

LESSON 38

Ezra 10:5-6

5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware. 6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

Upon hearing the words of Shecaniah, Ezra immediately rises from his knees. And he makes “the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel” take an oath that they would do according to the word that they had heard, and they did that.

Ezra then makes his way from one of the outer courts of the temple to the chamber of Johanan. This chamber would have been one of the many rooms of the temple complex.

Earlier we mentioned that some commentators argue that Ezra arrived **after** Nehemiah rather than before Nehemiah. Verse 6 is often quoted as their best evidence for that position.

Here is what we know:

- In 458 BC (if we maintain our current chronology), Ezra is said to have entered the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib (Ezra 10:6).
- In 445 BC, Eliashib is the high priest when Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 3:1, 20).
- Around 410 BC, according to the Elephantine papyri, someone named Johanan was high priest.

From this chronology it is argued that Ezra must have returned when Johanan was high priest (that is, after 410). But this argument is based on nothing but conjecture. The Biblical text simply states that Ezra made use of Johanan’s chamber - nothing more. The text does not say that Johanan was the High Priest.

Nehemiah 12:22 tells us that Johanan was the grandson of Eliashib. Those who think Ezra arrived after Nehemiah argue that the grandson of Eliashib could not have invited Ezra to use his chamber in

458 BC, but could have done so only much later. But that argument falls apart with the simple observation that Johanan was very common name, and particularly so once it had already been used in a family. That is, since we know that Eliashib had a grandson named Johanan, it is even more likely that Eliashib had a brother or a son named Johanan. In short, there is no need to adjust our timeline.

We don't know why Ezra went to this chamber. Perhaps he wanted to enlist the support of Jehohanan. It is also possible that he wanted to confer with one of the religious leaders before progressing with his plan.

And when Ezra leaves that chamber, we see that he remains very upset by the sin of the people. He doesn't eat or drink, but instead he mourns because of the sin of those who had strayed from God's word. Ezra took sin very seriously!

So where are we at the end of verse 6?

"At this point, Ezra has torn his garments, pulled out his hair and beard, sat down, fallen on his knees, stretched out his hands, prayed, made confession, wept, prostrated himself, taken an oath, and fasted. Ezra's behavior reveals not only his love for his people, but also his hatred for sin. It should be remembered that Ezra has not even personally committed the sin over which he is in such extreme anguish. May our response be the same when we view sin in our midst today."

Ezra 10:7-8

7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; 8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

In verse 7, a message is sent out commanding all men to appear in Jerusalem within three days for an investigation. Those who failed to do so would have their property confiscated and would be banned from the congregation.

From 7:25-26, we recall that Ezra had authority from the King to take such actions – and in fact Ezra had authority to take much more drastic actions than this. Ezra is restraining himself here! He had the full backing of the Persian government to do this, and to do much more if he wanted to do so.

The proclamation allowed the exiles three days to make their way to Jerusalem. Judah was a very small territory at this time, and Jerusalem could easily be reached within three days from any city in the region (but that three day period also included the time it took for the proclamation to reach them).

The Hebrew word translated “confiscated” or “forfeited” in verse 8 originally meant that the property would be destroyed (Joshua 6:21), but by this time it meant that the property would be delivered to the priests (Ezekiel 44:29).

Exclusion from the congregation meant that they would not be allowed in the temple and might even lose their citizenship. They would not be allowed to participate in the daily sacrifices, and they would not be able to call upon their fellow Jews for help. They would be regarded as foreigners by the Jews.

Ezra 10:9-11

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain. 10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. 11 Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

In verse 9, all the men from Judah and Benjamin gather in Jerusalem. As for Judah and Benjamin, we saw that same phrase back in 1:5, and it likely refers to a geographical area, although most of the Jews at this time were from those two Southern tribes.

The exiles gathered in the open square in front of the temple. This square could accommodate thousands of people and was probably the only place in the city large enough to hold this gathering. It should be remembered that much of the city still lay in ruins.

The 20th day of the 9th month was in midwinter, and we see in verse 9 that the people were trembling. In the Hebrew, “the great rain” indicates that these were heavy, torrential rains. At this time of the year, the temperature could have been in the 40’s, which along with the rain explains the trembling. But verse 9 tells us that they were also trembling because of the matter that was being

discussed.

“Even the weather seems to cast judgment on the people: as the people wait outside the temple, they are trembling, not just because of the gravity of the matter, but because of the heavy rain. If this is not intended as a direct sign of God’s displeasure, it is at least intended to intensify the seriousness of the situation: the Bible does not tend to report weather conditions idly.”

Clearly, the gathered men understood the significance of the occasion. Many of their lives were about to be forever changed. Many were going to lose their wives and their children. Perhaps some feared for their lives, knowing that Ezra had the authority from the King of Persia to put them to death.

The bad weather prevented a long speech, so Ezra gives a short and powerful speech – and it is amazing how much Ezra manages to say in such a short speech.

He says in verses 10-11:

“Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.”

The speech has four key elements.

- First, Ezra accused the exiles of being unfaithful to the Lord by marrying foreign women.
- Second, Ezra explained that their personal sin had implications for the whole group; it added to the guilt of the nation. The entire nation could be exiled as a result of the sins of a few.
- Third, Ezra called on the people to repent and confess their sin to God.
- Fourth, Ezra commanded the remnant to do the will of God, namely, to separate from foreigners, especially the foreign wives.

What more needed to be said? They had broken faith with God, and they needed to restore that broken relationship. Either they would do it, or they would not. There was no need for Ezra to repeat the same message 12 different ways in a longer speech.

And what was the key to restoring that broken relationship? Verse 11 tells us – separation. Separation

from the peoples of the land and separation from the foreign wives. And that is still God's message today for his people:

2 Corinthians 6:17-18 - Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

We cannot be right with God if we refuse to separate ourselves from that which is unclean. That was true then, and that is true now.

Here in Ezra 10 what that meant was that these men had to divorce their unlawful wives.

Ezra 10:12-17

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do. 13 But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed in this thing. 14 Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us. 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them. 16 And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. 17 And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.

In verses 12-13, the people agree about what needs to be done, but they have three reasons why it should not be done right now. First, there are too many people here. Second, it is raining. Third, there are too many cases to be decided.

But they also had a proposed solution for those problems, and we see that in verse 14. This shows us that they were not just trying to delay and avoid fixing the problem.

Their proposed solution was for the officials to organize things locally, and then for those affected to come to Jerusalem with their local leaders and judges. They understood that these were very delicate

matters, and they wanted things to be handled fairly. Ezra apparently agrees with the proposal because this is what they do in verses 16-17.

But in between verses 12-14 and verses 16-17, we have verse 15:

Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them.

What does that mean? The ESV translation is clearer:

Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.

What we have between the problem in verses 12-14 and the solution in verses 16-17 is the opposition in verse 15! And, believe me, there will always be a verse 15 between the problem and the solution!

Verse 15 has been called “one of the most difficult verses in the whole book of Ezra.” To what do “this” and “them” refer?

The most likely interpretation is that Asahel and Jahzeiah opposed the delay – they wanted to take immediate action. But it also possible that they opposed the drastic measures, perhaps because they themselves had foreign wives. But if they were opposed to the divorces, one might expect a sharp rebuke from Ezra and the other leaders.

And what about Meshullam and Shabbethai? Which view did they support? Verse 29 might provide a clue in that Meshullam is listed among the offenders, but that was a very common name – there are perhaps as many as 10 different Meshullam’s in Ezra and Nehemiah! In short, all we can say for sure is that they were opposed to something – which is probably all we need to say.

The process begins on the first day of the tenth month and ends on the first day of the first month – which is about 75 days.

Ezra selected leaders from each family who were responsible for identifying those members of their families who had participated in the sin of intermarriage. The list of these leaders is not provided, which one commentary describes as a somewhat peculiar omission in a book noted for its fondness for lists.

These leaders and the guilty parties would travel to Jerusalem to have their situations investigated by the national leadership, which would then offer its decision.

Assuming that the list is complete, a total of 113 Jews had married foreign women. Given that it took 75 days, that means they dealt with fewer than two cases a day on average. Why so few?

First, they were complicated matters, and the people had been told to come to Jerusalem in an organized manner.

Second, some may have been found innocent, which means their cases might not have been listed in verses 18-44.

Third, it is possible that not all the cases were listed in verses 18-44, so they may have dealt with many more cases.

Were some of the women allowed to stay? Possibly. Perhaps some of them had or were willing to convert to Judaism.

Were some of the children allowed to stay? Possibly. Perhaps some were unwanted by the mothers or would have been in danger had they returned. (Remember these were racially mixed children being returned, in some cases, to a people who practiced child sacrifice.)

We aren't told whether some were allowed to stay, but we are told that these decisions were made through a slow, deliberative process. This was not a case where the women and children were just all shown the door and told to get out.

And, perhaps not surprisingly, the book of Ezra ends with a long list of difficult to pronounce names!

Ezra 10:18-43

18 And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah. 19 And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass. 20 And of the sons of Immer; Hanani, and Zebadiah. 21 And of the sons of Harim; Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and

Uzziah. 22 And of the sons of Pashur; Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasah. 23 Also of the Levites; Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah, (the same is Kelita,) Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers also; Eliashib: and of the porters; Shallum, and Telem, and Uri. 25 Moreover of Israel: of the sons of Parosh; Ramiah, and Jeziah, and Malchiah, and Miamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah. 26 And of the sons of Elam; Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Eliah. 27 And of the sons of Zattu; Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and Zabad, and Aziza. 28 Of the sons also of Bebai; Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. 29 And of the sons of Bani; Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, and Ramoth. 30 And of the sons of Pahathmoab; Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, and Binnui, and Manasseh. 31 And of the sons of Harim; Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchiah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. 33 Of the sons of Hashum; Mattenai, Mattathah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. 34 Of the sons of Bani; Maadai, Amram, and Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Chelluh, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasau, 38 And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei, 39 And Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azareel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadau, and Joel, Benaiah.

The book of Ezra ends with what has been called a list of shame – a list of those who had married foreign wives in violation of the law of God. But it may also be a list of the repentant because it seems that most and perhaps all of these men sent their foreign wives and children away.

As usual, when we find a long list of names in the Bible, we should ask why we have this list. Why did Ezra give us all of the specific names? Was he trying to shame or embarrass these men?

One reason we have the specific names, I think, is the same reason we have seen before - this list is a reminder that these were real people! This was not some hypothetical problem that Ezra the scribe considered in his ivory tower. This was a real problem that involved real people.

There are 113 men on this list who were guilty of foreign marriages. For each of them, we also had the foreign wife and the children with the foreign wife. And, as we have seen, it is very likely that for many of these 113 men there was also a first wife and children with the first wife.

Jehiel in verse 26 is a good example. He was the father of Schechaniah from verse 2, which means that he had a first wife with children, and verse 26 tells us he also had a foreign wife.

Think of the heartache involved in the divorce from the wife of his youth, both on his wife and on his

children. And then think of the heartache on them when he rushes off to marry the unbelieving foreigner. And then think of the heartache when he is commanded to divorce her and send her and his children with her away forever. And then multiply that heartache by 113. And we should also add in the heartache of the parents of these men, noticing that Ezra gives us their family names in this list. These were real people, and this was real heartache. These names remind us of that fact. Sin creates heartache all around!

And I think there is another reason here as well - these names serve as a warning, both to these men and to others. This sin was serious - so serious that it threatened to derail God's plan of redemption. And I think that was one reason why Ezra named names here. He was not going to sweep this under the rug - even though most of these offenders were prominent men. It was important for everyone to see what had happened and who had done it. Perhaps this would keep these men from offending again, while encouraging others not to commit this sin in the first place.

As for the names themselves, we have already noted Jehiel in verse 26 and his connection with Shechaniah in verse 2. Other than that, the commentaries don't have much to say about the other names. I think the lesson of this list comes from the fact that we have the names rather than the specific names themselves (except for Jehiel).

The wording of verse 38 is a problem. The KJV has, "And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei." The ESV has, "Of the sons of Binnui: Shimei," which comes from a slight adjustment of the vowels. We don't know for sure which is correct, but the modern view favors the latter.

We can also learn something about the order of this list.

The list begins with a record of the religious leaders who were guilty of intermarriage. The roster includes 17 priests and 10 Levites, together making up almost one-fourth of the total.

The priests are listed first, showing that the sin reached even to the highest ranks of the spiritual leaders. In fact, the family of the high priest Jeshua begins the list. Clearly, there was no attempt by Ezra to suppress the guilt of his fellow priests.

“Where we might have expected some cover-up of priestly guilt, this catalog goes out of its way to give it prominence, with true biblical candor, by reversing the order followed in Chapter 2.”

The priests guilty of the sin of intermarriage made a pledge to put away their wives. The phrase “gave their hands” in verse 19 was a common way of confirming an agreement.

These priests also offered a ram as a guilt offering for their offense. And notice that the ram offering did not mean they could then keep their illegal wives!

The pledge and the guilt offering in verse 19 are mentioned only for the priests. If they were the only ones who made this offering, then it may have been because their transgression was worse due to their position. But a more likely explanation is that verse 19 was the example that all the rest also followed, but the description was simply not repeated over and over again in the text for each group.

The temple servants were not mentioned. Perhaps they were too numerous to list, which would also answer our earlier question about the small number of cases. Or perhaps this problem was one that affected only the higher social classes – those with money who could attract the attention of the foreign women.

After listing the priests and the Levites, verse 25 begins the list of those “of Israel.” Sometimes Israel is used in this book to refer to all the people (priests and Levites included), and sometimes (as here) it is used to refer to people other than the priests and the Levites. Four of the families mentioned here do not also occur in the list of earlier returnees found in Ezra 2.

There are no women included in this list. It is possible that no Jewish woman married a foreigner. However, the command of Nehemiah, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons” (Nehemiah 13:25), given less than twenty years later, indicates that the practice seems to have been at least known, if not common, in his day. It is more likely no such Jewish women are mentioned here because those women had already left the group to live with their foreign husbands.

Ezra 10:44

44 All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

Verse 44 is an unusual ending, and there may have been some corruption from the original text. Literally the verse reads: “and there are of them women, and they [masculine] appointed sons.”

The KJV and the ESV both have verse 44 say simply that these men were guilty of the sin in question, and that some of them also had children by their foreign wife.

The RSV goes a step further: “All these had married foreign women, and they put them away with

their children.” That is, the RSV translates the verse so that it says these all of these men did what had been proposed back in verse 3.

The text is difficult, and we can’t know for sure which view is correct.

But one thing we can say for sure about verse 44 is that it is definitely abrupt.

“The narrator seems to walk off stage with the last of the women and children, leaving the reader contemplating the significance of the final scene.”

But is verse 44 really the last word from Ezra? No. He will disappear from the written record for about 13 years, but we see Ezra again in Nehemiah 8 sometime after Nehemiah’s arrival in 445 BC – and we see Ezra, in this same city square, still reading the Law, still doing the Law, and still teaching the Law! If you are looking for an example of faithfulness, godliness, commitment, and integrity, you won’t do much better than Ezra.

But, sadly, Ezra’s reforms here did not last very long. Nehemiah 13:23-28 reveals that this same apostasy was present when Nehemiah returned from his trip to Persia around 430 BC, roughly 30 years after this time. Malachi would also preach against it.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are a single book, but our study of Ezra must end here (at least for now!).

What great themes have we seen in Ezra and Esther? (1) The Law (The Written Word), (2) The Temple (Proper Worship), (3) The Wall (Separation and Purity), (4) Reversal (God’s Plan of Redemption), (5) Restoration (back to the blueprint!), (6) The Remnant (which, today, is the church), and (7) God’s Providence.

Thank you!

E. Hall (2023-09-10)

#ezra-esther