

Day 273

Psalms of Restoration

Psalm 107, 116, 118, 125

Psalm 107 This is a Psalm centred around the *chesed*, self-sacrificial obligation of the Lord to His people, despite the waywardness of His people.

It has no ascription or dedication, but immediately calls on the Lord's people to thank Him for His unceasing *chesed*, employing the ancient refrain, 'Thank the Lord, for He is good, for His *chesed* is forever.'

This call to give thanks recurs through the Psalm in verses 8,15 and 31 –

יָדוּ לַיהוָה תְּסַדְרוּ וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבָנֵי אָדָם
Yodu l'Adonai chasdo veniphlotav liv-ney adam
Let them thank the Lord for His *chesed* and his wonders to the sons of humanity.

In v.2, there is mention of the *redeemed by the Lord* (Heb גְּוִלֵי יְהוָה *Ge'uley Adonai*) This is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that the redeemed of the Lord would return with singing to Zion. (Isa.51.11), those who have been restored, like Ruth, out of their sadness and loss to a place of plenty.

There are descriptions of the different painful journeys that the people have been on, initially in arid places, from which the Lord found them a place to dwell.

There were those who were imprisoned and enslaved, subject to hard toil – the Lord delivered them.

There were those who almost died of famine and illness, but the Lord has healed them of their afflictions. Yet others took to sea, risking their lives on the oceans, but the Lord has come and set them free from the dangers, bringing them back home.

And now, at last, the people have been brought into fruitfulness and settledness in the land, and their families have begun to grow again.

Yet, they are not out of the time of trouble; there are still those who would oppress them; they have enemies, and their future is always dependent on the mercy of God, the *chesed* of the Lord, which is ultimately dependable and true.

Psalm 116 Another Psalm with no ascription, this is a personal thanksgiving for the Lord's rescue of an embattled soul. In crying out to the Lord, he experiences the free-will favour and compassion of the Lord.

In this place, he calls his soul to return to its rest (v.7), for the Lord has relieved him from the pain and the distress. This results in a desire to give back to the Lord for this joy He has bestowed. For those who remain in a place of self-sacrificial commitment (Heb חַסִּידִים *Chasidim*, v15) to the Lord, even their death will be an expression of worship to

the Lord. The singer will bring sacrifice and his promises of fealty to the Lord in the presence of the Lord at the Temple, the place of His dwelling.

Psalm 118 Here is a further unascribed Psalm, giving praise for the *chesed* obligation of God. The refrain of Israel opens the Psalm, and there is a call for this to be repeated by the people of God.

The reason for the singer's thanksgiving is his story of the Lord's deliverance from a place of distress. The restoration of the people of God is echoed, for the stone that was rooted up in the destruction of the Temple has become the foundation stone of the new Temple (v.22) , God is able to turn around what seems hopeless, a theme of the story all the way through, which encourages us into further relationship with Him.

The Psalm ends with the oft-sung theme of the *chesed* of the Lord enduring forever.

Psalm 125 Here is a Psalm prophesying the downfall of the foreign regimes over Israel. 'The sceptre of the wicked will not remain', for the land is given to the chosen people. There is a closing call for the Lord to bless the righteous and drive out the oppressors, with a blessing of peace upon Israel.

Day 274

Further Psalms of Restoration

Psalms 126, 128, 129, 132, 147 and 149

The first four of these psalms are headed, '*Shir ha-Ma'a lot* (Heb *שִׁיר הַמַּעְלֹהֶה*), meaning a song of going up, sung when the people come to Jerusalem for festivals.

Psalm 126 The exultant joy of the return is encapsulated in this psalm of praise to the Lord for the great things he has done. Their coming back has caused the surrounding peoples to take note of the greatness of God, their chief aim. Although they went away with weeping and pain, they have returned with delight, bringing the fruit of the land in as a sign of the Lord's faithfulness.

Psalm 128. Here is a psalm of promise that all who walk with the Lord will experience prosperity and fruitfulness, ending with a word of blessing out of the place of God's dwelling, and a prayer for Israel's peace.

Psalm 129 This is a song of malediction, a curse, revoking blessing on the oppressors, from whom Israel has been freed. There is wishing of shame upon them, and a failure of their intentions, so that no one who sees them will speak a blessing to them.

Psalm 132 This is a song looking back to the promise made to David of a dynasty which would never fail. In the context of the restoration, there is a cry here to God to honour His promise, to restore the Davidic line, which also will restore the worship and the priesthood of Israel. It also is the sign that the Lord will continue to make Jerusalem His holy dwelling, as well as the seat of the line of David.

Psalm 147. Without ascription, this Psalm is a praise to God for the return of the exiled people. He is the one who has put the heavens in place, and who provides for the annual harvest which is so important for this people. There is a reminder that it is not their military strength which is their greatest asset (which must have been small by comparison with the great empires around them), but their reliance on the *chesed* of the Lord. (v.10,11)

It is the Lord who is their defence, the One who put all things in place. And they, His unique people, are the ones who have encountered Him through His self-revelation.

Psalm 149. A further unasccribed praise song, this psalm sees the people of Israel fully engaged with all their beings, physical, emotional and spiritual in the worship of the Lord, through music, dance and song. Even in the night, praise is heard from their beds.

It is not military force which Israel shows, but the fervent praise of God which is like a weapon in their hands to bring the nations to heel. The glory of his saints is to see the kingdom of the Lord come at last, to see the proud empires of the human construct laid low under the throne of the Creator, their YHWH God, who is praised at the end of the psalm.

Day 275

The Apocalyptic Message of Zechariah

Zechariah 9.1 – 14.21

Zech.9.1-8 The neighbouring nations, from Tyre and Sidon in the north to Gaza in the south will be left in shame for their lack of seeing the Lord's presence in their midst. However, the Lord's promise is that Jerusalem will not be overrun, and the forces who are against her will be kept back by the Lord Himself.

Zech. 9.9-13 The longed-for successor of David to restore the throne of Israel is on his way, but He is not coming as a warlord, but as a humble rescuer, not living off the backs of the people, but riding on the back of a donkey, the ordinary transport of the day. The pursuit of war will not be his method, and peace will be the hallmark of His reign, across the nations. This is the Scripture quoted of the Lord Jesus Christ on His entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. (Matt.21.5)

On the basis of the divine covenant, (a blood-sealed covenant, a sacrificial covenant), the Lord will set free those who are still captive, and will defend the nation Himself against threats of attack. In particular the threats of Hellenisation by the Greeks will be resisted.

Zech. 9.14-17 When the Lord is reigning in Zion, even slings and stones will be enough to overcome the enemies of Jerusalem, because the Lord will fight for them. There will be security and prosperity for the whole land in this king's reign.

Zech.10.1- 3 It is the Lord, not the false idols, who provides the much needed rain for the crops. The empty words of the pagan practitioners leave the people without guidance,

like shepherdless sheep. They will be punished, and the leaders of the nation who let such a situation arise, and the Lord will turn the lost sheep into a mighty well-trained horse.

Zech.10.4 – 12 Here is a promise of full restoration for Israel, as the Lord defends and protects them. There will be redemption and increase in population, and even those in distant lands will be included in the Lord's plans. There is also a promise that even if they are taken away from the land, they will be strengthened by God and outlive the great imperial powers of Egypt and Assyria.

Zech.11.1-3 This seems to be a looking back for Zechariah at how things have been. There has been devastation around the region, and much has been destroyed by the past attacks.

Zech.11.4-17 In the loss and exile of the people, there have been stages of dispossession. The leaders of the nation became rich on the backs of the wayward people, marked out by the Lord for judgement. Zechariah describes two staves, shepherds' tools, with which he would rule the flock of Israel, removing the kings from their places, sending them into captivity and exile ahead of the people. One of the staves is called *No'am* (Heb נֹעַם), meaning *Delight* and the other is called *Chobhelim* (Heb חֹבְלִים), meaning cords or bands, indicating relationship and linking of people together. Then, because the people still did not repent and follow the Lord, both the delight of the Lord is removed, and the togetherness of the people is broken up, as Israel and Judah split into separate kingdoms.

The bad news for Judah is that there is coming another shepherd like the earlier ones, who misled the people, exploiting and oppressing them. This could be a reference in particular to the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, who did such damage to the Jews in later centuries.

Zech.12.1 – 9 A promise to Jerusalem and her inhabitants that the Lord is going to be her personal guardian, even when the nations surround her and seek to remove her from history. The promise is that, under the Lord's protection, the least citizen will be as bold as David, and the foreign nations who come against Israel will fail.

Zech.12.10-14 A day is coming in Judah when God's Spirit will provide for them an opportunity for reconciliation with the God whom they have so rejected and 'pierced', bringing them to a place of deep repentance. For Christian believers, this is the One, Jesus, who is nailed to a cross, and this Scripture from Zechariah is recalled at Calvary in John 19.37.

Zech.13.1 – 6 When this reconciliation comes about, there will be a sanctification for all of Jerusalem, an expulsion of the pagan idols and their disgusting practices from the land. Also, those who have been practicing false prophecy for the idols will be dealt with, suffering violence and rejection for their falsehoods, even from close friends and family.

Zech.13.7-9 The prophetic vision becomes more doom-laden at this point. There is going to be a striking down of the shepherd, which seems to indicate the king will be removed once again, and the people oppressed. Yet, though the loss and suffering, the Lord's people will emerge purified like gold, confessing the Lord's Name.

Zech.14.1 – 7 In the final chapter of his prophecy, Zechariah seems to be looking to an end-time of all things, to a great battle focussed on Jerusalem, which will result in great but not total destruction for the city. At this point, the Lord will appear physically on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem, splitting it in two and allowing the survivors to escape, as they once did in an earthquake in King Uzziah's time.

Then the Lord God will come, with all the divine beings, to inaugurate a new era, with time and light itself ceasing.

Zech.14.8 – 11 This will be an era of the reign, the kingdom of God over all things, and the 'living water' (fresh water) will flow from Jerusalem, which will be secure, throughout the nation, in a scenario similar to Ezekiel's vision of chapter 47.

Zech.14.12 – 15 Those standing against the Lord and Jerusalem will endure terrible judgement, one which sees their very flesh rotting from their bones in a moment, leading to widespread panic and conflict. In Zechariah's time, this would be the stuff of nightmares. In our day and time, with weapons of mass destruction, it is all too possible.

Zech.14.16 – 19 The outcome will be the establishment of Jerusalem as a worship centre for the world, and those nations not submitting to the Lord will suffer drought and loss. In particular, the world will come and celebrate the feast of *Sukkoth*, the memorial of God's leading His people in their time in the desert after their exodus.

Zech.14.20-21 Zechariah's closing words are of an age when everything in Jerusalem from cooking pots to horse-brasses will be inscribed with the words *Kodesh l'Adonai tzebha'ot* (Heb קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה צְבָאוֹת), Holy, property of the Lord of hosts, and the vessels of the Temple will be used by many different people, but pagan ways will be expunged from the city.

Day 276

The Story of Esther

Esther 1.1 – 5.14

This is one of the most beautifully-crafted accounts in Scripture, in terms of the insights into the hearts and minds of the characters involved. It is uncertain which Persian king is meant by Ahasuerus, but if Xerxes is referred to, the setting in time of this testimony of the deliverance of the Jewish ethnic community in the Persian empire from genocide is around 483BC to 479BC.

It is to be noted that the name of God does not appear in the book of Esther. Rabbinical teaching suggests that although this is the case, God's face is hidden in the book (Heb הֶסְתֵּר פָּנָיו *Hester Panim*, hidden face.) He is active, nonetheless.

The book of Esther was proscribed by the Nazis in the 1930's, and it was a capital offence both for Jews and Christians to possess a copy.

Est.1.1 – 22 The wealth of the emperor of Persia is graphically described in this chapter, as he throws a banquet for his court and capital. Parallel to the men's banquet, the Queen, Vashti, gives a women's banquet. When the revelry has been going for seven days, and the King is the worse for wear with alcohol, he commands the queen to come and disport herself in front of the men, 'to display her beauty.' Vashti refuses, not unreasonably. For her disobedience, she is banished from the King's presence forever, and the crown is to be given to another. We have no record of Vashti's reaction to this demotion, but the decree of the king is supposed to strengthen the power of the man in his household.

Est.2.1-23 When the king has calmed down, Xerxes has a chance to think about what he has done to Vashti. Perhaps he regrets his rashness which banished from his court such a beautiful and accomplished queen. His attendants suggest that he make a search for a replacement, to cheer him up.

We are now introduced to a Jew named Mordekhai Ben Jair, a Benjamite, whose great-grandfather, Kish, was exiled at the deportation of the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar. Mordekhai has a cousin, Hadassah (her name means *Myrtle* in Hebrew) whom he has raised because she is an orphan. She is beautiful and is also known by a Persian name, Esther, meaning *star*. She is taken to the palace for consideration as one of Xerxes' candidates for wife, and she catches the eye of the eunuch in charge, Hegai, and he begins to prepare her to go before Xerxes, placing her in the best accommodation. However, nothing is said of her ethnic origins.

For a year, Esther is prepared for her encounter, with oils and cosmetics, then she goes to the king to spend the day with him, returning to the harem in the evening under the care of another eunuch, Sha'ashgaz. The only way a woman can come into the King's presence is by being called – anything else will result in summary execution.

It is recounted that Esther wins favour (Heb חֵן *chen*) and the bond of devoted love (Heb חֶסֶד *chesed*) from Xerxes, one an expression of freewill and the other an obligated, self-sacrificial term. The king is captivated by her, and makes her queen in Vashti's place, but is still ignorant of her Jewish background.

Mordekhai continues in the king's service, and while at court, he overhears the plots of a couple of guards, Bigthana and Teresh to assassinate Xerxes. Mordekhai informs Esther of the plot, and she tells Xerxes, averting his death. The two guards are hanged as a result, and a record made of the whole episode.

Est.3.1-15 A man named Haman is honoured by the king, and enjoys the obeisance of all the courtiers, except for Mordekhai, who will not bow and worship a man. This refusal to follow protocol leads Haman to plot the eradication not only of Mordekhai, but his whole people in the empire. After all, they are perverting the culture of the Persians.

Haman now engages in divination using a device called a *pur* (a Persian word, meaning a broken piece, possibly of bone or pottery, which was used to tell fortunes.) This gives a date, the twelfth of Adar, in the Hebrew calendar, when the Jews are to be liquidated throughout the empire. Haman applies for the King's signet on his decree to destroy this troublesome people, offering money for the king's favour, and Xerxes, amazingly, complies, believing Haman's advice, although he refuses the cash.

The edict goes out for the genocide of the Jews, and the appropriation of their property by the people. While Haman and the King are relaxing, the capital is appalled at what is being permitted.

Est.4.1 - 17 Mordekhai, hearing of the bloody edict, goes into mourning, wearing sackcloth. When Esther hears of his grief, she wants to help and know what is the matter. Mordekhai shows Esther the decree, and tells her to go and beg for the king's mercy.

But Esther may not come into the King's presence without being called. And if the king does not extend his sceptre as a sign of pardon for the interruption, it is off to the executioner with the intruder.

However, Mordekhai points out that Esther is doomed either way, because she will not escape the slaughter, if it is found out that she is a Jewess. And perhaps, says Mordekhai, she has received her royal position for such a moment as this?

Esther bravely agrees to take her life in her hands and to go to the king. She asks for support by fasting from her people, and prepares to go uncalled for to Xerxes.

Est.5.1-14 Esther goes in her royal robes to the King's presence chamber, and waits for her fate to be sealed. But she is shown again the freewill favour of the King (Heb *חן* *chen*) who holds his sceptre towards her and listens to her enquiry.

Esther does not begin to accuse or to demand, rather she employs her femininity and charm to engage Xerxes by inviting him and Haman to a banquet, something we know Xerxes is partial to. They agree, and as Haman goes out, high as a kite, he comes across the unbending Mordekhai, and is enraged by him. He goes home, to boast of his honour by Queen Esther, but vindictively orders a towering gallows to be built on which to hang Mordekhai on the day of genocide.

Day 277

Esther's Bold Action Rescues the Jews

Esther 6.1 – 10.3

Est.6.1-14 That night, Xerxes has trouble sleeping, so he calls in his servants to read him the royal chronicle of his exploits as king, and hears the record of Mordekhai's intervention, and realises that he has not rewarded him for saving his life from the would-be assassins.

In an ironic twist, Haman is called in and consulted about what kind of honour should be shown to a man whom the king honours. Haman immediately jumps to the conclusion that the king means him, and so he dreams up a ceremony of ennoblement which he himself would like to experience, not realising that the honour is for his enemy, Mordekhai! The king then orders Haman to fulfil his wishes, but to honour Mordekhai the Jew, not Haman.

When his family and friends hear what has happened, they point out that Mordekhai is Jewish; perhaps they know the stories of old of Daniel and the three friends, and remember the decrees of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar praising the God of heaven, because they warn Haman that nothing positive will come of his harassment of Mordekhai the Jew. At this point, Haman is called to Esther's banquet.

Est.7.1-10 Two days into the feast, which Esther is hosting, when the wine is flowing, Xerxes' curiosity gets to him and he wants to know what Esther want from him. He repeats his promise to her – even half the kingdom – and waits for her answer. Esther now reveals the full extent of the malice being targeted toward her and her people, and the king is insensed. Haman is petrified with fear, but Xerxes in his rage rushes out into the garden of the palace. Haman knows the game is up, and while Xerxes is contemplating his next action, Haman throws himself upon Esther's mercy – quite literally, because when the King returns a moment later from the garden, he sees Haman spread-eagled over the Queen on her couch. Fired by wine, Xerxes is incandescent with wrath, accusing Haman of molesting Esther. The guards seize Haman, and gag and hood him to prevent further outrage. Seeing the King's intention to deal quickly with Haman, and perhaps to assuage this temper he witnesses, a eunuch, Harbona, recommends making use of the gallows standing outside Haman's house, prepared for Mordekhai, the king's rescuer. The king commands Haman's hanging, and the anger is quenched.

Est.8.1-17 Haman's estates are forfeit to Esther, and Mordekhai is promoted to Haman's position. Esther then appeals for the king to annul the genocide edict, and Xerxes allows instead the Jews to arm themselves and to repel any attackers who would seek to harm them, on the day following that picked by Haman's lot.

There is celebration and rejoicing over this turn-around in the capital Susa, and among the Jews in the empire.

Est.9.1 – 17 In a complete turn of events, the Jews now have royal authority and local backing to root out their enemies and destroy them. The sons of Haman are hanged, and five hundred anti-Jewish agitators are liquidated. Throughout the empire, seventy-five thousand enemies are killed, and as Esther asks for a second day of retribution, the Jews are allowed to continue the removal of their detractors.

Est.9.18 – 32 On the fifteenth day of Adar, the Jews celebrated and feasted their deliverance and victory over their enemies. Mordekhai enjoins upon the Jews an annual commemoration of the event, on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar, with sending of presents to each other, which has developed into the modern Jewish feast of *Purim*. Esther writes the letters, which Mordekhai has sent to all the Persian provinces.

In modern times, *Purim* is one of the most joyful and riotous feasts of the Jewish calendar. The story of Esther is read in synagogues, and children are particularly involved. In a kind of pantomime atmosphere, every time the name of Haman is mentioned in the reading, there is a storm of rattles and boos and noise, as the memory of the deliverance is rehearsed. Presents are sent to friends and neighbours, and much alcohol flows, and gifts are made to the poor. In Jerusalem, Purim is celebrated on one day only, as it was in Susa – the so-called *Shushan Purim*.

Est.10.1-3 Like Joseph and Daniel before him, Mordekhai rises to be prime minister of a foreign nation, ensuring the survival of his people. Once again, a Jew is the vehicle of good government and blessing to an empire not his own land. The promises of Jer.29 are coming to pass.

Day 278

Malachi – my Messenger

Malachi 1.1 - 4.6

There is little known of the prophet Malachi, other than his name (Heb מְלֶאכִי) which means 'my messenger'. In the Christian Old Testament, he is placed as the last of prophets, prefacing the coming of the One True Messenger, the Lord Jesus Christ. His message is certainly pointing forward both to a coming messenger of God and to the apocalyptic 'day of the Lord.' It seems likely that his message comes at the time when the people of Judah are returning from exile, and finding their feet again in the land, after the establishment of the second Temple. They are not yet practising their faith as they should be, and this is a provocation to the Lord.

The evidence of marriage with foreigners seems to place this in the period of the return to Israel.

Mal.1.1 – 5 There is a word for the people of Edom, who have thought to have rid themselves of the neighbouring Jews. There is no possibility of Edom inheriting the promise.

Mal.1.6 – 14 There is an issue about the priests bringing imperfect sacrifices to the altar, not giving of the best. The Lord will not accept such offerings.

Mal.2.1-9 The priests have violated the Levitical covenant by their action, not honouring the Lord's name. The priest should be an example, as the messenger of the Lord, but humiliation has followed their disrespect.

Mal.2.10- 16 Marriages with unbelievers and divorces from those to whom covenant has been given are causing the Lord, their one Father to be separated from them. There is a call, then to faithfulness.

Mal.2.17 – 3.4 Because of the ongoing laxness of the Lord's people, the Messenger of the Lord Himself will come, the messenger of the covenant to bring judgement and justice; but the event will be a purifying, and a purging of the people.

Mal.3.5 The Lord will remove all those involved in sorcery and faithlessness, as well as those who swindle the poor.

Mal.3.6-12 Furthermore, the people have been withholding their gifts from the Lord, not making provision for the storehouse. If they will respond in generosity to the Lord, the Lord will provide all they need.

Mal.3.13 – 4.3 People have been questioning the point of faith in God, and pulling away from the Lord. The evil rise, and the arrogant are praised.

Yet, as a result of the prophet's words, the people respond positively. They renew the covenant with the Lord, and receive a blessing from the Lord. A reminder of the coming day of the Lord, with judgement and fire accompanies this blessing.

Mal.4.4 – 6 With a call to return to the *Torah*, there is a promise of the return of Elijah, the great man of God. (John the Baptist is presaged here.) He will reconcile the generations, to avert the curse of God visiting the land.

Day 279

Ezra Leads the Second Return

Ezra 7.1 – 7; 7.11-28; 8.15-32; 7;8 – 10; 8.1-14, 33 -36

The story moves on to the period of the reign of Artaxerxes, who came to the throne of Persia in 465BC. It is possible that Artaxerxes' permission to allow Judah to rebuild further is because it provides a buffer between him and troublesome Egypt. Whatever the reason, there is a record here of a letter, written in Aramaic, giving the royal approval to Ezra's work. Ezra leaves Babylon in 458BC at the head of a second tranche of returnees.

Ezra 7.1 – 7 Ezra (Heb עֶזְרָא) is given his full pedigree, stretching back to Aaron the first high priest. It has been noted already, in Ezra 2.63, that priests who could not prove their lineage were not allowed to serve unless a divine lot was taken. Ezra, however, is able to trace all his forebears back, sixteen generations.

He is presented as a scribe. (Heb סֹפֵר *sopher*, from a root meaning to inscribe or etch.) This means he would be one of those who copied and studied the law, a very honoured and painstaking task, since he would be handling the writing of the unspoken name and the *Torah* of Moses. He is given more equipment for the Temple, and for the long journey home.

7.11- 26 Artaxerxes' letter of permission is recorded in the Aramaic language. It uses the familiar Aramaic title of God as *Elah Shemayya*' (Aram. אֱלֹהֵי שְׁמַיָּא), used by previous monarchs to refer to the Lord. The expedition has royal permission to go, with the grant given from the treasury, as well as money given by other Jews in exile, to first of all make sacrifice, as a sign of the good will of the king of Persia towards the 'God of heaven' and then to use the balance to help in the work of the temple. The king is particularly anxious to avoid the anger of Ezra's God, and provides him with abundant supplies to enable him to ensure the correct rites are carried out.

Ezra is also to establish a system of governance in the province of Trans-Euphrates, in which Judah is found. The law of the Lord will become the law of the land, and there is a state penalty attached to any who will not follow *Torah*, an explicit example from the Old Testament of the state endorsing the practice of the law of Moses. It is worth bearing this mind as the Law is put into place by Ezra.

Ezra 7.27 – 28 Reverting to the Hebrew language, Ezra gives thanks to the Lord for this favour shown to them.

8.15 – 20 The expedition of returnees assembles at the Ahava Canal, but Ezra discovers there are no Levites who are needed to take charge of the sacred vessels for the temple use on the journey. He sends messengers to Casiphia, a Babylonian city, to bring priests, and they come back with a couple of hundred Levites and temple servants who will be able to safely convey the objects back to Jerusalem. Ezra is concerned for the ritual purity of all that is done.

8. 21-23 They pray and fast before setting out, seeking a safe passage. Ezra has told the King that God will protect them on the journey, so they are not protected with any cavalry or defensive force. This is something of a miracle, given the large amount of treasure and provisions they are carrying with them through open country!

8.24 – 30 In carrying the holy items, the Levites need to be sacred to the Lord as well. There is a great amount of gold and silver going with them as cargo and it will need to be handled with complete integrity.

8.31-32, 7.8-10; The expedition sets out from Babylon, and takes five months to make the journey, protected from all harassment, because of the Lord's hand upon them. This is because Ezra has faithfully followed the *Torah*.

8.1 – 14 Recording the names of those who have come with him, Ezra himself writes the list of those who have reached the homeland with him. There are more than eighteen hundred souls who arrive safely.

8.33-36 The treasures are safely delivered to the Temple, and all accounted for. The sacrifices are then made as requested, and letters and decrees from Artaxerxes are given to the local provincial governors, who assist the continuing work.