

## EZRA - WHO CARRIED GOLD THROUGH A LAND OF BANDITS

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And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days. Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessel weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Memeroth the son of Uriah the priest. .. By number and by weight of every one, and all the weight was written at that time (Ezra 8:32-34).

Ezra was a scribe employed by the kings of Babylon and Persia. He lived in an age when the art of printing was unknown. The first writing was made on either clay tablets or engraved by masons on monumental columns. Important messages were written by hand, and consequently, scribes were valuable assets in any community. Ezra was known to three royal families, and became the messenger between the kings of Babylon and the Hebrews rebuilding Jerusalem.

When Cyrus conquered Babylon, he ordered the repatriation of all slaves. A vast expedition was arranged which included nearly fifty thousand people, 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys (see Ezra 2:64-67). This caravan led by Nehemiah reached Jerusalem, and the work of reconstruction commenced. Certain Gentiles desired to assist in the building but were refused because they were aliens. Infuriated, they decided to oppose the builders, and part of their strategy was the writing of malicious letters to the Babylon monarchs who were chief sponsors of the project (see Ezra 4:4-24). It was at this point in history that Ezra appeared (see Ezra 7:1).

His research persuaded Artaxerxes that the letter he received was untrue. The Jews whom he had helped were loyal friends and deserved better treatment. He immediately rescinded his former decision, and increased his assistance to the Hebrews. Ezra was not only instructed to send another letter to Jerusalem—he was commissioned to lead a second expedition to supply everything necessary for the completion of the project. The details recorded by the industrious scribe were

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written in the book bearing his name. It was at that time Ezra faced his greatest challenge. Between Babylon and Jerusalem were hundreds of miles of desert that provided cover for bandits. Ezra realized he had no army to protect the enormous treasure to be carried to Jerusalem. The many males in the first expedition had guaranteed the safety of all concerned, but a smaller company would be in jeopardy. Four months of hazardous pilgrimage lay ahead, and danger was inescapable.

#### Ezra's Commission... Chosen

Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time. I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 7:12-14).

Ezra was a man who came from comparative obscurity to become one of the greatest men in Hebrew history. He was a priest, a scribe, a researcher, a person whom God and the king

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trusted. The accusing letter sent by pagans in Palestine annoyed the king, who threatened to deprive the Jews of necessary assistance. The people who were restoring Jerusalem had no defender, and when everything seemed to be lost, Ezra changed the course of history. He was appointed to lead a new expedition to deliver necessary supplies for the success of the reconstruction. The task was frightening, for the caravan train would attract the attention of every thief in the desert (see Ezra 7:9).

This priest apparently had no military experience. He was a scribe. Why the king appointed this inexperienced man to lead such an expedition can only be surmised. Ezra must have been an extraordinary man.

Ezra's Concern ... Conscientious

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right

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way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him (Ezra 8:21-22).

This was Ezra's finest hour. The people were ready to begin their journey, the vast treasure had been packed in crates, the herds of cattle were ready to move, but the priest was worried. He considered the difficult journey ahead and knew it was almost an impossibility to reach Jerusalem safely. The king who had financed the effort would be willing to supply an escort of soldiers, but the thoughtful leader considered that possibility and shook his head. How could he solicit aid when he had already assured the king Jehovah would help His people? The time had arrived when God should display His ability.

Today's religious leaders would have organized a telethon to raise enough money to pay for an escorting army. Ezra refused to beg, preferring to bow before the throne of grace. "So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us" (Ezra 8:23).

Ezra's Courage... Commendable

Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests . . . and ten of their brethren with them. And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God. . . . And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD: the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers. Watch ye, and keep them until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD (Ezra 8:24-29).

It may have been significant that after the people had fasted and prayed, this industrious scribe summoned the priests and

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entrusted to their care the treasures which were to be

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transported to Jerusalem. Ezra probably realized that some of the gifts would be required for wages, materials, and other expenses, and was concerned that some of God's money might be used for other purposes. Long afterward the Savior said to His disciples: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). Ezra did what the Lord recommended. How he handled the finances of that expedition should be a model for every financial advisor. Everything of value was carefully weighed before witnesses, and a record was made for future reference. Ezra 8:32-34 supplies important information: "And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days. Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God . . . by number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time." Ezra was a most meticulous treasurer. He avoided every possibility of theft, and even critics could not complain about the service rendered. Apparently the man received no payment for his work. If he controlled the finances of the United States of America, there would not be a deficit. This man was a financial wizard!

#### Ezra's Conquest... Complete

It must be considered amazing that such a genius for details refrained from supplying information concerning his long journey through the wilderness. The scribe who recorded even minor events confined his report to a few words:

Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the law. And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days (Ezra 8:31-32).

Evidently armed bandits tried to ambush the travelers, but as Ezra confessed, the hand of God protected the pilgrims, and they reached their destination safely. Probably the priestly

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author had to assume the post of commander in chief of the expedition, and what he lacked in military experience was supplied by his communion with God. He became the second in command, for as the Angel of the Lord came to assist Joshua (see Josh. 5:13-15), so He came to help the inexperienced Ezra. Nevertheless, it would be expected the ancient writer would say something about the spectacular events that occurred during the journey to Jerusalem. Was he afraid of the praise of men and determined Jehovah should have all the glory? It would appear this man from a bygone age not only conquered his enemies, he vanquished personal desires for fame or notoriety. He had been entrusted with a special task, and his only ambition was to fulfill his duties efficiently. Had he lived in a later age, he would have been able to say with Paul: "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (see Gal. 2:20). The apostle John would have admired the ancient leader, for Ezra could have been a strange contrast to "Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence" (see 3 John 9).

#### Ezra's Contribution... Considerable

Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the

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people of the land, and from the strange wives. Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou

hast said, so must we do (Ezra 10:11-12).

It became increasingly evident that the messenger from Babylon was held in the highest esteem by the Hebrew people. That they accepted his advice and obeyed his orders indicated he had won their esteem. He was a man who reached a pinnacle of excellence because he truly belonged to Jehovah. He and Nehemiah were among the most patriotic of all the Hebrews. They remain examples for all who desire to serve God. Ezra not only exhibited concern for God's work, he put muscles into his prayers and never expected others to work while he watched. His favorite text might have been: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (Eccl. 9:10).

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