

Ezra 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 10. While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel. For the people wept bitterly, and Shekhaniah the son of Jehiel of the sons of Elam addressed Ezra. 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. Therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my Lord, and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the law.

Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you. Be strong and do it. Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Johanan, the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles. And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem, and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders, all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles. Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth day of the month, and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increase the guilt of Israel. Now then, make confession to the

Lord the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the foreign wives. Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, It is so, we must do as you have said. But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain. We cannot stand in the open, nor is this a task for one day or for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us. Only Jonathan the son of Asahel, and Jazir the son of Tikva, opposed this, and Meshulam and Shabbathai the Levite supported them. Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers' houses, according to their fathers' houses, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter, and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women. Now there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women, Maaseah, Eliezer, Jareb, and Gedaliah, some of the sons of Jeshua the son of Josedach, and his brothers. They pledged themselves to put away their wives, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt. Of the sons of Imah, Hanani, and Zebediah. Of the sons of Haram, Maaseah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uzziyah. Of the sons of Pasha, Elioenai, Maaseah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jehozabad, and Elisa. Of the Levites, Jehozabad, Shimei, Kaliah, that is Kalita. Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. Of the singers, Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers, Shalem, Telum, and Uri. And of Israel, the sons of Parosh, Ramiah, Isaiah, Malkijah, Midjamin, Eliezer, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. Of the sons of Elam, Mataniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. Of the sons of Zatu, Elioenai, Eliashib, Mataniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. Of the sons of Bibai were Johanan, Hananiah, Zabai, and Athali. Of the sons of Benai were Meshulam, Malak, Adiah, Jashab, Sheol, and Jeremoth. Of the sons of Pahath-Moab, Adner,

Kielal, Benaiah, Maaseah, Mataniah, Bezalel, Binuai, and Manasseh. Of the sons of Harim, Eliezer, Ishidra, Malkijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Malak, and Shemoriah. Of the sons of Hashem, Mataniah, Matata, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremiah, Manasseh, and Shimei. Of the sons of Benai, Maadi, Amram, Euel, Benaiah, Badiah, Kaliuhai, Benaiah, Meremoth, Eliashib, Mataniah, Mataniah, Jeasu. Of the sons of Benuai, Shimei, Shalamiah, Nathan, Adiah, Magnadibai, Shashai, Shariah, Azaral, Shalamiah, Shemoriah, Shalom, Amariah, and Joseph. Of the sons of Nebo, Jeiel, Matithiah, Zabad, Zabina, Jadai, Joel, and Benaiah. All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even born children.

[5 : 22] The book of Ezra ends with the crisis surrounding intermarriage. The crisis is not merely about observance of some detail of Mosaic legislation. It's a crisis in which the people's entire status as a holy seed is seen to be in jeopardy. If intermarriage is normalized, the returnees are in considerable danger of assimilating and disappearing into the surrounding pagan people groups, when they have been called to be a distinct people, the seed of a restored nation. In chapter 9, Ezra, shocked by the discovery of the situation, mourned publicly and turned to the Lord in prayer.

In chapter 10, Ezra and the other leaders act in response to the problem. In the previous chapter, the account was a first-person one, presumably taken directly from Ezra's personal memoirs. In this chapter, there is a shift to third-person narrative. Likely, as Andrew Steinman argues, the narrator is here paraphrasing material from Ezra's memoirs, as he seemingly does elsewhere. Ezra leads by example, and the people follow. Seeing Ezra's distraught response, the people join him in weeping bitterly over their sins. Speaking for the people, Shek and I address Ezra, seemingly treating him as the spokesperson and representative for the Lord. Shek and I's family were early returnees to Jerusalem, as we see in Ezra chapter 2, which perhaps is part of the explanation for the prominent role that he is playing among the people here. He acknowledges that they have broken the covenant in taking wives from the pagan people of the lands, and proposes a covenant with the Lord to put away the foreign wives and their children from among the people, in keeping with Ezra's own counsel as the faithful teacher of the law. It is not entirely clear the extent to which the proposed policy is one which Ezra himself had outlined, or whether Shek and I is advancing a policy of his own, in line with but going beyond Ezra's own teaching. It seems more likely to me that Shek and I and the community that he represents are the ones taking the initiative at this point, perhaps even presenting a more radical policy than might otherwise have been demanded. The sin of intermarriage is also mentioned in prophetic literature around this period, in Malachi chapter 2 verses 10 to 11 for instance. Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah has been faithless, an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign God. In considering the problem of intermarriage, one possible factor to weigh up is the possibility that men greatly outnumbered women among the returnees. If we look at the list of returnees in Ezra chapter 2 for instance, and compare the total numbers for the sons of various houses, and then the number of the whole assembly, there is a significant discrepancy. Some have accounted for this discrepancy by arguing that, while the separate numbers for the various houses number only the men, the total number given also includes the women. If this were the case, then the women were greatly outnumbered in the company, by about two and a half to one.

[8 : 33] However, this is quite a speculative interpretation, and very far from certain. In Malachi chapter 2, written around this period, the Jews are condemned, not merely for taking foreign wives, but for putting away Jewish wives in order to do so. This would weaken the argument for a significant dearth of women, precipitating the situation. Another intriguing possibility that Steinman highlights is that Shekheniah's own father might have been one of the guilty parties. Shekheniah is introduced to us as the son of one Jehiel of the sons of Elam. Later, in verse 26, we read that one of the parties guilty of taking a foreign wife was a Jehiel of the sons of Elam. Even more intriguing is the possibility that Shekheniah himself was the child of such a union, one of the persons whose place among the people would be challenged by the proposed policy. Steinman suggests that, if he were, Shekheniah would be evidenced that the putting away of the foreign wives and their children was not about radical ethnic purity, but about covenant faithfulness. Any child of a foreign wife who devoted himself to the Lord and became a full member of Israel would not be put away. The issue was religious syncretism and the loss of covenant distinctiveness, not a fixation on bloodlines.

When the same issue of intermarriage is mentioned in Nehemiah chapter 13, we see that the children of those who had intermarriage could barely even speak the language of Judah. Their mother tongue, their mother's tongues, were those of the surrounding pagan peoples. When they couldn't even speak the language of Judah, it seems clear that they weren't being trained in the way of the Lord.

Ezra, with the authority given to him by the Persian king Artaxerxes, enforced the policy that Shekheniah had proposed, making all of the leading priests, Levites, and the rest of the people take the oath to put away their foreign wives. Before sending out the proclamation concerning the covenant and its enforcement, Ezra fasted all night in one of the priestly chambers of the house of the Lord. Such an extraordinary fast evidenced how gravely Ezra took the situation. The other examples of such fasts in scripture tend to occur at times of national crisis and imminent judgment, such as the fast of the city of Nineveh in response to the message of Jonah. Ezra throws the weight of his office behind the covenant. He makes an official proclamation, summoning all of the returned exiles to Jerusalem, where the covenant stipulations would be put into effect. As a leader, Ezra is someone who leads chiefly by example. He is also a teacher of the law, who instructs the people, so that, in cases like this, the people themselves wish to conform themselves to things that he has taught them.

However, when the occasion demands, he isn't afraid to implement severe sanctions, in this instance the threat of banishment and forfeiture of property for those who do not submit to the covenant and its demands. Nevertheless, the weight of his approach doesn't fall on coercive measures, and it seems as though the people conform largely voluntarily to his proclamation. The effectiveness of his leadership is manifested in the fact that, although he has coercive measures and ample authority at his disposal, his rule generally does not seem to work by the power of force. The Judahites and the Benjaminites assemble within three days. It was around December, in the cold and rainy season.

Standing in the court before the temple, feeling keenly both the bitterness of the weather and the weight of their guilt, the people were shivering and trembling. There Ezra addressed the company, declaring to them their fault, exhorting them to amend their practice and to glorify and obey God, presenting the specific action in which submission to the Lord would be manifested, separation from the peoples of the land and the putting away of their foreign wives.

[12:21] However, given the inclement weather and the extensive process of dissolving the unlawful unions, the people requested that the process be carried out over a greater period of time by the elders and judges in various cities, rather than in a lengthy, centralised process, the people readily assent to the covenant, with only a small handful of dissenters. It is not obvious whether the dissenters object to the putting away of the foreign wives and their children, or whether their objection is merely to committing the process to the charge of local authorities. The returnees enforced the policy, the policy being administered by the heads of fathers' houses, appointed by Ezra himself, over a period of three months. The completion of the process on the first day of the first month, exactly a year to the day after Ezra had started out from Babylonia, might perhaps remind us of other auspicious events that occurred on the first day of the first month of a new year, about one year after the start of a journey or process. In the story of the flood, for instance, the waters are dried from the ground by the first day of the first month of the new year. Likewise, the tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first month of the new year. Perhaps more weight to these associations would be given by the recording of the fact that the tops of the mountains were first seen on the first day of the tenth month, the same day upon which the process of the elders' examination began.

If a connection with the flood and the Exodus narratives were intended, it might raise some interesting possibilities. For instance, it might invite us to consider parallels between the intermarriage that was part of the sin provoking the flood, the sons of God taking the daughters of men, and the sin of the returnees of Israel here.

The chapter ends with a list of men who had married foreign women. The list is comparatively a fairly short one. There are only approximately 110 men on it. Considering that nearly 30,000 men were among the numbered sons of various houses in chapter 2, and that depending on how we account for the discrepancy, the number of men might even have been nearer 50,000, 110 intermarrying men, only a fraction of a percent, hardly seems to be evidence of a widespread problem.

