

EZRA

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(An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books)

Ezra the Man

We do not learn anything about Ezra himself until the "Ezra Memoirs" begin in chapter 7 of his book. Here his genealogical credentials are presented in some detail in 7: 1b5. His priestly lineage is traced back through sixteen generations (including Zadok, priest in David's day) to Aaron, the high priest. This genealogy serves to show him genuinely qualified for the task at hand. (See chapter 8 under "The Genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1-9" on this function of genealogies.)

Ezra returned to Jerusalem from Babylonia, not Persia (7:6). He came with royal authorization to teach the law of the Jews and to take all necessary steps to reinstitute the sacrificial system (7:1 1-26). Besides being a priest, Ezra was also a scribe, "well versed" in there law of Moses (7:6). Furthermore, he had "devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and law in Israel" (7:10). An evaluative summary of Ezra calls him "the teacher, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and de- crees of the Lord for Israel" (7:11). Both the genealogy (which traces his roots to Aaron) and the comments about his grounding in the law of Moses show Ezra himself to be connected in important ways with the early history of Israel as a nation, a connection that is made in many other ways in the book as well (see below).

Ezra was a great figure in post biblical judaism, where he was placed on a par with Moses and credited —along with "the men of the Great Synagogue"—with the origins of the synagogue. However, most of these "facts," as well as the existence of a fixed institution known as "the Great Synagogue" and of a fixed synagogue service modeled after the read- ing of the law in Nehemiah 8:1-12, are matters of conjecture.⁶

Ezra's Reforms

In the book of Ezra, only one true reform is addressed—the problem of marriages to foreigners. Strictly speaking, then, we should speak of Ezra's "reform."—and not "reforms"—since his activities here are limited to one issue. However, in the book of Nehemiah, we see him involved in wider issues related to his commission as teacher of the law.

In Ezra 9, the jewish leaders approached Ezra with a report of the problem, that Israelites—both clergy and laity—had not refrained from marrying foreigners (v. 1). The basis for the leaders' concern seems to have been the Pentateuchal prohibitions against mixing with peoples of the land of Canaan (w. 1-2). Several passages strongly warn against mixing in any way with these peoples, and some even specifically refer to intermarriage: Exodus 34: 11-16 (see v. 16 on intermarriage) and Deuteronomy 7:1-4 (see v. 3 on intermarriage; cf. also Deut. 20:10-18). The concern in these passages is with pollution of Israel's faith and religion. A dramatic example of how faith was polluted by intermarriage can be seen in Solomon (I Kings 3:1; 11:1-8).⁶⁶

Sometimes we see that several biblical heroes did take foreign wives, with no apparent censure by God or the biblical writers. For example, Abraham took Hagar, an Egyptian (Gen. 16:3); Joseph married Asenath, an Egyptian (Gen. 41:45); Moses married Zipporah, a Midlanite (Ex. 2:21), and a Cushite woman (Num. 12:1); Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite (Ruth 4); David married Maacah, a Geshurite (2 Sam. 3:3). Some of these wives (e.g. , Ruth) may have been converts to Israel's faith, but not all were.

Here in Ezra, eight groups of peoples are mentioned: Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites (9:1). This list especially recalls two passages cited above (in connection with intermixing): Exodus 34:11 mentions the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites; Deuteronomy 7:1 mentions the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. This would seem to show the connections in the



author's mind between the present problem and these earlier prohibitions.

The concern in verse 2 is that the "holy race" (lit., "holy seed") has been polluted. This recalls phrases describing Israel as a "holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) and a "godly seed" (Mal. 2:15), and especially Isaiah 6:13, where this precise term occurs again ("holy seed"), the only other place in the OT where the term occurs. The phrase in Malachi occurs in the context of mixed marriages, whereas the terminology in Isaiah refers to a holy remnant of God's people surviving.

Ezra's reaction was dramatic: it was one of distress and mourning, fasting and tearing out his own hair (9:3-5). He then prayed a heart-felt prayer of confession (9:6-15). It is a model prayer of a leader. In it can be found true confession and an attitude of repentance, as well as genuine identification with the sin of the people. Ezra himself was not guilty of intermarriage, yet he identified himself with the people in the prayer: he quickly shifted from "I" and "my" in 8:6a to "we" and "our" in 8:6b-15.⁶⁷

After he persuaded all of the Israelites to deal with this problem (10:1-17), a list of offenders is given (10:18-43). The list is carefully ordered, starting with religious officials (10:18-24) and finishing with the laity (10:25-43). Kidner notes that this displays a certain forthrightness in that the clergy's sins are not in any way minimized.⁶⁸ Indeed, here they represent a higher percentage of the families than they had in the Ezra 2 list (15 percent vs. 10 percent); if this does not prove that they were more errant than the general population, at least it strongly suggests that they were not any less errant!

The list includes 27 clergymen and 84 laymen, a total of 111 persons altogether. That is a very small portion of the population of almost 30,000 returned exiles. Several possibilities have been suggested to explain this. Some maintain that it may be only a partial listing, others that it may indicate that only a small percentage of people really did reform. Others suggest that the problem was not in actuality as serious as it appears on the surface.⁷⁰ The text does not indicate a reason for the apparently small number, although the list does have a certain air of comprehensiveness to it.

Beyond Ezra's activities recorded in his own book, we also see him involved with Nehemiah and presenting the law in its more positive aspects, as an enlightening force (Neh. 8:8) and as a "witness to God as liberator and provider (Ne. 8:9-18)."⁷¹

Regarding the "ethics" of the "divorce decree," the actions of Ezra and the people in taking these actions against foreign women, including some who had children (Ezra 10:44), seem harsh to many modern readers. Some have wondered about the fates of the cast-off women and children. Others have wondered whether the action violated the divorce law of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. That is, was this a mass divorce on grounds not provided for in the law?

In response to the first issue, the author's concern here is very much limited to treating the one question of the pollution within Israel. The urgency of protection of Israel's religious identity was the primary concern, not other, ancillary questions, however important. Indeed, the author is not even concerned with other, equally important religious issues where deterioration in standards and obedience had indeed set in (as we see in the book of Nehemiah), so we may excuse the author for not satisfying our modern curiosity concerning these people's fates. As a conjecture, we might suggest that, knowing what we do of Ezra's special concern for the laws of the Pentateuch, he would have been well aware of the laws of provision for widows, orphans, and aliens within Israel (e.g., Ex. 22:21-24; Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17) and guaranteed that they were cared for in some way.

However, if the relatively small number of offenders is indeed accurate, then we must at least place the "divorce decree" into proper perspective. Despite its seriousness, it had far less of an impact upon actual people who were put away than is often imagined; an innumerable underclass of thousands upon thousands of outcast women and children was not instantly created. Yamauchi shows that the total percentage of offenders is less than 1 percent of the population: 0.4 percent.⁷² Concerning the second issue, as to whether the action violates the divorce law of Deuteronomy 24: 1-4, Walter Kaiser notes that this law did permit divorce for "something indecent" (NIV) found in a wife and that this could not have been adultery, since in that case the death penalty was called for (Deut. 22:22).⁷³ Thus, Ezra may very well have had this law in mind, and he may have understood these women's pagan (or at the very least, syncretistic) beliefs and practices as the "indecency" mentioned in that law.