

Supplementary Materials for KOOL Journal for Parents/Adults

Week 5: 19 to 25 February, 2018 (pp.42-49)

Context

A period of 58 years separates Ezra 6 from Ezra 7. In terms of chronology, the events that occurred over a period of about 10 years in the book of Esther took place between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra. Ezra 4:6 fits chronologically between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It is part of a collection of verses summarizing the opposition the Jews faced as they were rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple; Ezra 4:7-23 refers to the events between Ezra 7 and Nehemiah 1. The author of the book of Ezra grouped them together to highlight the persistent opposition to God's people over the years and God's ability to overcome it. The Temple was fully completed (under Haggai and Zechariah) when Ezra was released to return to Jerusalem with the articles of the Temple that were taken by Babylon. This last portion of completion was decreed by King Artaxerxes. Led by Ezra, this second return of the exiles took place some 80 years later after the first group led by Zerubbabel had arrived (Ezra was not yet born then). No further mention of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai and prophet Zechariah was made in the Book of Ezra from chapter 7 onwards (other Zechariahs were mentioned in 8:3, 11, 16).

In Ezra's day, Palestine was part of a larger governmental unit, the satrapy of Abarhahara and was ruled by a Persian governor. Times were difficult in Judah: to reconstruct the agriculture economy, the people had scattered from Jerusalem and built smaller communities throughout the land. The walls had not been rebuilt and the people intermarried with the unbelieving Gentiles of the land. This inter-marriage was a serious breach of the Old Testament law which Ezra had to address (refer to chapter 9 in Week 7).

Key Character: Ezra ("Yahweh has helped")

Ezra, a contemporary of Nehemiah, was not only a priest whose lineage was traced back to Aaron but also a scribe well-versed with God's Word. He made his first appearance in the Book of Ezra in chapter 7. He led some 1,500 men and their families on a 900 mile journey back to Palestine. Long before Ezra's mission, God prepared him in three important ways. Firstly, as a scribe, he dedicated himself to carefully studying God's Word. Secondly, he intended to apply and obey personally the commands he discovered in God's Word. Thirdly, he was committed to teaching others God's Word and its application to life. Since his time the Jews have regarded Ezra as a second Moses because he re-established Israel on the Mosaic Law. (Note: the personal pronouns "I", "me", "my" were used in from verse 7:28 ff. to refer to Ezra himself.)

Other Characters: Persian Kings

Artaxerxes is the throne name of several Persian kings of the Achaemenid dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great. It was in the seventh year (458 B.C.) of the reign of King **Artaxerxes I**, also known as Artaxerxes Longimanus (465-423 B.C.) that the second return of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem took place. He was the stepson of Queen Esther, a Jewess, whose story began in 483 B.C., 25 years before Ezra led the second group back to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes was influenced by the gods of other nations including the God of Israel whom he acknowledged without fully worshipping Him. He not

only allowed the Jews to return home but also informed the rest of his empire to accommodate the Jews' return journey and the rebuilding of the Temple. He personally knew the orthodox scribe Ezra and his cup-bearer Nehemiah and allowed their return to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. and 445 B.C. respectively. He appointed Ezra as a sort of Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs in his Persian court. This decree encouraged any Jews in exile to return to their land (7:12-13). He also commanded Ezra to regulate the Jews' life according to Mosaic Law (7:11-16), thus conceding a measure of autonomy. Artaxerxes permitted all this to ensure peace and good will among his Jewish subjects, and so he might appease Yahweh's wrath (7:23). From a geo-political perspective, a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal lifeline, and as long as the Greeks dominated the coast and Egypt, the Persian king supported a strong Judean province headed by a Judean-Persian official and peopled by a pro-Persian population, most of whose families were hostages in Babylon and Persia. This would facilitate direct military intervention from its capital at Susa to put down any revolt by the Egyptian subjects. Nevertheless, some historians trace the demise of the Persian Empire to have begun with Artaxerxes' reign.

Ezra 7

Watch video (for quick review of Ezra 1-6 and overview of 7-10)

- **Introduction to Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther by Dr. Tony Evans,**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3vX5AzoOjQ> (from 4:25 to 7:52).

Review Verse of the Week **Ezra 7:9b-10**
For the gracious hand of his God was on him. 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.

Date/Passage	Reflection and Response (R & R)
<p>Mon. 19</p> <p>7:1 – 7</p> <p>{7:1,6-7}</p>	<p>It was Ezra's first trip to Jerusalem. He was probably compiling a record of events that had taken place and he needed the king's decree stating that any Jew who wanted to return could do so. It was like a passport in case they ran into opposition along the way.</p> <p>R & R:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What impresses you most about Ezra's traits? Why? (Refer to 7: 11, 12 too) • Why was a special group of Israelites specifically singled out: priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants? What were their roles in this second return of the exiles? <p>It is not Ezra's personal achievement but personal commitment to live for God that is important.</p>
<p>Tue. 20</p> <p>7:8 –10</p> <p>{7:9 - 10}</p>	<p>The second return led by Ezra took four months but it was without any incident of banditry (despite carrying much gold and silver) or other hindrances. Ezra acknowledged once again (as in 7:6) that God's good hand was upon him (7:9) for a safe journey. He was no political reformer but a teacher of the Law. To him, a fresh start for God's people upon their return from exile could only be found in a return to God's Word.</p> <p>R & R:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do we acknowledge that the good hand of God was upon us or

	<p>our nation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When (under what circumstances) do we pray that God’s favour be with us and why?
<p>Wed. 21</p> <p>7:11– 20</p> <p>{ 7:11-12}</p>	<p>Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a number of concessions from the king. Funds were granted so that sacrifices could be offered in Jerusalem for the king and his sons. The council of seven was Artaxerxes’ supreme court (Esther 1:14). When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple, he took a vast amount of plunder including possibly a Book of the Law (2 Chr 36:18). It is also possible that the Jews brought this book into exile and it was confiscated and read by the conquerors. It was common then for foreign leaders who worshipped many gods to have records of gods of other nations for military and political reasons.</p> <p>“What makes the Jews' restoration so remarkable is not simply that they should return, but that kings should supply their needs in relation to worship....” (McConville)</p> <p>R & R:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What tasks did Artaxerxes assign to Ezra? For what purposes? • Why did Artaxerxes choose Ezra to carry out these tasks, including approval to use the royal treasury to pay for anything else needed? • Have you been chosen to carry out some specific tasks for the Lord and how have you responded?
<p>Thu. 22</p> <p>7:21 – 26</p> <p>{ 7:25-26}</p>	<p>Those in temple service were declared free from taxes by the king. Ezra was given the right to appoint magistrates and other government officials and the Old Testament Law was affirmed as the civil as well as the religious code of the land.</p> <p>R & R:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did Artaxerxes exempt Temple workers from paying taxes? • Should churches today assume the responsibility of paying taxes for its spiritual workers/pastoral staff?
<p>Fri. 23</p> <p>7:27 – 28</p> <p>{ 7:27-28}</p>	<p>Ezra could have assumed that his own greatness and charisma had won over the king and his princes but he gave credit to God. He acknowledged it was God who made the king “want to beautify the Temple”. How remarkable it is that the king should supply the needs of the returning exiles in relation to worship. God can indeed change a king’s heart (Pro 21:1). Note how Ezra praised God for His favour upon him that gave him courage to lead the second return.</p> <p>R & R:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we ever feel inadequate when asked to take on a big task for the Lord? What can we learn from Ezra’s doxology in these two verses? • How do we show that we recognize God’s hand in our success? Do we remember to praise Him for His help and protection?

Sat. 24	<p>Review again Ezra's traits.</p> <p>R & R:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of Ezra's traits would you like to develop in your own life? Why? Share with your family what you see in Ezra that you would want to see in your own personality. • What are some disciplines we can develop that will help us become more grounded in God's Word?
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