of Susa fasting in and of itself was considered something admirable and worthwhile much like meditation is today, or perhaps as that "moment of silence" is called for at a gathering when honoring someone important who has died or commemorating a sobering event that has touched us as a community.

But Ezra as a devout man of God, determined to restore Biblical based worship and observances of God's commandments, had his team fast before the Lord for the express purpose of beseeching the Lord for the His favor of protection on their journey. And Ezra had a very good reason for asking for this particular request; the route he would take was close to 1000 miles long and it was treacherous. Bandits marauded, Egypt was in full rebellion and attacking in the southern areas of the Persian Empire, and Ezra's caravan was loaded down with a tantalizing King's treasure of gold and silver.

We'll finish Ezra 8 and get into Ezra 9 next time.