

Ezra Seeks God's Law

Ezra 7: 1-26

February 13, 2022

The book of *Ezra*, together with *Nehemiah* (once attached to it), is a continuation of the work of the “Chronicler”, as the writer of *I* and *II Chronicles* is known. The author of these books seems to have been a temple functionary of some kind. Perhaps he was a priest, or perhaps a musician, given his special mentions of music and musicians in these books. There are traditions that the author is Ezra himself. There also is evidence that their composition may have been later. In the Jewish *Bible*, these books are in the third division of the *Bible*, called “The Writings.” By the time of Jesus “The Law” (the five Mosaic books) and “The Prophets” (most of the named prophet books, but also *Judges* and *Kings*) were considered scripture, and “closed.” That is, no additions were to be made to those parts of the scripture. But other books, such as these, *Esther*, *Psalms*, and even *Daniel*, and *Esdras* (also credited to Ezra) were considered authoritative to some extent. Later at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D., Jewish authorities accepted certain of these “Writings” as being scriptural, and to be included in the Jewish canon. The Jewish *Bible* has been closed since that time. That left some Writings out, for example *I* and *II Maccabees*, and the book *Esdras* mentioned earlier. These books were in the Jewish Greek *Bible*, the *Septuagint*, and hence were in the Christian “Old Testament” as well. They were cut for Protestants by Martin Luther, separated out as “The Apocrypha.”

I mention this, because the Chronicler has a particular way of viewing history. He sees it as it ought to have been. He takes as his material earlier sources, for example, from *Samuel* and from *Kings*, adding some details and leaving others out. For example, the account of the ark being brought to Jerusalem spans two chapters, 15-16, while in *II Samuel* it is much more abbreviated. Yet from *II Samuel* 11-12, the story of David and Bathsheba, *I Chronicles* takes 11:1 and then skips all the parts that are unflattering to David, and continues with 12:26-31. In modern words, we would say the Chronicler “whitewashed” David’s history, so he can present David as the righteous exemplar of what God’s ideal king was, and should, be. For the period of the monarchy, we have *Samuel* and *Kings* as a more reliable text for comparison. But for the post-exile situation, we have very little else, except what can be separated out as the writing of Nehemiah’s own hand, that has been included by the Chronicler. If the Chronicler is Ezra himself, the material we have in *Ezra-Nehemiah* may be more historically reliable than what we see in *Chronicles*.

Ezra 7:1 begins Ezra's own story. He was a scribe, a student of the Law, and may well have been a Persian official responsible for religious matters concerning the Jews. The exile had ended over a century earlier with Cyrus of Persia allowing Zerubbabel to lead the Babylonian exiles back to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the temple. Construction was stopped and restarted, with the temple finally completed during the time of Persian Emperor Darius. *Ezra* Chapters 1-6 recount this. The gap in years, *Ezra* 7:1 "After this ...," is reckoned as 117 years. In our scripture, we read that Emperor Artaxerxes II has empowered Ezra with authority over all of the Jews in "the province Beyond the River" (the territory beyond the Euphrates, roughly Syria and Palestine) and is given access to royal resources (within limits).

Ezra 7: After this, in the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, ² son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, ³ son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, ⁴ son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, ⁵ son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of the chief priest Aaron— ⁶ this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

⁷ Some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants also went up to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸ They came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him. ¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

¹¹ This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to the priest Ezra, the scribe, a scholar of the text of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: ... (skipping most of the letter)...

²³ Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, or wrath will come upon the realm of the king and his heirs. ²⁴ We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to impose tribute, custom, or toll on any of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God.

²⁵ “And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. ²⁶ All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment.”

When Ezra gets to Jerusalem, after administrative and ceremonial matters were attended to, in Chapter 9, we read:

9 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, 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. ² For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. 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.” ³ When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled.

What we don't see here is the account of Ezra reading the Law to the people. That is in *Nehemiah* 8, but may have preceded what we read in Ezra 9. In both here in *Ezra* and in *Nehemiah*, the solution sought is the same. Those men who have married foreign wives are to send them away, them and their children. The practices of the “People of the Land” were not to be allowed to contaminate true worship and adherence to the Law.

This seems harsh and unjust, especially to modern ears, when “diversity” and “equity” are being held up as the most important of virtues in our modern culture. For perspective on this, it's helpful to go back to *II Kings* 17 for what happened after Israel was destroyed, and the Northern kingdom tribes were carried off into exile. The summary in 17:41 reads: **⁴¹ So these nations worshiped the LORD, but also served their carved images; to this day their children and their children's children continue to do as their ancestors did.** These, then, are (in part) the Samaritans of Jesus's day. They certainly did not hold Jerusalem as

the proper place to worship God. The woman at the well told Jesus, in John 4:20 **“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”** The result of these mixed marriages is summarized in Nehemiah 13:23: **“²³ In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; ²⁴ and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples.** They, culturally and linguistically, are not Jews, as Nehemiah sees it.

Coming out of the Babylonian exile, the Jewish scribes and rabbis had compiled, edited, and made copies of The Law, pretty much as *Genesis* through *Deuteronomy* are today. It seems that Ezra was the one to bring that written Law to the returned exiles in Jerusalem. It hit with an impact similar to finding *Deuteronomy* in Josiah’s time. The people were confronted with just how badly things had gone off course from what God intended. Two centuries earlier, that had led to Josiah’s reform, without which Judaism may not have survived the exile. Ezra’s delivery of the Law in effect formed what would be the Judaism of Jesus’s time. Sins against the Law were not to be tolerated. The First Commandment, “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me ...” was to be kept absolutely, with no compromise, lest the LORD turn again against his people, the remnant of Judah. Foreign wives would turn the children to other ways, the ways of the heathen nations Ezra lists in Ezra 9:1.

There is an interesting point in what may seem to be a dry and boring genealogy in 7:1-5. This genealogy has too few generations, and doesn’t even match that given by the Chronicler, presumably the same author, in I Chr. 6:3-15, 50-53. The priest Seraiah who went into exile could hardly be Ezra’s father. But look at who Ezra does claim, one Phineas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron (Moses’s brother). That Phineas is the hero of the story in *Numbers* 25 where he kills an Israelite and the Midianite princess he had brought into his tent. A very, very similar situation to how Ezra sees the current crisis among the returned exiles. To his credit, Ezra does not apply the power granted him in the letter from Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:26). He uses persuasion. (See *Ezra* chapters 8 and 9, as well as *Nehemiah* 8 and 9.) It helped that he had the backing of the secular authority, Nehemiah, supporting him.

So, where is Justice in all of this? That’s our theme this quarter. Here’s the connection: those laws from *Deuteronomy* and *Exodus* that we have been studying

were compiled and edited into their final form by Ezra and his predecessors and colleagues in the exile. Now, Ezra has to face the reality of a social mess when he gets to Jerusalem. How do you apply concern for the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien, when faced with a real situation? The wives and their children sent away are now widows and orphans. The wives are now aliens. They are all people to be protected. Yet the Law also prohibits intermarriage, backed up by Phineas's story, and somewhat disregarding the fact that Moses himself married a Midianite woman. There really was a valid concern about Judaism being so compromised by pagan ideas and practices that it would lose its character, and the Jews would again turn away from God as in times past. Even from today's perspective, it's hard to see a "solution" that is fully satisfactory. Ezra and Nehemiah chose to emphasize and follow the literal Law concerning intermarriage, and that was that.

Later, Judaism admitted others, "proselytes," to the faith. They had to undergo a ritual that included "baptism," where the old self was washed away, and the person became new in the people of Israel and Judah, a Jew. In effect, this was the path that Ruth followed, when she declared to Naomi, **"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God"** (*Ruth* 1:16). She ceased to be, and worship like, a Moabite. Many gentiles who admired Judaism, and worshiped God, would or could not bring themselves to undergo this rite, and become Jews. They remained "God fearers." It was they who so eagerly embraced the gospel during Paul's missionary journeys, and in response to other evangelists of the early Church. We are the inheritors of those who have learned that God loves and calls to all of us to be His children, and to follow His way.

Justice issues are complicated and nuanced in the real world, as opposed to what various ethical theories may suppose. Ideals of "Equity" and "Justice" as articulated in the scriptures focus on what men do. In Jesus's great "sheep and the goats" parable of the Final Judgment (*Matthew* 25:31 ff.), it is what people do, not the results they achieve, that matters. Even so, Jesus expressed God's mercy to the penitent thief on the cross (*Luke* 23:43). We all live by grace. And in Hope.

Prayer: Lord God, we thank you for leaders who teach others your way. Help us to be obedient to your law and keep your word, and to confront fear and prejudice within ourselves and within our community. Like Ezra, may we be ready to be sent by you where we are needed. Amen.