

## Ezra and the Law

April 11, 2021

Ezra 10:1-12

Our lesson writer classifies Ezra as a “Prophet of Restoration.” It is unusual to consider Ezra a prophet. The *Book of Ezra* was at first was one book with the present contents of *Nehemiah*, and was a continuation of the massive work beginning with *Chronicles*. Some early manuscripts even included later chapters of *Chronicles* in *Ezdras*, the *Book of Ezra*. The writer of all of this material may well have been Ezra. Chapters 8 and 9 are written in first person, as if by Ezra himself. Scholars refer to the author of I *Chronicles* through *Nehemiah* as “The Chronicler.” These books were not considered “scripture” during the time of Jesus. They were likely written somewhere around 400 B.C., after the canonical books of Prophecy had been closed. In 90 A.D. at the Council of Jamnia, Jewish authorities chose some books of “The Writings” to be included in the Jewish Scripture, including these. Other writings, what is now known as the “Old Testament Apocrypha,” were left out. But they still are in the Catholic Bible because they were in the *Septuagint*, the Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures, used by the early Church.

The Chronicler had a particular point of view that pervades his writings. He seeks to portray the history of Israel as it ought to have been. As such, he takes some liberties in telling the story, differences that can be seen between the canonical books of *Samuel* and *Kings* and the writings in *Chronicles*. It is apparent that the Chronicler is not writing with the approach a modern historian would use. He has a purpose of inspiring the Jews of his day to live up to his ideals of Judaism. For the *Book of Ezra*, we have very little contemporary of writings to use for comparison, in the way that *Samuel* and *Kings* can be used to understand what we read in *Chronicles*. There is material in *Nehemiah* that comes from Nehemiah himself, and has been found to accord extremely well with other historical sources of that era. The same cannot be said for *Ezra*. Perhaps in later editing, or perhaps by the Chronicler himself, some re-ordering of material seems to have occurred. The sequence through Ezra-Nehemiah is not consistently forward. In particular, Chapters 8-10 in *Nehemiah* seem to have originally been immediately after Ezra Chapter 10, our scripture reading.

From the evidence available, the return from Exile can best be understood as three distinct “waves” of exiles from Babylon and other parts of the Persian empire.

The first of those was a party led by Zerubbabel, who was a grandson of the last surviving king of Judah, Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin escaped being killed because he was carried off to Babylon in 597 B.C., before the final fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. That preserved the “House of David” to the return from exile, and ultimately to Jesus. Those first to return began rebuilding the temple in 536 B.C. It was completed 20 years later. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were active during this period.

A second return led by Nehemiah dates to 445 B.C. He is known for the successful effort to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. He also instituted reforms. He acted to counter corruption within the Jewish nobility, especially lending practices that were impoverishing those in need. We will look at Nehemiah more next week.

The third wave is associated with Ezra, perhaps 40 years later, about 400 B.C. About the same time the last prophet in the Old testament, Malachi, was active. The Book of Nehemiah portrays Ezra and Nehemiah as contemporaries in Chapters 8 and following, but there are reasons to think Nehemiah was earlier. For example, officials active in Ezra’s time are sons of officials of Nehemiah’s time. Ezra’s contribution is the reading of the Law, reinstatement of Jewish festivals, and a purification of the Jewish religion and people.

The particular passage chosen by our lesson writer focuses on Ezra’s priestly role as repenting on behalf of the Jews in and around Jerusalem. This follows Ezra’s denunciation of “mixed marriages” in Chapter 9, immediately after he and his party get to Jerusalem. Indeed, even many of the Priests and Levites, those responsible for the purity of Jewish religion and its practice, have married foreign women from “the peoples of the land,” which would include the Samaritans (See 2 Kings Chapter 17) and various others. Ezra gives a list in 9:1, but that list reflects more the time of Joshua and Judges than the Persian period. Ammonites and Moabites, from this list, were still around, and causing problems. They were the descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot. Hittites, Amorites, and Jebusites were not then still in Palestine.

The focus of Ezra’s concern is that Jews have married daughters of the peoples of the land. He sees this as a source of corruption and a violation of the Covenant. During Israel’s history, this had indeed been a very real issue. For an example we saw recently, King Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the King of Sidon. She brought with her the worship of the pagan gods, and instituted that

worship in Israel. The earliest example is Numbers 25, where **“Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the LORD’s anger was kindled against Israel.”** (Numbers 25:3) A plague came upon the Israelites. The problem was exemplified by Zimri of the tribe of Simeon taking Cozbi, a Midianite princess, into his tent. Both were slain in righteous anger by Phineas son of Eleazar, which seemed to stop the plague. Ezra’s zeal didn’t go quite that far, but he demanded that the Jews “put away” (divorce) their foreign wives and children born of those wives.

But did the law really prohibit marriage to foreign women? (I found very little said by Ezra except in general about cases of Jewish daughters marrying foreign men.) Consider, Moses’s own wife was the daughter of the Priest of Midian. Rahab of Jericho married Salmon, Boaz’s father, and Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite widow of one of Naomi’s sons. They are in the lineage of David, and subsequently Jesus. Deuteronomy 21:10-14 even prescribes a process for marrying a foreign woman taken captive. Interestingly, in Deuteronomy 23:3-8 tenth generation Moabites are excluded from the assembly of Israelites, though at the third generation descendants of Egyptians and Edomites are allowed.

In our day and time we would find fault with Ezra for prohibiting “mixed marriages,” especially at terminating marriages and sending away children as Ezra requires. Ezra did have a valid concern. Israel had been carried away captive primarily over the sin of idolatry. As he saw it, and as he read it in the history of Israel, this idolatry was due to the joining together of the Israelites with their Canaanite neighbors who practiced these pagan religions, and taught their children to do the same. The one thing of greatest importance for the Jews was the renunciation of idolatry. They must not again worship any god but The LORD, as required by the First Commandment. That was the foundational law of the covenant. Survival of the remnant of Israel depended on it.

Our sense of identity is different from the way things were seen then. Ezra viewed the world through a Jewish post-exile cultural perspective. The Torah had recently been edited into a fixed canonical form that could be copied and taken throughout the Jewish world. The writings of the Prophets were similarly becoming a sacred scripture. Compromises of that Law, especially, could not be tolerated lest the Lord bring another catastrophe on the Jews. Strict obedience to the law was needed. Specifically pagan practices had to be stamped out.

We would tend to see the prohibition on marrying someone “of the peoples of the land” as an act of ethnic or similarly reprehensible prejudice. But, culture matters. Suppose a son or daughter wanted to marry someone who believed in the child sacrifice, one of the pagan customs. “Absolutely not!” would be our response. The Canaanite wife might be willing to give up that part of her pagan worship, but would she teach her children something else that was offensive? The pagan perspective that sees gods as powers to be manipulated could easily lead to other forms of sin against God. I think this is the way Ezra saw the peoples of the land – they sought cultural assimilation of the Jews and their ultimate destruction, as during the time of the kings.

So, we ask ourselves, what about Ruth? What about those other exceptions? This is where there is a difference. Remember what Ruth told Naomi: **“Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”** (Ruth 16b) Ruth, a Moabite, abandoned her pagan ways to join the Israelite family of Naomi. Rahab told the Israelite spies in Jericho, **“The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.”** (Joshua 2:11b) By this confession she too willingly abandoned her pagan ways to join the company of Israel. That would apply perhaps to the young women captured in war, who would likewise have been removed from their pagan context. Indeed, the passage in Deuteronomy 21:12-12 provides, **“.. and so you bring her home to your house: she shall shave her head pare her nails, discard her captive’s garb, and shall remain in your house a full month, mourning for her father and mother: after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife.”** It is as if the woman is completely removed from her pagan past and re-initiated as an Israelite wife. How well that worked out, we can’t say. I don’t know of any specific cases in the Bible. Going into a marriage expecting to be able to change the other person is chancy.

In contrast, normally a marriage is a joining of two families in a union, a covenant, that makes the practices of the one part of the practices of the other. That was what worried Ezra. It was an entrance into the Jewish community of pagan practices and culture, the same practices that had brought destruction in the past. Ezra focuses on the wives and their children for a reason: women are important! It is they who teach the children. Raising and teaching the following generation is probably the most important and critical task facing each generation. Israelite daughters who married pagans might well be lost. But, they just might raise

children in the ways of God, and eventually find their way into the Jewish faith. At least if they weren't Ammonite or Moabite.

Early in the Christian era the apostle Paul faced similar issues of mixed marriages among his churches, most notably at Corinth. Paul lives in a world more like our own. Corinth, particularly, had a mixed population with background and religions from all over, and in addition, both slaves and free. Paul would actually prefer to simplify matters by not marrying! In *I Corinthians* 12-16 Paul gives advice to those in circumstances where the husband and wife are not both believers. Paul urges staying together, and hopes that the partner might come to believe. **“It is to peace that God has called you.”** (*I Corinthians* 7:15c)

That is more nuanced than Ezra, and reflects that the Gospel is offered to all, Gentile and Jew, slave and free, men and women. Where Ezra wanted to protect the purity of the Jewish faith with barriers of religious purity, the Christian message was spread freely and energetically. Yes, that created problems, as at Corinth. It also all but guaranteed that perversions and heresies would arise. The Church has struggled with such issues. But we ultimately rely on God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, to prevail against sin and death. As well, we can have faith that God's purpose can and will ultimately overcome the new forms of paganism and corruption that seem so powerful in our world today.

*Prayer: O God of faith and action, may we learn from the past about trust and rebuilding. Thank you for your servant Ezra, who delivered your message of truth. Amen.*

On this coming Sunday, April 11, I have the privilege and of leading the worship service. I'll be talking about Mary Magdalene, with the scripture drawn from John's gospel, 20:1-18. I found inspiration in our lesson about Mary of Magdala from February 14. I hope that, as many of you can, will come. I want to thank all of you for your prayers and support. Cindy and I feel uplifted by what you have all meant to us as we teach our class. Thank you.