

Ezra 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 July 2021

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[0 : 00] Ezra chapter 9. After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites, for they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost. As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me, while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, saying,

O my God, I am ashamed and blushed to lift my face to you. My God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings and our priests, have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. But now, for a brief moment, favour has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant, and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes, and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves, yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving, to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.

And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, The land that you are entering to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever. And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved, and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again, and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? O Lord, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this. The focus of the concluding two chapters of the book of Ezra, Exogamy,

Marrying Outside of Israel, is one that unsettles the sensibilities of many modern readers. It has provoked much discussion among commentators. The insertion of ill-fitting categories, such as ethnicity, race, and nationality, into our consideration of these passages, can easily produce confusion of what is actually at issue. Concern about intermarriage is hardly a theme peculiar to Ezra and Nehemiah. The same issue is a prominent one at the time of the Exodus, for instance. In Exodus chapter 34, verses 11 to 16, we see the Lord speaking to this issue, emphasizing the importance of resisting intermarriage with the pagan nations.

[3 : 55] Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their asherim, for you shall worship

no other guard. For the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous guard, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. And when they whore after their gods, and sacrifice their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods. The warning here is about covenants with surrounding pagan peoples, leading to idolatry and syncretism, followed by intermarriage, which will confirm the Israelites in such idolatrous worship. Deuteronomy chapter 7 verses 1 to 4 present a similar warning, but with intermarriage in this case proceeding and leading to idolatrous worship. When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons, or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. The story of Israel contained notable cautionary tales of intermarriage with pagans. The sin of Israel in Numbers chapter 25, when they yoked themselves to Baal or Peor as a result of their intermarriage with idolatrous Moabites, is one example.

More famously, the heart of King Solomon was led away from the Lord by his many foreign wives. On the other hand, there are examples of Israelites having positive relations with foreign wives. Ruth the Moabite is the most prominent example of a foreign woman who married into Israel. Rahab is another. Moses married a Midianite woman, Zipporah, and the Lord defended him from the complaints of Miriam and Aaron in Numbers chapter 12. The chapter opens with Ezra being informed of extensive intermarriage between the Israelites and the peoples of the lands. We ought to pay attention to the use of the phrase with their abominations and the inclusion of a typical list of nations, characteristic of that associated with the first entry of Israel into the land. The Hivites and Girgashites are not mentioned in Ezra, but the Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians are, groups that were mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 3 to 8. The concern here is not, as many have mistakenly understood it, one of mere ethnic purity, but is rather about preserving the holy status of the people themselves. They are the holy seed, replanted in the land after having been uprooted by the Lord's judgment. It is imperative that they be a people set apart to the Lord, lest they suffer a similar judgment once more, and indeed such a judgment would almost certainly be final. The danger of mixing the holy seed with the wild seed of the nations is one that is often highlighted in scripture. Indeed, one could understand the right of circumcision as representing a pruning of the seed of Israel. We might also see this principle of separation symbolically represented in the law of Leviticus chapter 19, verse 19. You shall keep my statutes, you shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind, you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made with two kinds of material. While the concern not to intermarry with the nations has a straightforward moral concern underlying it, the concern that the people not be drawn away from the Lord in their hearts and their worship, there are also principles of cultic holiness present here. Principles of cultic holiness concern being set apart and rendered distinct from others. Israel's principles of endogamy, of marrying within itself, were not merely about avoiding negative influences, but were also about jealously maintaining its own separateness and distinctiveness as a people, not because ethnic separateness as such is so to be protected, but because of the covenant. We should remember that many people of different ethnic backgrounds became part of Israel over time. Israel departed from Egypt with a great mixed multitude that assimilated into the people, for instance. However, whereas persons of other ethnic backgrounds and people groups could convert to the true worship of the Lord, become Israelites and members of a set apart people and then intermarry with Israelites, Israel itself was not to mix itself with the nations around it and allow itself to be assimilated into them, or have mixed marriages that encouraged religious syncretism, which compromised Israel's set-apart holy status. This would likely also have restricted intermarriage with Gentile God-fearers, who, while true worshippers of the Lord, would compromise the covenant status of any children born. In addition to faith in the Lord, becoming an Israelite would be necessary for free intermarriage. The importance of maintaining distinctiveness that came with the set-apart status of Israel was especially pronounced for priests, as we see in Leviticus chapter 21 verses 6 to 7.

Again, we need to be aware of treating these restrictions simply as if even stronger for the high priest. And he shall take a wife in her virginity, a widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute. These he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people, that he may not profane his offspring among his people. For I am the Lord who sanctifies him.

[10:11] Again, we need to be aware of treating these restrictions simply as if moral ones. There is nothing sinful or compromised about marrying a widow, for instance. Indeed, elsewhere scripture encourages widows to remarry. The point is rather that the high priest needs to be set apart, and a virgin of his own people and tribe was the sort of wife that he would need to maintain the optimal separateness and integrity of the high priesthood. The issue of intermarriage in Ezra chapter 9 is greatly exacerbated by the fact that the priests and the Levites have also been intermarrying. Not only was the separateness of the priesthood more imperative, but in intermarrying as they had, the priests and Levites were setting a bad example for everyone else.

We should also consider here the fate of the people of the former northern kingdom of Israel, who had been displaced among and assimilated into other nations. The Samaritan population contemporary with Ezra, for instance, was one that resulted from intermarriage and religious syncretism. Few things were more important than that the returnees not fall into a similar condition. We should also appreciate the way that the holiness of the entire people of Israel is more pronounced here. All, not merely the priests, are a holy people and must jealously guard that status. The people are here described as the holy seed, language that is elsewhere only found in Isaiah chapter 6 verse 13. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. The hope of the people rests upon this holy seed. It is absolutely imperative that it not be corrupted, adulterated or compromised.

Intermarriage would always have held appeal when Israel was not the only group in the land, intermarrying with wealthy and powerful Canaanite neighbours and other peoples would be a means of increasing influence, status, wealth and security. In the early years of Israel's life in the land, for instance, when they were vulnerable and often surrounded by more powerful neighbours, intermarriage would be a shrewd means to establish greater security. For a king like Solomon, marriages would be ways of making alliances, treaties and alignments with wealthy and powerful families within the land and other nations around it. While desire for attractive women was part of what was occurring, it was far from the full picture. When he heard the news, Ezra was deeply shaken.

[12:38] The returnees were supposed to be the faithful seed from which a great people would be regrown, that they would so compromise their set-apartness, both their moral and religious holiness in avoidance of the iniquity of idolatry and paganism, but also their covenantal holiness as a distinct priestly people set apart from their neighbours, strikes at the very core of Ezra's hope for the people. He responds by dramatic acts of distress and mourning, expressing his horror at what he has discovered. After many hours of publicly expressing his distress, at the time of the evening sacrifice, he begins to pray. He expresses his own shame and embarrassment as he comes towards the Lord, recognising that he comes as a representative and member of a people that has utterly disgraced itself.

This is not just a matter of the current generation of Israelites, the returnees who have intermarried with the pagan peoples, but also their ancestors whose sins had led to them being in exile in the first place. At this point in history, after they have been put into exile, the Lord has shown great grace to them in giving them some measure of restoration. Ezra expresses this in verses 8 and 9, where, as Andrew Steinman notes, he expresses on four occasions the different gifts that God has given to them. God has given them a secure hold within his holy place. God has given them a little reviving in their slavery. God has given them some reviving, in verse 9, to set up his house, and then has also given them protection in Judea and Jerusalem. That the people would sin as they have done at this moment in time, in the face of such grace, and also to jeopardise such grace, is scandalous and appalling.

The Lord has not forsaken them. He has caused the kings of Persia to show mercy and grace to them. He has granted them hope. He has not destroyed them. That they would be prepared so to forsake him at this time is an expression of the most wicked ingratitude and faithlessness. Ezra expresses the sin that the people have committed. The Lord has instructed them through his

prophets, not least Moses himself, that they were given the promised land, in part on account of the impurity of the peoples, and also in a manner contingent upon their not confusing themselves with the peoples.

Their failure to observe this commandment, repeated on many occasions in scripture, threatens their very presence in the land. Just as the Lord seems to be granting them a foothold in the land once again, they seem to be prepared to throw it all away in their wickedness. Ezra's prayer, more than anything else, is an expression of his distress at the faithlessness of the people, in the face of the gracious goodness of God. In contrast to great prayers of intercession that we find elsewhere in scripture, he presents no arguments that the Lord should show mercy, no appeals to the Lord's purpose for his people, to the promises and commitments of the covenant, or to the Lord's name among the Gentiles. He merely declares the sin of the people, declares the justice of God, and places himself and the people before the Lord.

A question to consider. Where in the New Testament do we see the principle of the separateness of the people of God being applied to Christians? What can we learn from the example of Ezra and the people here?