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Ezra's Arrival in Jerusalem
Ezra 8:15-36

Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem DIG: How does Ezra handle the lack of response by the Levites to his planned pilgrimage? Is he "end-running" divine authority? Or pursuing an additional channel for God's blessing? Why do you think so (What do the numbers in Ezra 2:40 tell you)? How does Ezra show spiritual dependence, political expediency, and common sense in his journey from Ahava to Jerusalem? What do you make of Ezra praying and fasting instead of (not in addition to) the customary escort (see Nehemiah 2:9)? At face value, it seems that Persian kings gave Ezra over 32 tons of silver and gold to underwrite the Temple project. What principles of financial accountability do you see in the way Ezra handled this vast amount of money?

REFLECT: Is God's hand more directly involved in the lives of those who strip themselves of all visible means of support and protection? Or are God's "fingerprints" just more "obvious," or better yet "necessary," at such times of naked trust? Why do you think so? Ezra fasted before approaching God for direction, as did Yeshua and His disciples (Matthew 4:2, 6:16-18). How might fasting help you know God's answer for an important decision that you're facing? Ezra entrusted 24 men with a vast fortune and held them accountable for every last "talent." For what talents have you been held accountable (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Jx – The Parable of the Bags of Gold**)**? How and when have you sensed God's protecting you from your enemies? What enemies (internal or external) might you still need God's protection from?**

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

The account of **Ezra's** return to **Jerusalem**, along with the list of **exiles** who returned with **him** was given in summary from the beginning of **Chapter 7**. Since

then we have been examining the details of all **the returnees** who accompanied **Ezra** on the five-month journey in the heat of the summer. Specifically, we have learned that the total number was around six thousand, representing **twelve** families.



I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. This was an unknown location where a canal or river flowed into the Euphrates River. This was in **Babylon**, and **Ezra** chose it as a place where the returning **Jews** would pray and make preparations to leave for **three days**. **When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there (Ezra 8:15).** Because Ezra's main reason for returning was to reform worship within the Temple, the need for a sizable and loyal group of **Levites** was paramount. **The Levites** were the tribe of **Israelites** descended from **Levi**, one of the **twelve** sons of **Jacob**. When you think **Levites** – think **Genesis**. All **priests** were to be **Levites**, according to the Torah, but not all **Levites** were **priests**. **The priests** were a group of qualified men from within the tribe of **the Levites** who had responsibility over the different aspects of **Temple** worship. It was a significant amount of work – work that none of **them** had ever done before. And **they** would need to perform it flawlessly. **Their** work was lowly, servant work, and perhaps many had enjoyed more favorable circumstances in **Babylon**. No wonder that there was some reluctance on **their** part!

Is **ADONAI** calling you to do something for which there might be little visible reward or personal glory? Are you not volunteering because you are reluctant to get involved in something for which you will receive no applause? Are you more concerned about your own personal comfort than the cause of the Kingdom of **God**? Is it asking too much for you to be involved in something, however menial, when **the Lord Yeshua Messiah** was prepared to become a servant on your behalf? **He** did not have to reach out for notoriety and glory – it was already **His** – **but He**

emptied Himself – taking on the form of a slave, becoming the likeness of men and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled Himself becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8). What task is too menial for you to do for **Him** when no task was too menial for **Jesus** to do for you? **John the Immerser** thought that untying **Yeshua's sandals** was not too low for **him**. Indeed, **he** felt unworthy of the honor![141]

When **the Jews** received the Torah of Moses at Mount Sinai, **ADONAI** gave commands regarding a formal **priesthood** for **Isra'el** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fv – The Selection of Aaron and His Sons as Priests**). **The priests** would be males from the tribe of **Levi**. Among these **Levitical priests** was **the high priest**. The first high priest was **Aaron**, the brother of Moses. **His sons** and **their** descendants were to serve as the future **priests**, and **high priests** of the nation of **Isra'el** (see the commentary on **Exodus Gf – Dedicate Aaron and His Sons So They May Serve Me As Priests**). Only **the high priest** was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle and **Temple**, and that only once per year on the Day of Atonement (see the commentary on **Leviticus – Yom Kippur**). When you think **priests** – think **Exodus**.

The priests needed to meet certain physical and age qualifications in order to serve. In addition, they had to remain ceremonially clean to perform their duties before a holy **God**. **The priests** served as mediators between **the Israelites** and **YHVH**. They were the ones
who performed animal sacrifices on behalf of **the people**. It was only **the priests** who were permitted to enter the Holy Place in the Tabernacle and, later, **the Temple.**[142]

Apparently there were no descendants of **Levi** who were willing to return to **Tziyon** with **Ezra**, although **others** had previously returned with **Zerubbabel** on **the First Return**. **Ezra** was deeply concerned about this because **he** had no one qualified to serve in **the Temple**. **The sages teach that there were many Levites in the caravan but none were qualified to officiate. All the Levites had bitten off the fingers of their right hand to escape the obligation put upon them by the Babylonians to play Temple music on their harps (Midrash to Psalm 137).**

So I summoned Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, who were leaders and carried some weight in the

community**, and Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of learning** (men like **Ezra himself**) **and** known for **their** diplomatic skills**, and I ordered them to go to Iddo, the leader in Kasiphia. Iddo was evidently a man of influence and authority at a place called Kasiphia, where a Jewish settlement flourished at the time. I told them what to say to Iddo and his fellow Levites, the Temple servants in Kasiphia, so that they might bring attendants to us for the house of our God (Ezra 8:16-17).**

Again, **Ezra** gives **YHVH** the credit for success in acquiring **Levites** to go to **Jerusalem**. **Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, the eleven man** team (with the help of **Iddo**) succeeded in procuring the services of two independent **Levitical** families. **They brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi** (who were responsible for carrying **the Tabernacle** in **Numbers 3:33-37, 4:29-33; First Chronicles 6:19**)**, the son of Isra'el, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 in all; and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 in all.** Only **thirty-eight Levites** were willing to join **Ezra** in **the Second Return** to **Jerusalem**. However, this **remnant of men** whom **ADONAI** had raised up had understanding and wisdom and recognized that even the mundane tasks in **God's** service were of infinitely more value than the most glorified positions in the world. This also helps us to realize the sacrifice that **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** made in leaving behind **their** great Persian positions and return to **their** homeland.[143]

They also brought 220 of the temple servants – a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites. All were registered by name (Ezra 8:18-20). The temple servants (Hebrew: *nethinim*) were **the men** who assisted **the Levites** in performing the humblest jobs connected with **the Temple** service. According to **Numbers 31:30-47**, some war captives were given to serve **the Levites**. **They may be identical with the strangers in the Land of Isra'el whom David gathered for the work of building the Temple (First Chronicles 22:2). Gibeonites** were also enslaved and set apart for service by **Joshua (Joshua 9:21-27)**. **They** were, therefore, called *the nethinim*, *the given [to God]*, or *the devoted*. **They** were held in low esteem by **the Jews**, occupying a social position even lower than *the mamzer*, or *illegitimate offspring*. Along with **the Jews**, **they** had been taken to **Babylon**; and like **the Levites**, had never performed any of **their Levitical** duties.[144]

From Ahava to Jerusalem: Before **Ezra** led **the exiles** back to **Yerushalayim**,

he held **a fast** to pray for **Ha'Shem's** protection and appointed **priests** to carry **the gifts** for the Temple. **There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. It served as the equivalent of *tephillath hadderech*, "a prayer for a safe journey," offered by Jewish travelers to this day.** The presence of **the** great **gift** of **the king's and silver and gold (Ezra 8:25-27** below**)** only made the caravan a more attractive target for bandits and **enemies**. Yet, **Ezra** said: **I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had** previously **told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to Him, but His great anger is against all who forsake Him." So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and He answered our prayer (Ezra 8:21-23)**.

Ezra refused to ask **the king** for a military escort back to **Jerusalem**, for doing so, **he** reasoned, would be a denial of faith, a **shameful** request. **Nehemiah,** on the other hand, was given a military escort for which **he** gave thanks to **ADONAI**, seeing the provision as an example of **the good hand of God upon him (Nehemiah 2:8b).**

Both **Ezra** and **his** younger counterpart, **Nehemiah**, were godly men. Both were committed to discerning the will of **the LORD** through prayerful study of the Scriptures applied to **their** particular circumstances. Both were deeply conscious of their role as leaders called by **ADONAI** to do a significant work for **YHVH**. Both felt deeply responsible for **the people of God** and the advancement of the Kingdom. Yet for all that, **they** came to different conclusions about what faith meant in **their** respective circumstances. One reasoned that to ask for military protection was a lack of faith; while the other saw it as divine protection. What are we to make of this? Is it possible for two equally godly believers to seek **God's** guidance in similar circumstances and come up with different conclusions?

Yes. It is a mark of our freedom in **Messiah** to show understanding and tolerance when such differences surface over issues that are not threatening to the fundamentals of our faith. In other words, major in the majors . . . don't major in the minors. Believers in the B'rit Chadashah differed on whether it was right to **eat meat** that had been offered in a sacrifice at the local pagan temple and later sold at the nearby meat market. Paul urged them not to pass judgment, adding: **Don't let the one who eats disparage the one who does not eat, and don't let the one who does not eat judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.**

Who are you to judge another man's servant? Before his own master he stands or falls. Yes, he shall stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand (Romans 14:3-4). Another issue was that people differed on what day of the week they should worship. Once again Paul explains: **One person esteems one day over another while another judges every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes that day does so to the Lord (Romans 14:5-6a). The Chronicler** made no attempt to favor either **Ezra** or **Nehemiah's** decision in regard to having or not having a military escort. That they reached a different conclusion was as obvious to the author as it is to us, but the matter is left without comment.[145]

The treasure entrusted to them was enormous. **Artakh'shasta,** like **his** predecessors, marked the occasion with an official **gift**, and called upon the Jews who were not making the trip to add their share. **Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, namely, Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brothers. And I weighed out to them the offering of silver and gold and the gifts that the king, his advisers, his officials and all Isra'el present there had donated for the house of our God. I weighed out to them 650 talents of silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold valued at 1,000** Persian **gold darics** (a thick piece of **gold** having on one side the figure of a king with a bow and javelin, and on the other side an irregular oblong depression)[146]**, and two fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold (Ezra 8:24-27).** These items were **gifts** for **the Temple**, donated by Persian officials and by the non-returning **Israelites**. **These** were *not* **the vessels from the House of ADONAI that Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Jerusalem. Those** had previously been returned fifty-seven years ago by **Sheshbazzar** (**to see link click Aj – The Return to Isra'el Under Sheshbazzar**).

Both the gifts and the men in charge were **dedicated** to **ADONAI**. **I said to them, "You as well as these articles are dedicated to the LORD. The silver and gold are a freewill offering to the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Guard them carefully until you weigh them out in the chambers of the house of YHVH in Jerusalem before the leading priests and the Levites and the family heads of Isra'el." Then the priests and Levites received the silver and gold and sacred gifts that had been weighed out to be taken to the house of our God in Jerusalem (Ezra 8:28-30). Ezra** also made sure that there were sufficient witnesses when **the gifts** were eventually deposited in **the**

Temple. In addition to **the priests** and **Levites**, **the heads of families** were also present. Evidently **Ezra** sensed the need for exact records, careful auditing, and doing everything possible to avoid suspicions of wrongdoing with **the gifts** given to the service of **ADONAI**. This is an example of faithful, responsible stewardship.[147]

The journey and safe arrival: On the twelfth day of the first month of Nisan **we set out from the Ahava Canal to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way (Ezra 8:31).** Once again, **Ezra** reminded **his** readers that **Ha'Shem** is completely faithful to **His** promises and **His** people. **The Jews** had no need of a military escort in spite of the fact that **they** were carrying **the king's silver and gold** in the caravan. The important fact for us to understand is that **the Lord's** hand is always on **His** children, and **He** must be the sole source of our security no matter what may come our way.[148]

So we arrived in Jerusalem, where we rested three days (Ezra 8:32). The journey of nearly a thousand miles is passed over with barely a comment. All that mattered was the destination and the mission to fulfill. From **Numbers 3:8, 31, 4:5ff**, it is clear that **the Levites** carried **the gifts** from **Babylon**, and **the priests** handled **them** once **they** got to **Jerusalem**.

The inventory was businesslike, and the implication is that nothing was missing, despite the long and hazardous journey.[149] **On the fourth day, in the house of our God, we weighed out the silver and gold and the sacred articles into the hands of Meremoth son of Uriah, the priest. Eleazar son of Phinehas was with him, and so were the Levites Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui. Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time (Ezra 8:33-34).**

These two verses (using the third person) add a few details to supplement **Ezra's** own account, which will continue in the next chapter. **Then the exiles who had returned from captivity sacrificed burnt offerings to the God of Isra'el** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fe – The Burnt Offering**)**.** Once again there is an emphasis on the number **twelve** (see **Bj – The List of Exiles who Returned with Ezra**), which stands for the **twelve** tribes of **Isra'el**. **Twelve bulls for all Isra'el, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven male lambs and, as a sin offering** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fc – The Sin Offering**)**, twelve male goats** that were offered**. All this was a burnt offering to the Lord. They also delivered the king's** written **orders to the highest officials and to the governors of**

Trans-Euphrates, who then gave assistance to the people and to the house of God (Ezra 8:35-36).

They had begun with worship in **Babylon**, and **they** ended with worship in **Jerusalem**. To pause and give thanks was the fitting thing to do. It always is. **Their** sacrificing of **burnt** and **sin offerings** was extremely special because it was the first time **the exiles** had done so. Those **offerings** spoke of atonement and the acceptance of **God**. **The burnt offering** expresses holding nothing back from **Ha'Shem** because the whole animal was consumed on the bronze altar and ascended in smoke, a pleasant aroma to **the LORD**. **The people** had come to give **themselves** to the work of **YHVH**, and for now at least **they** meant it. **They** wanted **God** to have all there was of **them**. Has **ADONAI** ever asked *everything* of you? And are you willing to say yes if **He** does?[150]