

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

3. PAST IMPERFECT

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Ezra 10:1-5

Our reading today from the Old Testament book of Ezra presents an interesting situation when the leadership of the Jewish people in Jerusalem enact a policy requiring that certain wives and children be separated from their families and sent away because they are “foreigners.”

I am currently preaching this seven-week sermon series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These two Old Testament books describe the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. In 597 BC, the Southern Kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian Empire. Many of the elite members of the community were carried back to Babylon to serve the king. Fifty-eight years later, the Persian Empire, led by King Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus immediately issued an edict allowing the Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city and the great temple which had been destroyed in the war. Chapters 1-6 of Ezra tell of the first wave of returnees and how they, despite obstacles and opposition, successfully rebuilt the temple and re-established communal worship of the Lord.

In chapter 7, we are finally introduced to the person of Ezra. Approximately fifty years have passed since the first group of exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Ezra is a Jew living in Babylon. His can trace his genealogy back to the great priest Aaron. By birth, this places Ezra in the priestly class, but by choice he is a scribe. As a scribe, Ezra served an important function in ancient society. Not only could he read and write, but he would have been a specialist in a certain area. His specialty was in the law of Moses—the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Together these are known as the Torah. As a scribe, Ezra worked with the government as a record keeper and administrator.

About fifty years after the first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem, King Artaxerxes of Persia appoints Ezra to lead a second group back to Judah in order to bring him a progress report. Ezra is also tasked with conveying gold and silver from the king to the city.

Ezra recruits a large company of Jews to accompany him. When all are gathered, he takes a census and discovers that of the twelve tribes of Israel, all the tribes are represented except for the Levites. Ezra convinces members of the tribe of Levy to join them thus creating his own mini-Israel for the journey. They begin the

journey by proclaiming a fast and praying to God for safe travel. Ezra then calls together twelve priests and he divides the gold and silver equally among them for safe keeping for the journey.

The entire caravan completes the trip safely without incident or ambush. And if you are curious, the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem is about 900 miles and in those days would take about five months of travel. It was not an insignificant undertaking.

The party arrives in Jerusalem. They deliver the gold and silver to the temple priests (it was all accounted for). They offer burnt offerings to the Lord. And they deliver all the official correspondence from the king's court to the governors and administrators in the province.

Once all the official business had been dealt with, some of the Jewish leaders approach Ezra to inform him that some of the returned exiles (and these would have been the descendants from the first wave of returnees) had taken wives from among the local people—the people of the land.

As you will recall from last week, 125 years before the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. The Assyrians removed many of the Israelites and took them to other lands and then imported foreigners from various locations to replenish the population. These foreigners brought with them their own gods and customs. However, under pressure from the locals, they agreed to worship the Lord, the God of Israel, but they also continued to worship their native gods. These are “the people of the land” who live in and around Jerusalem. The Jews look down upon them as impure because of their mixed worship of gods. And now Ezra learns that the Jews—even among the priests and leadership—have been marrying into these local families and having children. As the leaders tell Ezra, *Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.* This is not a case of a couple of people at the fringes of society getting involved with the local women; these are the leadership—the core of the people—who have set the example and are, in the opinion of some, polluting the *holy seed* of the Lord. Then, rather like in the story of Job, Ezra tears his clothing, pulls hair from his head and beard, and sits down in the dirt in grief. The people gather around him waiting. When evening arrives, Ezra gets up and then falls to his knees praying to God. He confesses that he is ashamed and embarrassed to even look toward God. The people, he says, are buried in their sin and guilt. They have sinned before and were nearly destroyed, but God saved a remnant of the people and salvaged the city and the temple, and now they are about to do it all again. Ezra fears that this time God will be so angry that God will destroy them without leaving any remnant or any survivors. Marrying the people of the land may eradicate the Jews forever.

Finally, one of the men of the people approaches Ezra and says, *We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land,*

but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children. The man tells Ezra that if Ezra will lead the way that he will have the support of the people. So Ezra stands up and makes them swear that they will obey him and they do.

Ezra then makes a proclamation that all the returned exiles must gather in three days in Jerusalem. Anyone who does not show up will lose their property and be evicted from *the congregation of the exiles*. The people gather as ordered but it is December and that is a rainy month in Jerusalem. The people gather and wait in a heavy downpour. Ezra stands before them and tells them, *You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increase the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord...and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.* The people agree. Ezra wants them to take action immediately but the people argue that 1) it is raining and they are soaked to the skin, and 2) this is a complex matter that will take time to work out. As a compromise, a commission is appointed to oversee the great separation.¹

The book of Ezra then concludes with a list. This list is the report of the commission. The list is the names of the 110 men who were found to have married women deemed to be “foreign.” The book concludes with this note, *All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children.*

If you are appalled by this story, that is okay. You should be. This is an indefensible story—110 women, plus their children, exiled and cast out of their homes and community. These are innocent people who are being punished. The women had done nothing wrong except to marry Jewish men. The children’s only crime was to be born. And for this they are exiled.

The question I put before you is this: Why then is this story even included in our scripture? What purpose does it serve?

I surveyed a number of contemporary sermons that address this passage and all of the ones I read argue that the banishment of the women is an example of faithful repentance—admittedly extreme—but repentance, an attempt to make things right with God. The people had sinned and action was demanded. One preacher referred to the mixed marriages as being “cultural corruption.” Several times the word cancer was used, specifically that these marriages were a “spiritual cancer.” In these sermons I discovered incredible feats of contortion as these preachers attempt to justify the actions of Ezra’s people. One suggested that these men and women were weren’t actually married but just living together. As if that made it okay. Many point out that 110 men represented only one-half of one percent of the Jewish population, an “inconsequential” number. As if that made it okay. Other preachers point out that the book of Deuteronomy specifically forbids Jews from marrying other peoples. That is correct. However, there is no prescription for what to do in the case of such a marriage. Nowhere does scripture call for divorce in this matter. Others claim that the women were cared for, that they were adequately provided for

when they were let go, or that they simply returned to their pagan families of origin. Neither of these claims is supported by scripture. In the end, I simply cannot accept that what Ezra demands is a model of Godly behavior.

Therefore, I am going to suggest a different way to approach this story of the exile of the foreign wives. The book of Ezra appears to have been written about 100 to 200 years following the events it describes. I believe this story is included so that we do not forget the past. Including the story is a form of reconciliation—of confessing the past, admitting the past, and attempting to learn from the past.

Was Ezra a bad person? No. I believe that he was a good, God-fearing person who wanted to do what was right in the eyes of God. However, when faced with this explosive situation, he allowed his fear to control him. When the man in Jerusalem offered his remedy, Ezra accepted in fear. His logic was that if the people have sinned because they married pagan wives then the solution must be to get rid of the wives. That will make us right with God. And he was wrong. I cannot believe that God would want families to be separated and women and children placed in peril. The Torah, of which Ezra was an expert, is clear in its call for the just and loving treatment of strangers. The prophets emphasize the need for justice and love toward neighbor. The prophet Jeremiah calls for justice and love toward “the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jer. 7:6).

In every nation across the world, there are stories and events that the people of that nation would rather forget, that they would rather just sweep under the rug: apartheid, the Holocaust, slavery, genocide. But we ignore these at our peril. If we choose, we can learn from our past, even from the ugliest of times. We can learn that what may seem at the time like a justifiable idea may in fact be reprehensible. Instead of ignoring these moments we should embrace them and learn from them.

I believe that the person who brings us the book of Ezra successfully lifts up the great accomplishments of those who returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and reignited the worship of the Lord. These are divine moments where God’s hand is at play. Ezra was a specialist in God’s law, but he blew it here. He let his fear get the best of him. In the name of God, he called for actions that completely ignore God’s love and mercy.

The man who brought the idea of sending the wives away told Ezra that *even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this*. And he was right. There was hope. There is always hope. Hope comes from God. There was a God-centered solution to the situation but what Ezra chose was not that solution.

Let this story be for us a reminder that God’s hope is always present. It is always there. It may not be easy to recognize. It may be hidden by our fear and anxiety. But it is there. And for this we can be thankful.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to Prof. Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos and her insightful commentary “Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.”