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King Artakh'shasta's Letter to Ezra
Ezra 7:11-28a

King Artakh'shasta's letter to Ezra DIG: What doors of opportunity does this letter of endorsement open up for Ezra and his fellow Jews? Besides the royal letter, what other free will offerings (7:15-22) does Ezra have in hand? How does this bounty compare with what was ordered by Darius (see 6:8-9)? What prompts King Artakh'shasta to be so generous (compare 6:10 with 7:23b and 28a)? How long had it taken so far for the Jewish refugees to return to their homeland (compare 1:1-4 with 7:8ff)? Therefore, what job promotion and higher authority was Ezra given (7:25-26)?

REFLECT: How is the "hand of God" evident in your life? What leadership role does that encourage you to take? What meaning for Jews and Christians do you ascribe to the historic restoration of Isra'el then in 538-430 BC, and now? Why is it important for some people to have their religious leader's pedigree or ordination related to a great high priest (as in Ezra's lineage in 7:1-5), or even the High Priest (see Hebrews Chapters 7 and 8). What aspect of praise, gratitude, and healthy self-esteem do you enjoy as a result of your devotion to God's Word?

458 BC During the ministry of Ezra (**to see link click Bf – The Second Return**).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs
(see **Ac – Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: The Ezra Memoirs**).

Now we come to the decree of **Artakh'shasta. He** was the fifth monarch of the First Persian Dynasty (550-330 BC) – the successive Persian kings who followed Cyrus II the Great and the initial phase of **the Jews'** return from Babylon. Museums in Philadelphia and London, among others, house hundreds of archaeological artifacts – clay tablets bearing cuneiform texts as well as vases and silver dishes – all attesting to the reign of **Artakh'shasta.** Many have **Jewish** inscriptions evidencing commercial transactions, agricultural lending, and tax-collection

agencies. Some **Jews** evidently were bankers and brokers who loaned almost everything for a price, and some **Jews** worked as officials of the royal court. There appear to have been few social or commercial barriers between **Jews** and Babylonians, resulting in the wealth of many **Jews**. Perhaps it explains why some were reluctant to leave and return to **Jerusalem**.

Soon after **Artakh'shasta** came to power, two or three years before the events of **Ezra 7**, **the Persian king** faced his biggest challenge – an Egyptian revolt. Led by Inarus the Libyan and Amyrtaeus of Sais, the revolt was successful in defeating the Persian governor in Egypt, Achaemenes, a brother of **King Ahasuerus, Artakh'shasta's** predecessor. Then Greeks from Athens sailed a fleet of some two-hundred ships to capture the Egyptian city of Memphis only months before the events recorded in this chapter. Two years later, a sizeable army, under the leader of the governor of Syria, recaptured Memphis with great loss of life on both sides. It was some of the fiercest fighting the Persians had ever known.

Given this background, it may not be surprising that a Persian ruler would commission a devout **Jew** to administer the Torah in Jerusalem. **Ezra** came to Jerusalem bearing a letter from **the king**. With the instability in the Egyptian delta, it made perfect sense for a policy of stability and respect for the Torah to be instituted. The last thing **Artakh'shasta** needed was for the revolutionary spirit in Greece and Egypt to spread to Judea. A very similar policy had been undertaken decades before, during the reign of Darius, when the Egyptian priest Udjahorresnet was sent back to Egypt to restore respect for Persian law.[132]



This is a copy of the letter that King Artakh'shasta, king of kings, gave to Ezra. The original was usually kept as an official record. This particular letter was addressed to **Ezra** because it authorized **him** to carry it and read it to its intended audience. **The king gave it to Ezra, the Cohen, the scribe, a teacher of matters pertaining to the mitzvot of ADONAI and His statutes over Isra'el.** This was a powerful testimony to both **Ezra's** character and **his** grasp of **God's Word. He** had studied and memorized **the commandments** of **YHVH** to the point that **he** had become **a teacher of teachers**. It is also significant that **the king** described **Ezra's** qualifications rather than **his** job description.

Ezra 7:12-26 is written in Aramaic, the language that the Persians used in official documents (much like the Roman Empire used Greek).

From: Artakh'shasta, king of kings,

To: Ezra the Cohen, a scribe of the Torah of the God of heaven (Ezra 7:11-12). Just as Joseph, long ago, gained the trust of the pharaoh of Egypt and was enabled to preserve his family and clan, so **Ezra** won the friendship of **the Persian king**. It was a friendship that spelled the survival for the **Jewish** community after the Babylonian captivity.[133]

I have now issued a decree that anyone in my kingdom from the people of Isra'el – even the cohanim and Levites – who wish to go up to Jerusalem with you may go (Ezra 7:13). Decrees were commonly written as official documents and then reiterated in personal letters that gave the emissary authority in his travels. **Ezra** would have read this **letter** to **the Jews** in **Yerushalayim** to demonstrate that **he** had **the king's** backing. This was a remarkable decree that showed **ADONAI's** sovereign rule as **KING of kings (Revelation 19:16)** over earthly **kings,** and **His** intent to keep the Abrahamic, Davidic and B'rit Chadashah covenants with **Isra'el**. **The letter contained five provisions.**

It authorized Ezra (and others with him) to go to Jerusalem to see that the Torah was observed. For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors (this number according to Persian tradition also seen in **Esther 1:14**) **to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Torah of your God, which is in your hand (7:14). Now you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint judges and magistrates who may administer justice to all the people in Trans-Euphrates – all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach those who do not know them (Ezra**

7:25). His jurisdiction no doubt included authority over Jews who had remained in Palestine during the exile but who had neglected the Torah and intermarried with non-Jews. The effect of this decree gave a measure of autonomy to **the Jews** in Judah – exactly what **their** enemies were striving to avoid. Yet this element of spiritual shepherding was exactly what **Ezra** had a heart to do. **He** knew **the Jews** returning from captivity needed instruction in **the Word of God**, and this became the focus of **his** ministry.

It provided a grant to buy sacrifices and Temple vessels. And to bring the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely given to the God of Isra'el, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold that you find in the whole province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and the cohanim for the House of their God in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:15). It is interesting that **King Artakh'shasta** chose to make **a freewill offering** to **ADONAI**, even though **he** did not worship **Him**. **The King** may have been trying to appease **the God of Isra'el** in hopes of avoiding future trouble from that region of **his** empire. People during that time thought various gods ruled specific geographical regions. **The freewill gifts** of **God's people** were an important part of the rebuilding effort in **Jerusalem**, both for **the Temple** and **the walls**.[134]

Furthermore, with this silver you should be sure to buy bulls, rams and lambs, along with their grain offerings (Leviticus 2:1 and **13) and their drink offerings (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 23:13), and offer them on the altar of the House of your God in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:16).** How did **Artakh'shasta** know what **sacrifices** were needed? **He** must have had a **Jewish** advisor, probably **Ezra himself**, to help draft **the decree**. The phrase in **Ezra 7:6b, "The king gave Ezra everything he requested,"** also suggests that it was **Ezra**. The Persian kings took seriously the religious rights of their subjects.

The king trusted **Ezra** to use the money that **he** sent wisely. **You may do whatever seems good to you and your brothers with the remaining silver and gold, according to the will of your God. The vessels** originally taken from Solomon's Temple **that are entrusted to you for the service of the House of your God, deliver before the God of Jerusalem. The rest of the needs for the House of your God that you may have occasioned to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury (Ezra 7:17-20).** The Persians were careful to support the religious celebrations of the people they ruled.

Knowing about **YHVH** does not make one a believer. The Adversary and his demons know about **Ha'Shem,** and one day **sh'ol** will be thrown **into the Lake of Fire** for all eternity **(Revelation 20:14).** Ultimately, their knowledge will do them no good. One must submit to **Him** as the only **God** (see the commentary on **Exodus, to see link click Dk – You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me**), and accept **His** free gift of salvation.

It commanded the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra. I, King Artakh'shasta, hereby issue a decree to all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates to diligently provide all that Ezra the cohen, scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of you – up to 100 talents (or four tons) **of silver, 100 cors (624 bushels) of wheat,** fine flower used in the grain-offerings **(Leviticus 2:1, 13)** and drink-offerings **(Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 23:13); 100 baths of wine** used in the drink offerings **(Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 23:13)**, which accompanied other offerings. **Oil** was used in the continual burnt offering, in the grain offering **(Leviticus 2:4** and **15)**, and in anointing the priest **(Exodus 29:21); 100 baths** (or 600 gallons) **of oil** used in the continual burnt offering, in the grain offering **(Leviticus 2:4** and **15)**, and in anointing the priest **(Exodus 29:21); and salt without limit (Ezra 7:21-22). Salt** was added, especially to **the grain offerings**. **The salt of the covenant** is a phrase that appears several times **(Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; Second Chronicles 13:5; Mark 9:49)**, **salt** being the symbol of covenant relationship.

Everything that the God of heaven has required, let it be done with diligence for the House of the God of heaven (Ezra 7:23a). This reminds us of when **ADONAI had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for, so they plundered the Egyptians (Exodus 12:35-36).** In this case, part of the purpose for such an amazingly generous **decree** to **the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates** may have been to provide supplies for the journey. Thus, **Ezra** could show this **letter** to the Persian officials during the four month journey.

For why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons (Ezra 7:23b)? In **Ezra 6:10 King Darius** had asked for prayer for **his** well-being and that of **his sons**. Here, **Artakh'shasta** wanted **Ha'Shem's** protection even though **he** also feared other gods. It was important to **him** that **God's** wrath in the form of catastrophes on **Jerusalem** were avoided. There had been a revolt in Egypt in 460 BC, and in this same year, 458 BC, a Persian army was sent to Egypt. Nevertheless, it is interesting that **the king** of one of the greatest empires the

world has ever known should care about the **God** of such a seemingly insignificant **people**.

It freed all Temple officials from taxation. We also notify you that you have no authority to impose tribute, tax or duty on any of the cohanim, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, sanctuary servants, or attendants at this House of God (Ezra 7:24). This was Persian policy and can be seen in other cases.

It authorized Ezra the ability to set up a judicial system to see that the Jews obeyed the Torah. Let anyone who does not observe the Torah of your God and the law of the king, be punished with due diligence, whether it is death or banishment, confiscation of goods or imprisonment (Ezra 7:26). This may not mean that **Ezra** could punish in the ways listed here, but the governor and Persian authorities were to back him up with these punishments. **Ezra**, like **Joseph** many years earlier, had authority in a foreign government. In **the LORD's** providence both were used to fulfill **His** purposes for **His** people. But depending of a secular government to enforce biblical principles can be dangerous. **God's** commandments give us the blueprint for a healthy society. But at the same time, they are part of the covenant between **YHVH** and **His people** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Eo – The Days are Coming, declares the LORD, When I Will Make a New Covenant with the People of Isra'el**).[135] **Ezra's** response to **the king's** decree showed what kind of a man **he** was. **He** praised **YHVH** for what **He** had done, saying: **Blessed be ADONAI, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the heart of the king to beautify the House of Adonai in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended lovingkindness** (see the commentary on **Ruth Af – The Concept of Chesed**) **to me before the king and his counselors and all the king's mighty princes. And I gathered strength, as the hand of ADONAI my God was upon me Ezra 7:9, 8:18, 22** and **31;** and **Nehemiah 2:8** and **18) (Ezra 7:27-28a). The thanksgiving was not for personal favors but for the national blessing bestowed by the king, under God's guidance, in enabling the Temple to be built. From here to the end of Chapter 9 (apart from a brief return to the third person in Ezra 8:35-36), Ezra speaks in the first person.** Once again, **Ezra** recognized that **the king's** generosity was due to **the LORD's** intervention. **He** was grateful to **King Artakh'shasta** for **his** benevolence, but **he** gave the final glory to **ADONAI**.

One more question comes to mind, "Where is **Yeshua** in this passage?" If you listen closely, you can hear **His** answer, "**I am the One** who caused this pagan **king** to write this **letter**!"

Messiah is also a **letter-writing King**. The Bible is a letter to us – including this letter from a Persian monarch. **Jesus** is saying in this chapter, "Do you see, **I am** in complete control? **I am** ensuring the end from the beginning. **I am** determining the future of **My people**. **I am** aligning the events of history to ensure that **My** purpose for the redemption of **My people** will be accomplished according to **My** plan." Isn't that wonderful?[136]