

# **Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah**

## **Session 4, Ezra 7-8**

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This is Dr. Tiberius Ratta in his teaching on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 4, Ezra 7-8.

Open your Bibles to Ezra chapter seven.

We come face to face with Ezra, again, who is the man after whom the book is named. So, the first thing we see that he is sent by God, starting in verse one, we have the chronology again, the historical background because we're in the reign of Artaxerxes. So that's very important to understand because, again, it is a little bit of an anomaly.

Again, chapters one through six begin with Cyrus's first year and end with Darius's seventh year, a 20-year span. The total time span covering the first six chapters stretches over 80 years from Cyrus to Artaxerxes, so that's very important to understand.

So, chapter seven, when it starts with now after this refers to the preceding narrative detailed in chapters five and six. And then you have the Darius report and then the rebuilding of the temple. And then we are introduced to Ezra, starting in verse six, "this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked for the hand of the Lord his God was on him." This is the first time the name of Ezra appears in the book.

Now, Ezra is not a Hebrew name. It's actually the Aramaic form of the Hebrew Azaria, which means Yahweh helps or Yahweh has helped. Now, again, Aramaic and Hebrew are sister languages.

They're very close together. But it's very interesting here in chapter seven that he traces his lineage back to Aaron, the brother of Moses, who is introduced here as chief priest. But Ezra is not introduced as the high priest because he's actually just a scribe.

Ezra is not presented as the high priest, but he came to Jerusalem as a priest since he's coming from the line of Aaron. His ancestor, Saria, was killed by Nebuchadnezzar about 130 years before, as reported in 2 Kings 25. So, the genealogy that we have here at the beginning of chapter seven skips a couple of generations.

Again, this is not uncommon when we are dealing with genealogies. We don't know how important Ezra was to the Persian court. Some scholars suggest that he was the secretary for Jewish affairs in the Persian government.

We don't know exactly. We know that he had an important position since the king entrusted him with this very important mission. And again, it is emphasized here that Ezra's success has nothing to do with his political position.

His success is due to God's hand upon him. Again, the main character in the story is not Ezra; the main character is God himself.

The sovereignty of God is again emphasized in the book. Verses seven to ten describe for us the heart of Ezra and verses seven to ten are key to this the entire book.

**7** And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. **8** And Ezra<sup>a</sup> came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. **9** For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him. **10** For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Why? For the good hand of his God was on him. And then verse ten is key to understanding Ezra. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

This very, very important verse describes Ezra. What sets Ezra apart was his heart, because his heart was set to study the Law of the Lord. Now notice, please, the progression.

It was to study the law of the Lord, to obey it, to do what it says, and then to teach it. These are in order. Ezra serves as an example to all godly leaders who, before they get up to say, this is the Lord. They need to know what the Lord says.

So, he knows what the Bible says, and then he does what it says, and then he teaches it. Very, very important lesson for us. It is not just do what I say, but do what I do.

We have to lead by example. Ezra sets his heart not just to know the law of God, but to obey it. And once he does that, then he can teach it to others.

I'm reminded of the words of Jesus when he interacts with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Remember, Jesus calls them hypocrites. Why? Because they were teaching one thing and they were doing another.

And hypocrisy was one of the main obstacles for those who wanted to follow Jesus. It was the hypocrisy of the so-called leaders of that day. But hypocrisy was not born in the New Testament times.

Rather, it's defined and redefined during Old Testament times, when people practiced evil things, even though they knew what the law of God says, and they would say one thing, and they would do another. But because Ezra loves God and his people, he sets his heart not just to know all the laws, but to obey it and then to teach it. I like it how Derek Kinner puts it.

He says Ezra was a model reformer in that what he taught, he at first lived. And what he had lived, he at first made sure of in the scriptures. With study, conduct, and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each was able to function properly and at its best.

Study was preserved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness. Great, great quote from Derek Kidner. Eight times in Ezra and Nehemiah, we are told that God's hand was upon either Ezra or Nehemiah.

And we see that God again is sovereign and is with God's men, in this case, Ezra, who loves God and his law and his people. And then again, we move to God directing the heart of the king. Again, this is God working in the heart of a pagan king, starting in verse 11.

**11** This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: **12** "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace.<sup>b</sup> And now **13** I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. **14** For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand, **15** and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, **16** with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem.

Again, we have a shift here in verse 11 starts in Hebrew, but verses 12 to 26 are in Aramaic. Remember, because it's royal language, the king is writing the letter that will be in the lingua franca of the day, the language of commerce and business. Again, the royal language is diplomatic communication.

And this it is in Aramaic. Interestingly, Artaxerxes calls himself king of kings. Now, that is not a parallel, a direct parallel to Jesus.

This is you should not interpret that Christologically. What he does here is actually a lot of Persian kings call themselves that. Remember, in Hebrew and in Aramaic, there is no superlative.

There is no like in English, we have good, better, best or bad, worse, worst. They didn't have that. So, if you wanted to say the best of something, you just repeated the word in the plural.

So, if you want to say the most exalted king, you said the king of kings. If you wanted to say the most exalted Lord, you say Lord of Lords. If you wanted to say the most beautiful song, you say the song of songs.

So that's what's happening here. He says, hey, I'm the greatest. Obviously, humility was not one of Artaxerxes' strong points.

But Artaxerxes remembers and understands that God is the God of heaven. And he understands that Ezra is a man that God calls to do the work here for him. Again, it is very interesting that the letter of Artaxerxes sets up a parallel to the Exodus event, just like we've seen in the past.

Just like in the Exodus event, the Israelites come out with silver and gold and plunder, like we see in Exodus 11 and 12, the same thing happens here. This is kind of a second Exodus. And then you have all these freewill offerings.

You have silver and gold that they bring with them. Verse 17.

**17** With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. **18** Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. **19** The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. **20** And whatever else is required, just like the previous kings before him, whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king's treasury.

Again, how did Artaxerxes know about the requirements for sacrifices to Yahweh? Could it be that again, Ezra talked to him about his history? We don't know. But we do know that he allows the people to come back and not only return, but to use the money from the king's treasury.

Whatever else is required for the house of your God. It doesn't mean that Artaxerxes is a Yahweh worshipper. It just means that he's religiously tolerant and he's allowing Ezra to go back and rebuild.

He goes on, verse 21,

“And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river. Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven requires you, let it be done with all diligence.”

And then he actually names a hundred talents of silver.

He mentions wheat, wine, oil, so forth. Verse 23,

**23** Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. **24** We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

Where did this benevolence come from in Artaxerxes? He's definitely a very generous king. He wants God's will to be done. Again, some scholars suggest, well, it's because of all the tributes that were paid into the Persian empire's treasury.

We don't know. We do know that he actually has the clergy be what we call tax-exempt. He doesn't want any taxes to be imposed upon the people who work at the temple.

Verse 25, **25** “And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. **26** Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.”

So now, in his letter, the king addresses Ezra directly. And notice, please, that the king understands. The king understands that Ezra is a man of God and he has the wisdom of God.

According to the wisdom of God that is in your hand, a pagan king can recognize the wisdom of God in someone. That is remarkable. And again, we see the work of God at hand.

What is the response? Blessed be, verses 27 and 28.

**27** Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, **28** and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

It is not the king. Blessed be the Lord. Everything goes back to God.

This expression, blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, appears only here in the Old Testament. Although the expression, blessed be the Lord, appears about 27 times in the Old Testament. Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, only appears here in the entire Old Testament.

Again, we see Ezra working to give God the praise and the glory for everything that happens. Again, Ezra does serve as a good example for Christian and godly leaders of today. Like Ezra, we need to be skilled in handling God's word.

This skill is not inherited. You cannot just download it. It's actually hard work.

It requires a study of scripture. There's nothing more disheartening than a lazy Bible teacher. And there's nothing more encouraging than an industrious, spirit-filled teacher who follows Ezra's example in studying the law of the Lord.

To study, to know what the law says, to know what the word of God says before we get up to say, thus says the Lord. And Ezra noticed he didn't do everything by himself. He had to delegate.

That was also a sign of humility. There is also a sign of wisdom and discernment. We need to have godly wisdom in which we are humble and learn to delegate things to others.

Ezra was such a leader. Then we move to chapter eight. Again, just like earlier in Ezra, we have another list of the family heads who returned.

And we start at in verse one, verses one through 14. These are the heads of the father's houses. So again, not everybody is mentioned.

We shouldn't be looking for a comprehensive list of people who returned. We don't have that list anywhere. But here we have a list of heads of their father's houses.

This is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia. Again, the ruble bill was about 50,000. Now we're talking about 2,000. They returned with Ezra.

We see, again, a couple of things here that Ezra is writing in the first person. Scholars call this the Ezra memoirs. Whenever Ezra is writing in the first person, that's part of the Ezra memoirs.

When Nehemiah is writing in the first person, be part of Nehemiah's memoirs. Now the book, again, was one. Ezra and Nehemiah, who wrote it? Well, it looks like both Ezra and Nehemiah are responsible for the things in those books.

And then someone had to put it together. Some suggest it was Ezra. Some suggest it was Nehemiah.

I'm not sure, we will never know. But because of the beginning of Ezra and the end of 2 Chronicles, and then some similarities with Jeremiah, some people say, Jeremiah, maybe Everett has written some of these parts. Some people say Ezra has written the end of Chronicles, the beginning of Ezra, and maybe even about the fall of Jerusalem.

Again, we don't know for certain. We do know that the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra is almost identical. But here, again, the fact that it's written in the first person suggests that Ezra himself has written it.

Verses 15 to 20 talk about the servants for the temple of our God.

**15** I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi. **16** Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, **17** and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and<sup>e</sup> the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God.

Again, in the interim, in the exilic period, there was no work at the temple. What has happened to these people? And by the good hand of God on us, they brought us a man of discretion of the sons of Mali, the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely, Sherebiah with his sons and his kinsmen, 18. So they found 18 people.

Also, Hashabiah, and with him, Jeshaiiah, the sons of Merari with his kinsmen and their sons, 20. So 18 plus 20. And then, besides, so 38 Levites, and then besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites, these are all mentioned by name.

Very interesting passage. As Ezra inspects the returnees, where they are at Ahava. Again, Ahava was one of the canals that came out of the Euphrates River.

He sees the Levites are missing. And as they're investigating, they finally find these Levites who were helping with the work of the temple. And they have temple servants who are helping the Levites do the work of ministry.

Again, we see here the hand of God very much present. And what does Ezra do? Ezra does what other great men and women in the Bible have done. They humble before the Lord in a fast.

**21** Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. **22** For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him." **23** So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

If we look carefully in the Old Testament, all the great men and women of the Bible were men and women of prayer and fasting. And we see that here with Ezra. Again, an attitude of humility.

And we have to ask ourselves, why isn't fasting much more present in today's church? Jesus says, when I'm gone, then they will fast. So, for Jesus, fasting was a Christian expectation. But it's probably hard to fast when we have a fast food restaurant at every corner.

It's probably hard to fast when we have prayer breakfast. It's probably not very popular to call a fast. If you call a party, now people will probably show up.

But if we look carefully, not just in the Bible, in church history, again, all the men and great men and women of the Bible and of church history were men and women of prayer and fasting. Fasting did gain a bad reputation during the Middle Ages when people abused it. But again, if you look carefully at the Bible, we should be able to connect the two.

I'll give you an illustration of the great power of prayer and fasting. My wife's grandpa was an alcoholic all his life. And not only was he an alcoholic, but he was very abusive to my wife's grandma, physically abusive.

And from a human perspective, nobody would say that he would become a believer. So, we enlisted people to pray and fast for him. Not just people from our own family, but from all over the world.



And two years before he died, he gave his life to Christ. And he was a 180 change and became a man of God. And I attribute that to the power of prayer and fasting.

There's no reason, again, humanly speaking, that he would ever become a believer. But I think there's the power of prayer and fasting. And when I go and preach in churches and talk about fasting, most of the time, people look at me like I'm crazy.

But people who put it in practice come back and say, hey, I did that, and it worked. It's very interesting that there is power in fasting and prayer. And by the way, fasting and prayer always go together.

You'll never see in the Bible this fasting for medical purposes or I'm going to do this for whatever else. No, no. Prayer and fasting are always connected.

Take a break from eating and use that time to pray about a certain thing. And the Bible says there's great power in that. And that's what Ezra does here.

He combines fasting with prayer. By the way, Nehemiah does that. Daniel does that.

Anna, in Luke chapter 2, does that. If you read about the early church in Acts chapters 13 and 14, you always have prayer and fasting combined. Again, go back to the words of Jesus.

Remember, John's disciples are asking Jesus, hey, why don't your disciples fast? And Jesus says, can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come then when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast. So, for Jesus, fasting is a Christian expectation. And I love this verse.

God listened to our entreaty. Greatest encouragement. God listens to our prayers.

Our God is not deaf. Our God is not a granite-carved God who doesn't care. God listens to the prayer of his children.

When Ezra and his compatriots prayed and fasted, they experienced the power of prayer and fasting manifested in the answer to prayer by God. And then in verses 24 to 30, again, we have here the keepers of God's silver and gold. Again, in his leadership style, Ezra sets apart 12 of the leading priests, and they are keepers of the silver and the gold.

So, verse 25 says,

**25** And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered. **26** I weighed out into their hand 650 talents<sup>d</sup> of silver, and

silver vessels worth 200 talents,<sup>e</sup> and 100 talents of gold, **27** 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics,<sup>f</sup> and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold. **28** And I said to them, “You are holy to the LORD, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers. **29** Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers’ houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the LORD.” **30** So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God..

Again, the gold and the silver here is a lot of gold and silver and the large amount of silver and gold in their possession leads Ezra to appoint leading priests as the guardians of this great treasure. Some scholars doubt the veracity of this text because the numbers are so high.

We're talking about three and a half tons of gold, 24 and a half tons of silver. And some said, wow, this cannot be accurate. However, we see God's people always coming up with being generous to the work of God.

And when you consider the amount of people that came out of Egypt to begin with and that some came back to Israel from exile, I think the word of God can be trusted. What is most important here, again, these people are holy to the Lord. You are set apart to do this work of the ministry.

The expression, again, holy to the Lord originates in the Pentateuch, and it first appears in conjunction with God setting apart the priesthood for service at the tabernacle and obviously later at the temple. But this expression, holy to the Lord, appears only one other time in Ezra and Nehemiah. And it refers in Nehemiah 8 verse 9 when it refers to the day which is sacred to the Lord, a day holy to the Lord.

The Israelites had to be reminded that they had a special status before the Lord. They are holy to the Lord. They're not supposed to be like the other nations, but they are ethnically set apart for God.

And just like in the Pentateuch, not just the people are holy to the Lord, but the offerings and the vessels are set apart for sacred purposes. And then, the end of chapter 8 tells us that the journey that they started is completed in chapter 8. So, the journey started in chapter 7. Ezra and the people arrive in Jerusalem at the end of chapter 8. Then, we departed from the river Ahava on the 12th day of the first month to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.

We came to Jerusalem and there we remained three days. So, they counted everything. They weighed everything.

Verse 35.

**35** At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD. **36** They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps<sup>a</sup> and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God.

So, after 12 days that they spent in this canal of the river Euphrates, Ezra and his entourage finally arrived in Jerusalem.

Why? Because God's hand was on them. God protected them and God provided for them. Worship is restored.

The altar is built. They can sacrifice to the Lord. And again, we have the number of bulls that are used here for the sacrifice.

Chapter 8 teaches us two important leadership lessons. Again, for today's Christian and especially for today's Christian leader. First, humility.

Second, integrity. In Ezra's case, again, this humility was seen in delegating. This humility was seen in the calling of the fast and dependence on God.

He doesn't say, I can do it. He says, Lord, I cannot do it apart from you. That is humility.

But the integrity part is also very important. Ezra's integrity can be seen in the fact that he's delegating the care of the offering for the house of God, realizing that both the offering and those who handle it must be holy to the Lord. You all know from history and probably from your own examples how many times men of God fail because they don't have integrity.

And they not only don't have humility, but also, they don't have integrity. And they get involved in money issues that they should not be involved in. Here, Ezra gives us an example of integrity, where he's delegating that work to others who are holy to the Lord.

Maybe there's some wisdom there in today's church, where the pastor probably should not have his hands in the treasury. The pastor should be dealing with vision, preaching, and teaching the Word of God. But I think Ezra is a great example of both humility and integrity. And I hope that we can learn from him today.

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