



The Mandate Ezra 7:12-28

I remember when I first went to High School, we had a headmaster who was a very strict disciplinarian called Mr Eyre. He was an old fashioned Mr Chips type character, complete with handlebar moustache. One day I was sent by a teacher during lessons, to deliver something he was expecting to receive. After knocking on his door and giving him what he was supposed to have, he asked me to go to a class nearby and ask the teacher there to send a boy to him he wanted to speak to. As that teacher was even more grumpy and strict, I seemed rather nervous about going. Mr Eyre realised this straight away and wrote a quick note and gave it to me. "There you are," he said, "just give this to Mr Williams, and go back to your class." Of course, there was no problem. I walked into Mr Williams' class and said "I have a note from Mr Eyre". He took the note and said "Thank you" and off I went – no problem. What was the difference? The note from the headmaster. I walked in with his authority, on his business.

And here we have a decree in writing, given to Ezra to take with him from Babylonia to Judah, which explained to all in authority what the king had said he could do. It was his note from the headmaster to whom it may concern. In chapter 4 we got a taste of who they were. I'll come back to them shortly.

What did Ezra get from Artaxerxes ?

1. Permission for anyone to leave – he was allowed to add anyone to his party he decided to take on his expedition to Judah. *Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go.* You can't get clearer than that. Persia was a large empire and there would be many who would question what Ezra was doing and why, but the Separation Decree allowed these people to separate them from Babylonian society and remove themselves to the land of their fathers. The decree was their passport to Judah.
2. They were to represent Artaxerxes. *You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand.* They had to report back what they found. This was not a one-way "clear off and don't come back" decree. Ezra had a responsibility to Artaxerxes to report. There was a reason, which was understood well by later large empires like Greece and Rome. Persia was a diverse society, and rather than impose Persian worship on everyone, kings often tolerated or even encouraged minority religions. Artaxerxes appears to have been keeping peace in his empire from potentially troublesome minorities and provinces by encouraging their religions. Xerxes, his predecessor was cooler, but Cyrus was more accommodating. In the Roman Empire, there were Emperors like Tiberius and Claudius who tolerated minorities, but others like Diocletian or Nero who persecuted minorities, particularly the Jews. As an aside, by Constantine and his successors, Christianity became the state religion and the church was proactive in removing pagan religions and in Christian groups that did not match the mark. The story of Christian Councils and Creeds marks this search for uniformity during the late Roman period. Back to Ezra.
3. They were funded by Artaxerxes to buy sacrifices and to re-equip the temple. The decree confirmed that the funds they took with them were legitimate and they were authorised to draw more funds. Better still, the decree forbade local authorities to tax them. Wow they really were favoured. This brings out another point about Artaxerxes' attitude to minorities. Why was he so kind? Verse 23 gives us the answer: *Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and of his sons.* Artaxerxes did not want to bring the wrath of God down on his kingdom. Did he do this for all the conquered minorities - or just for Judah? I suspect that Ezra as a representative of Judaism was not unique. Artaxerxes had a responsibility to tame his disorganised outer regions. Judah was still in ruins after 80 years. The area was being run by governors who had little sympathy

for Judah – look at chapter 4 and Artaxerxes needed to develop these regions and get them economically productive again. He did not want to offend the God of Judah – just in case He existed!

How does he do that? By trying to appease the local warlords? No; by sending some people who he knew would be loyal to him, educated in Persian ways, but committed to the reconstruction of Judah. Sponsoring the religious folk and re-establishing their laws seems to have been part of his plan. He gave the Jews financial and judicial independence. That included the death sentence, banishment and imprisonment. The Torah was to be the foundation. Ezra's comments indicate that he was a restorationist priest in Babylon who could pull strings in Persia to get permission to re-establish Torah in Judah - over the heads of the people who were already there and that seems to have been the Jews who were already there and operating the Temple. Ezra as a direct descendant of Aaron spoke with authority and made sure he had sufficient priests and Levites (next chapter) to run the Temple. That would indicate that although there was a temple, religion was in a dire state – which we know from later chapters was the case.

What do we learn from this?

1. Don't be afraid to co-operate with and encourage the unbelieving authorities as to a Christian position and perspective. It does not mean we have to compromise our faith. This passage indicates that Ezra was more conservative than the Jews in Judah already.
2. God does things in His time. When Zerubbabel went back, people had permission to go and that was it. Would they ever have thought that they would have permission to restore Torah to Judah? I suspect not. It was hard enough just to get the temple built.
3. Remember whose authority we act in. Ezra was able to achieve much because He didn't just have the call of God, but he also secured the authority of the king. We operate in the name of Jesus. His is the name above all names. His is the name that makes demons fear and fly. It is in His name that the blind see, the deaf hear and the lame walk. It is in His name that lives are transformed. Use the name of Jesus, use it a lot – make it count by seriously using it in prayer and in your witness. Just never use it flippantly because it is the most powerful name in creation. And what if you do – let's have point 4.
4. Do what you are supposed to do and not anything else. In chapter 4 we see the local rulers complaining because the Jews (and from its date they must have been the ones under Ezra) were starting to re-fortify Jerusalem. Artaxerxes stops it straight away. That wasn't the agreement. They were given autonomy, but that did not stretch to defence. They only had the authority to re-establish Jewish law, not to start a defence portfolio. They obviously obeyed and it was 12 years before Artaxerxes realised that aspiration by sending someone he trusted implicitly – Nehemiah – to get that task done. In our work as the church of God, we need to have that clear mandate from God to act – and not try to go before Him. We have quite a lot of needs in the fellowship at the moment, but with no one to take them forward properly. Do we push forward with them – or do we pray and wait for God to raise up the people and resources. You know the answer to that.