

“The Hand of the LORD My God Was on Me”

The Seventh on a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Text: Ezra 7:1-10 (sermon covers all of chapter 7); 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Enter Ezra—the key figure in the next four chapters of the book which bears his name. The year is 458 B.C. The second temple was completed some sixty years previously, and sacrifices were being offered since that time according to the law of Moses. A priest in the genealogical line of Aaron, and also described as a skilled “scribe,” Ezra is among the first of a long line of Jewish biblical scholars who are devoted students of God’s law—men who later came to be known as “scribes” during the days of Jesus, four hundred years later. Some have described Ezra as the “secretary of state for Jewish affairs,” since Ezra was commissioned by the Persian king Artaxerxes to leave Babylon, travel to Jerusalem, and report back to the king about the current state of affairs regarding the Jews and their progress in rebuilding their capital city and its defenses (walls). Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Ezra began a series of reforms including a renewed devotion to the law of God, renewed focus upon prayer and fasting, as well as insisting that the Israelites end the practice of intermarrying with the pagans around them. With his arrival in Jerusalem, the scene in the Book of Ezra shifts from its focus upon the temple to a focus upon the law of God as the people of God return to the pattern so well established throughout Israel’s history—times of revival (in this case the Jews returning to the land and the rebuilding of the temple), followed by times of unbelief and apostasy, as many Jews seek to make peace with their pagan neighbors, many more intermarry with them, and some even adopt their pagan practices.

We are the midst of a series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and this morning we come to Ezra 7. In the previous chapters, we have considered the author’s account of that period of Israel’s history in which the Jews are back in their land, living as one people, with a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, and facing many of the trials and tribulations which the people of God have struggled from the time they first entered Canaan back in the days of the conquest. How do the people of God maintain their faith in YHWH and their loyalty to him, when the pagans all around them seek to entice them away from worshiping and serving the true and living God? As a man who can trace his ancestry back to Aaron (Israel’s first high priest), Ezra is well qualified for his role as a reformer of sorts, seeking to renew his people’s love for YHWH and their commitment to his covenant—specifically, the law of Moses. Israel many be back in the land of Canaan, but they live under Persian control, and the leadership of the nation naturally passes from the first generation of post-exile leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshau (Joshua), to an increased role for the high priest, who now leads the people in both religious and political matters.¹

Since the days when Israel first returned to the land because of the decree of Cyrus in 538 BC, a whole series of Persians kings have come and gone. Cyrus’ successor Darius (who was featured prominently in earlier chapters of Ezra) died in 486 BC. Darius was replaced by his son Xerxes, who ruled over the vast Persian empire from 485 until his death in 465 at the hand of one of his own bodyguards. Xerxes’ son, Artaxerxes—who is king in the days of Ezra—ruled until he died 424 BC. Given the upheaval and intrigue within the Persian royal dynasty, it is important for Ezra to remind us six times in chapters 7-8 that “the hand of God” orchestrated all of these things for the benefit and preservation of his people. The Persian kings come and go, but God’s providential purposes remain the same.

¹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 782.

God's care of his people is not only providential—controlling Persian kings and world events to ensure that his purposes are accomplished. YHWH is also Israel's faithful covenant Lord and shepherd to his people. When the Jews grew very discouraged when progress on the temple slowed to a crawl and then stopped altogether—due to the continual efforts of their pagan neighbors (the people of the land) hassling them and using all manner of schemes and complaints to keep the Jew from rebuilding their temple—God sent two prophets (Zechariah and Haggai) to remind his discouraged people of his covenant promises, as well as to exhort them to finish the rebuilding of the temple. While many of the promises made by Zechariah and Haggai are not fully realized until the coming of Jesus (Israel's Messiah), God did not leave his people in their downcast state, but encouraged them through his word of promise. As a result, the rebuilding of the temple was completed in 516 BC. And it will now fall to Ezra (as recounted in chapters 7-10) and Nehemiah (in the Book which bears his name) to encourage the people not to give up their devotion to God's law, nor lose confidence in YHWH's unseen providential purposes behind the struggles experienced by his people.

As we turn to our text this morning (all of Ezra 7), the chapter opens with a reference to Ezra's entrance into Israel's story—*“now after this.”* This time marker tells us that events are shifting from a time sixty years earlier—when the second temple was completed, and the previous focus upon rebuilding—to a new focus, reformation, which in this case is renewed devotion to the law of Moses.² If the first six chapters of Ezra focused upon the rebuilding of the temple and restored temple worship, chapters 7-10 will focus upon the Israelites living according to the law of God—that is living in light of God's word.³ This places the ministry of Ezra *“in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia,”* Darius's grandson. Ezra's impressive but selective family tree places him in the direct line of Aaron, Moses' brother, and Israel's first priest. *“Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra went up from Babylonia.*

This genealogy places Ezra at the center of what follows—he'll be the prominent figure in the rest of the book and the story which unfolds will center around his leadership. Although not a high-priest, Ezra descends directly from the line of Aaron which indicates that he is a man of stature. In fact, Ezra plays a very prominent role in subsequent Jewish tradition, and has come to be regarded as a sort of second Moses, who did more perhaps than anyone else after the return from exile to establish the Jews as a people of the book.⁴ His genealogy—with a few names and generations omitted—is the same as that found in 1 Chronicles 6:1-15. Such a genealogy is important, because as we read back in chapter 2:62–63, the priests returning from Babylon after the exile, *“sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.”* Given his impressive genealogy Ezra is the Jewish equivalent of an American Mayflower descendent.

In verse 6 we learn that Ezra *“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.”*

² Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, 783.

³ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part six).

⁴ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 62.

The word translated as “skilled” literally means “rapid” and refers to someone who is nimble and quick. Ezra is a scholar of the law of Moses, a skilled expert, someone who has mastered the detailed stipulations and history of Israel’s legal documents and is at ease with them. In fact, in verse 10, we read of him, “*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.*” That Ezra is said to be an expert in the law, even while living as an exile in Babylon, further reinforces his devotion to his studies, and that he is both well-known as a teacher and as practitioner of what he had learned. One writer describes Ezra as “a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he had lived he had first made sure was in the Scriptures.” He put study, conduct, and teaching in the right order.⁵

It is important that we not miss Ezra’s assertion “*the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given.*” Critical scholars glibly dismiss Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, seeing the first five books of the Old Testament as a multi-authored composition, which was eventually edited into its current form during the time of Josiah’s reform in 622 BC (the so-called documentary hypothesis–JEDP). Without any questions or qualifications, Ezra simply asserts that the law dates from the time of Moses, and that it is a divine gift to Israel from YHWH. Ezra has no doubts about the law’s origin (it is a gift from God, through the agency of Moses), and that it comes to Israel as divine revelation from YHWH.⁶

Ezra also has devoted himself to that law, so we should not be surprised when we read that “*the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.*” Once again we see the reoccurring theme of God’s sovereignty bringing all things associated with Jerusalem, its temple, and his people (the Jews), to YHWH’s appointed end. We have in this verse, as one writer points out, “a completed revelation (torah of Moses) and an ongoing providence (hand of Yahweh), this latter operating in conjunction with human ingenuity/initiative (“all that he asked”).”⁷ God’s hand is upon the Persian king. God has also stirred the heart of Ezra, who devotes himself to a life of study of God’s word, and all of this presupposing that God’s hand has been moving since the days of Moses when God gave Israel the law at Mount Sinai, as well as through all the events in Israel’s subsequent history.

In verses 7-9, we are given the setting for what follows. Ezra “*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. And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 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.*” There are a number of points made here. Because God’s hand was upon him, Ezra, along with a number of other returning exiles (apparently an additional group of Jews who remained behind in Babylon when the first group left for Jerusalem in 538, which included more priests, Levites, musicians, singers, etc.) made the four month journey back to Jerusalem. Here too there are echoes of a second Exodus from captivity back to the land of promise, as YHWH continues to fulfill the words of his prophets.⁸ The first day of the first month clearly points to the Passover, which in turn, points to the Exodus. This

⁵ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 62.

⁶ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 62.

⁷ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part six).

⁸ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 93.

connection is reinforced by the repeated assertion that God's hand is upon Ezra.

We can date the journey very precisely by comparing the dates Ezra gives against what we know about the dates associated with Artaxerxes and the doings of the Persian empire. It is likely that Ezra left Babylon on April 8, 458 BC, and arrived in Jerusalem on August 4, of the same year. As we already noted in verse 10, "*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.*" Ezra desired to return home to the land of his fathers, of which he has heard, but has not yet seen. In this, we see the purpose, as well as the consequences of God's hand being upon this Bible scholar. Ezra's desire is take what which he has learned back to Israel, where many of his people have gone, and where the temple has been rebuilt. The Lord blesses his desire by granting his wish, giving this new group of exiles safe passage from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Ezra's zeal for the law becomes the paradigm for much of post-exilic second temple Judaism. Before the exile the priests served as both guardians of the law as well as teachers of the people. This is a task in which the Levites also took part. But once Ezra comes on the scene, a new class of experts in the law become prominent—Ezra is the first and certainly the example to which all others should aspire. But clearly there is a transition from the way in which things worked in Israel before the exile—when the nation had a king, priests, and Levities (fulfilling the kingly, prophetic, and priestly roles)—to a new reality after the exile. As vassals (subjects) of great empires (the Persian and then the Greek) Israel is now led by a chief priest, supported by the Bible scholars such as Ezra. In fact, it is Ezra who pushes his people to trust in God's word, for in God's word of promise, the Israelites learn of a coming Messiah who takes away sin once and for all. But God's word also threatens covenant curse, which are additional sanctions if YHWH's people turn from him to serving other gods. The Jews still risk being cast from the land again—as they were in 70 AD.

In verses 11-26 we find the text of yet another letter (written in Aramaic, the official language of the Persian court), this time authorizing Ezra, and any Jews remaining in Babylon who wish to do so, to return to Jerusalem. Ezra was instructed by the king to ensure that the people of Israel were observing the law of Moses to which Ezra had devoted himself, so that there was a local judicial system in place, which would free the Persians from having to deal with local matters as they had been. There are also a number of administrative matters addressed by Artaxerxes.

The purpose of the king's letter is spelled out in verses 11-13. "*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: `Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now 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.*" As we have seen, this letter grants any Jews still remaining in Babylon permission to return to Jerusalem by accompanying Ezra.

Artaxerses identifies himself as "king of kings" the self-designation used by Persian kings, who by identifying themselves in such manner make the ironic point that even though the Persian king issues a decree which his subjects must obey, the Persian king is actually acting to fulfill YHWH's purposes whose hand, we read, was upon his servant Ezra. We can only wonder what someone like Artaxerses, who identifies himself as "king of kings," thought upon his own death and entrance into the presence of the true King of kings. In any case, Artaxerxes addressed this letter to Ezra, acknowledging that as a Jewish Scribe, Ezra worships the God of heaven, who gave Israel their law. It is important and helpful to realize that the nations surrounding Israel knew full well of YHWH and his covenant with Israel.

The king's reason for sending Ezra to Jerusalem is spelled out in verses 14-16. *“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, 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, 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.”* Ezra is going on a fact-finding mission. He is expected to report back to the king and his seven most trusted advisors about the state of affairs in Jerusalem. Ezra is also responsible for much gold and silver going to Jerusalem—probably not vessels from the original temple, but likely gifts offered by the Persians to the Jews for use in the temple.

It has hard to tell from the text of the letter just what, exactly, Ezra is to make inquiry about. Whether or not the people are keeping the laws of Moses? Why would Artaxerxes care about that—he is a pagan (perhaps even a Zoroastrian). Given the contents of the rest of the letter—it is concerned with worship in the temple—it may indeed be the case that Ezra is tasked with confirming whether or not the people of Israel are worshipping in accordance with their law.⁹ This would fit with the policy of the Persian kings we've met so far in the Book of Ezra, who are very concerned that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt for the well-being of the people, who, as happy subjects worshipping their own God, will be much easier for the Persians to govern. What the Persian king does not want to hear is that the Jews are divided among themselves, that the temple and the type of worship being conducted in it is a source of on-going division among the Jews or a ground of insurrection against the Persians.

Someone who nonchalantly describes himself as “king of kings” is not likely to worry whether the Jews are worshipping in such a way as to please YHWH, only that they worship in such a way that they are getting along with each other. There may also be a question in the king's mind, about who, among those living in the Jerusalem area, is actually a Jew. As we will see in the coming chapters, given Ezra's concern about the Jews intermarrying with non-Jews and embracing their paganism as a result, Artaxerxes may be quite concerned about telling Jew from non-Jew, because a blurring of ethnic, cultural, and religious lines, would make it difficult to tax subjects, conduct a census, along with a host of other complications if one cannot tell who is a Jew, and who is subject to pay tribute, etc.¹⁰

Artaxerxes wants to keep the good will the Persians now enjoy with the Jews. This requires the Jews to worship according to their law, and to govern themselves accordingly. Artaxerxes also wants the Jews to pray to their God on his behalf. All of this becomes clear in verses 15-26.

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. 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. The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. And 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. “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 of you, let it be done with all diligence, up to 100 talents of silver,

⁹ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 101.

¹⁰ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 101.

100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 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. 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. “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. 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.”

It is hard for us to conceive of a Persian king’s concern for Israel’s worship of YHWH. Some of this pure self-interest on the king’s part. Better to deal with the Jews this way than through military force and occupation. But Ezra has already told us that YHWH’s hand was upon him, and that “*the king granted him all that he asked.*” Therefore, it may well be the case that Artaxerxes was giving the Jews those things requested for them by Ezra. It is truly remarkable that anything Israel needs is to come from the Persian treasury. According to Jeremiah 29:4-9, the Jews were instructed to get on with life while in exile and serve their captors well and faithfully. The generosity of the Persian king might well be a fruit of this. That one of the king’s concerns is law and order in Israel becomes clear when the king requires that those who do not obey the law of God (the law of Moses), or the law of the king (Artaxerxes’ decrees) are to suffer severe penalties. It is also interesting to note that there was no tribute (tax) to be paid by “*priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.*” Maybe my housing allowance is biblical after all!

The chapter ends (vv. 27-28) with Ezra’s own personal comment upon the events which led to his return to Jerusalem. “*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, 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.*” Knowing that the Lord had turned the king’s heart, Ezra gives thanks to YHWH, blesses his name, and invokes God’s covenant faithfulness as “the God of our fathers.” As one commentator puts it, “the God of the Bible is always a God with a record in history, a God with a past – in which he has proven faithful to those to whom he has made promises.”¹¹

Proof that YHWH is all powerful is seen in the number of bureaucrats with which Ezra is forced to deal so that his mission might get under way—the king, his seven counselors and all his mighty officers. Even the Persian royal court and its numerous officials and hangers-on are no match for the God of Israel—who gave Ezra courage to deal with the entourage at court who, no doubt, had to be convinced of Ezra’s mission before the king prepared Ezra’s commission. It is fair to say that God demonstrates his love by sovereignly cutting through the red-tape. The application for us is to pray for God’s favor before going to the DMV or applying for a mortgage!

While we see humor in Ezra’s report of God’s victory over the bureaucrats, Ezra sees this as a sign that God’s hand was upon him. Because it was YHWH *who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.* Artaxerxes acts freely on behalf of his empire,

¹¹ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part six).

and yet as Ezra continually reminds us, God accomplishes his purposes through kings and courts. However small and insignificant, or great and important, Ezra reminds us of God's control over all things—good and bad. God put this in the king's heart while his hand was upon Ezra. Ezra devoted himself to his studies, while at the same time argued his case before the Persian court. Yet, throughout this entire account, God's will was done, and so Ezra gathers up some of the leading men who had remained behind in Babylon and strikes out with them for Jerusalem. A new chapter in Israel's history is now well underway.

What then do we say by way of application? As Christians we look back upon these events knowing where they will eventually take Israel—to the messianic age and the coming of Jesus Christ, who is the true temple of God, and that one in whom the law of Moses—for which Ezra was so zealous—will be fulfilled. Throughout the entire account of Israel's return to the land, the rebuilding of the temple, and in YHWH's victory over the Persian bureaucrats, we witness YHWH stirring hearts (even the king's), placing his hand upon his servants (i.e., Ezra, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai, and Zechariah), while directing all things to their appointed ends.

As Paul tells the Corinthians (in verses 8-10 of chapter 9 of his second letter to them, and part of our New Testament lesson this morning), *“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, ‘He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”* Ezra saw this play out with his own eyes, because *“the hand of the LORD my God was on me.”* Because we are Christ's, through faith in him and by trusting in his promises, that which was true for Ezra, is also true for us. Because we are united to Jesus Christ through faith, and with a bond effected by the Holy Spirit, the hand of God is upon us, and he will supply all our needs, and accomplish his purpose for our lives. Through his word and sacraments, he will stir our hearts to devote ourselves to him, he will move us confess our sins, to delight in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and give us grateful hearts, so that we love our neighbors.