

February 13 Lesson 11 (NIV)

EZRA AND THE LAW

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezra 7:1–10, 23–26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezra 7:1–26

EZRA 7:1–10, 23–26

¹ After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, ² the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, ³ the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, ⁴ the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, ⁵ the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—⁶ this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. ⁷ Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

⁸ Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. ⁹ He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. ¹⁰ For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

²³ Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons? ²⁴ You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.

²⁵ And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. ²⁶ Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

KEY TEXT

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.—Ezra 7:10

JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

Unit 3: Justice and Adversity

LESSONS 10–13

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HOW TO SAY IT

Ahitub *A-high-tub*.

Amariah *Am-uh-rye-uh*.

Aramaic *Air-uh-may-ik*.

Artaxerxes *Are-tuh-zerk-seez*.

Azariah *Az-uh-rye-uh*.

Baal *Bay-ul*.

Bethel *Beth-ul*.

EleazarEl-ih-*a*-zar or E-lih-*a*-zar.

EuphratesYou-*fray*-teez.

EzraEz-ruh.

HilkiahHill-*kye*-uh.

JosiahJo-*sigh*-uh.

JudahJoo-duh.

NebuchadnezzarNeb-yuh-kud-**nez**-er.

NisanNye-san.

PhinehasFin-ee-us.

SeraiahSe-*ray*-yuh or Se-*rye*-uh.

ShallumShall-um.

ZadokZay-dok.

Introduction

A. Researching Roots

By the year 2016, personal genetic testing became broadly accessible and popular. Various companies promised to provide extensive insight into a person's health and ancestry, all based on a person's genetic profile.

Some tests compare a person's results with the results from other participants to reveal familial relationships. These results sometimes provide intriguing insights—and the potential for making connections with previously unknown family members or discovering of famous (or infamous!) relatives. Through these programs, our ability to connect with and learn from past generations has been greatly enhanced. Law enforcement has also benefited as DNA from crime scenes is compared against genetic databases.

Ancestral background plays a crucial role in today's lesson. Because of Ezra's ancestry and his skilled knowledge of God's law, he was the right individual to lead his people back to their ancestral homeland.

B. Lesson Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

I. Ezra’s Qualifications

(EZRA 7:1–6)

A. Physical Lineage (vv. 1–5)

1a. After these things,

This phrase refers to the events of Ezra 6: the completion and dedication of the rebuilt temple (Ezra 6:13–18). Most scholars put approximately 57 years between the events of Ezra 6 and the events of today’s text.

1b. during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia,

In antiquity there were three Persian rulers with the name *Artaxerxes*. This one is Artaxerxes I, who reigned 465–424 BC. Since the other two reigned much later (404–359 BC and 359–338 BC), there was no need for Ezra to distinguish among them. Artaxerxes I is the same individual who would later send Nehemiah to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1).

1c. Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah,

The following genealogy traced the ancestry of *Ezra* back to Aaron, the first high priest (see Exodus 28:1), and validated Ezra's role as priest (see Ezra 7:11, not in today's text).

The genealogy relates Ezra to several prominent priests with the expression *son of*, an idiom meaning "descendant." This idiom does not necessarily indicate a direct father-son relationship.

In the Old Testament, at least 11 individuals were named *Seraiah* (see 2 Samuel 8:17; 1 Chronicles 4:13, 35; Ezra 2:2; Nehemiah 10:2; 11:11; 12:1; Jeremiah 36:26; 40:8; 51:59). The individual mentioned here was likely the high priest when Nebuchadnezzar's forces captured and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC (see 2 Kings 25:8, 18).

The Old Testament mentions more than 20 individuals with the name *Azariah*, including a second individual in Ezra's genealogy (see commentary on Ezra 7:3, below; see 1 Kings 4:5; 2 Kings 14:21; 1 Chronicles 2:8, 38; 6:9; etc.). This name likely refers to a priest and official in the service of King Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:2).

In 622 BC, during the reign of King Josiah, the high priest *Hilkiah* found the Book of the Law neglected in the temple (see 2 Kings 22:3, 8).

2. the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub,

Some 14 individuals in the Old Testament share the name *Shallum* (see 2 Kings 15:10–15; 22:14; 1 Chronicles 2:41; 3:15; 4:25; 2 Chronicles 28:12; etc.). In Ezra's day, temple gatekeepers were one of the first exiles to return to Judah (Ezra 2:42; see 1 Chronicles 9:17). Their role was critical as they protected the entrance to the temple and the sacred items located in the temple (9:23; 15:23).

3–4. the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki,

For further detail about the ancestral background of the tribe of Levi, one might turn to 1 Chronicles 6:1–81, where a detailed genealogy lists the relatives of Levi and Aaron. Some names from Ezra 7 are omitted in the genealogy of 1 Chronicles 6. However, their lack of inclusion is not an issue as it was uncommon to list every member of every generation.

5. the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—

Beyond his service as high priest from the tribe of Levi, very little is known about *Abishua* (1 Chronicles 5:30–31; 6:50).

Upon seeing Israel's sin with Baal, *Phinehas* is recorded to have killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman (see Numbers 25:3–8). His act of violence was seen as an act of righteousness, turning away the wrath of the Lord and establishing a "covenant of peace" (25:11–12; see Psalm 106:28–31).

Eleazar followed in his father's priestly duties upon Aaron's death (Numbers 20:25–29). Additionally, Eleazar assisted Joshua in distributing land to the tribes of Israel (Joshua 14:1).

One might consider biblical genealogies boring and useless, but they stand as historical record and are essential to show the validity of certain roles. For Ezra, these genealogies validated his role as leader and priest of his people. The importance of this is seen in the identical wording (in both Hebrew and English) of Ezra 2:62 and Nehemiah 7:64.

B. Spiritual Preparation (v. 6)

6a. this Ezra came up from Babylon.

With Ezra's role validated by his genealogy, the narrative turns to Ezra's specific task: leading a journey *from Babylon* to Jerusalem. The distance between the two cities was approximately 880 miles and would take extensive planning.

6b. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given.

Ezra was more than merely a priest. He is described as a *teacher*, or scholar, of *the Law of Moses*. As the legal scholars of the day, teachers of the Law (also called scribes) were highly regarded as they studied the ancient law given to Moses, provided accurate interpretation, and taught it to others (compare Nehemiah 8).

The ease at which Ezra understood the complex nuances of law is indicated by his description as *well versed*. This implies his skilled comprehension.

Ezra's focus on the law did not lie with its editorial foundations; he was not concerned with whether there were multiple authors of the law over several centuries. Instead, his focus lay with the reality that it was *the Lord, the God of Israel* who *had given* the law.

6c. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

As *the king had granted* Ezra's requests and needs for the upcoming journey, it seems that Artaxerxes's attitude had changed. Elsewhere, the king ordered that work on rebuilding the city of Jerusalem stop until he issued a new decree (Ezra 4:21). However, the king changed his opinion and supported Ezra's journey. Artaxerxes even contributed great quantities of silver and gold for the work in Jerusalem (8:25–27). Ezra prepared for this moment, knew the needs of the journey, requisitioned necessary resources, and secured the complete confidence of the king.

The hand of the Lord is referred to throughout the latter half of Ezra and acknowledges the source of the blessings bestowed on this journey and the following rebuilding projects in Jerusalem (see Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). This journey would be successful because it was blessed by the Lord.

II. Ezra's Journey

(EZRA 7:7–10)

A. Travel Companions (v. 7)

7. Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

The total number of those who traveled *to Jerusalem* numbered fewer than 2,000 (Ezra 8:1–14). This group included the *priests* and the *Levites*, individuals necessary for proper worship in the newly built temple; *musicians* and *gatekeepers*, necessary for rightly ordered worship; and other *Israelites*.

The *temple servants* were individuals who had given their lives to work and minister in the temple in a non-priestly manner (see 1 Chronicles 9:2; Ezra 8:20).

B. Journey's Length (vv. 8–9a)

8. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king.

As a careful scribe, Ezra gives additional information about the chronology of the trip. The entire journey took place *in the seventh year of the king*, Artaxerxes, corresponding to 458 BC.

9a. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month,

The journey *from Babylon* began on *the first day of the first month*, the Jewish month of Nisan (late March to early April). Ezra arrived *in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month*, the Jewish month of Ab. This date would be to August 4, 458 BC.

As the Jewish calendar is based on lunar months, each month is approximately 29.5 days. Therefore, the travel time was approximately 118 days, including Sabbath Days for rest. Because this group likely included animals, children (Ezra 8:21), and cargo (8:24–30), those would have necessitated a slower rate of travel: approximately nine miles a day.

C. God's Blessing (vv. 9b–10)

9b. for the gracious hand of his God was on him.

The arrival of the travelers to Jerusalem gave evidence that the providence and blessing of *the gracious hand of his God* was upon Ezra (see commentary on Ezra 7:6, above).

10. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

Ezra's role as a scribe and teacher is seen by the ways *the Law of the Lord* affected his life and the lives of others. It was not enough that he wanted to *study* teach God's law. The desire to practice *observance* of God's law implied a full understanding of the law's life-changing affect. Ezra's dedication to his calling undoubtedly changed Israel for the better and encouraged proper worship as the travelers returned to their homeland (compare Nehemiah 8).

III. Ezra's Obligations

(EZRA 7:23–26)

The intervening verses consist of the words of King Artaxerxes in a letter to Ezra. The text of this letter was written in Aramaic, the official language of the Persians. This letter granted Ezra authority to determine the proper location to observe God's law (Ezra 7:14).

A. What to Do, Part 1 (v. 23)

23. Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons?

Whether Artaxerxes regarded Israel's *God* as the one, true God is undetermined. However, at the very least, he held a high regard for the Israelites' God. The king ordered obedience to the commands of God as they related to *the temple* of God. The expression *the God of heaven* admits

that Ezra's God is not just the God of Israel; this God is much greater, and Artaxerxes recognizes the scope of God's domain.

However, it is also possible that Artaxerxes acted pragmatically, not wanting to incur divine *wrath* and desiring to maintain order among those in his kingdom (see Ezra 1:2–4; 6:10).

B. What Not to Do (v. 24)

24. You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.

It was customary for the Persians not to levy taxes on priests of any kind of religious order. Decades before Ezra, Persian King Darius the Great exempted servants of the cult of Apollo from paying *taxes* and *tribute* to the state. Artaxerxes continued that precedent to include all who served at the *house of God* in Jerusalem.

C. What to Do, Part 2 (v. 25)

25. And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.

Artaxerxes had developed a very high regard for *Ezra* and empowered Ezra to establish just and consistent guidance on the *laws of ... God*. Undoubtedly, Ezra's identity as an expert on God's laws allowed him to accurately *know* and *teach* others in the same regard.

The region known as the *Trans-Euphrates* refers to the area across the Euphrates River to the west. This highlights the geographic extent of the Persian Empire (see Ezra 4:10; Nehemiah 2:7, 9; 3:7), which stretched from the Euphrates to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, and from northern Syria to the border of Egypt.

D. Penalty for Disobedience (v. 26)

26. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

In a surprising move, Artaxerxes required people to obey both *the law of the king* and *the law of ... God*. Years before, Darius the Great made a similar demand, requiring obedience to "the God of heaven" and the word of the king (Ezra 6:9–12).

Conclusion

A. Be an Ezra!

Leaders must cast vision and invite others to see that vision similarly. Leaders must address immediate decisions, favors, or requests made to them by their followers. By reading widely,

listening to the advice of experts, and preparing for all possible scenarios, thoughtful and successful leaders are able to face a variety of challenges.

Ezra flourished as a leader because he focused on what really mattered: the wisdom of God and law of God. He studied God's Word and law in order that he might teach and lead Israel well. Because of his determination in study, combined with his priestly background, Ezra showed to be the most capable leader for Israel's return to Jerusalem. He became an example to following generations of a God-focused leader. The primary goals of his life were to study, to do, and to teach God's Word! Is Ezra a model for you?

B. Prayer

Almighty God, we are thankful for the example of Ezra. May we too be good examples as we take on our daily tasks, and may others see that your Word guides our lives. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Follow Ezra's example!¹
