

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 8

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Trouble in Covenant City, part 2 (Ezra 10)

III. A Word of Hope – Ezra 10:1-4

A. The contagious sorrow of a saving despair (Ezra 10:1)

Ezra was an Israelite and yet also a high government agent. Here he is, throwing sophistication to the winds in a paroxysm of grief (“weeping and throwing himself down,” the latter verb form represents a reflexive participle), and this brings together a crowd of males, females, and minors that had caught and were sharing Ezra’s attitude.

B. The major role of a minor character (Ezra 10:2-4)

Shecaniah admits to Israel’s corporate unfaithfulness (to “be unfaithful, treacherous,” comes from the root *maal*, used in this chapter in vv. 2,6,10). He in no way evades the state of matters, yet he appends two “And now” (*v’atah*) statements:

“And [or ‘yet’] now there is hope for Israel over this” (2b);
“And now let us cut a covenant with our God” (3a).

The first word is “hope,” but Shecaniah’s idea of hope is not some vague optimism. Rather, it is a call to covenant with God, a definitive covenant in which there is fruit that shows repentance. It is a repentance that takes the hard road: “to put away all the wives and their children.” Hope is often hard hope. Then in verse 4 Shecaniah both places responsibility upon Ezra for leadership in the matter (“Rise, for this matter is upon you”), and at the same time offers him the support and encouragement of the people (“and we are with you — be strong and act”).

Perhaps we should add Shecaniah to the Onesiphoruses and Epaphrodituses of the Bible — little-known folks whose faithfulness in their place made a difference for the kingdom of God.

IV. A Process of Discipline – Ezra 10:5-44

A. Preliminary commitment (Ezra 10:5)

Ezra succeeds in getting the priests, Levites, and laity to enter into the covenantal proposal.

B. Persisting grief (Ezra 10:6)¹

Ezra's sorrow (remember verse 1) was no spectacle for the benefit of the crowd. I remember that in my college days a rather famous men's Christian Quartet visited our campus. They took a break in the middle of their concert and went behind the stage curtain. A friend of mine was sitting in a side balcony that gave him an angle most of us did not have. He said that just before the quartet walked through the curtain to resume the concert he saw one of them suddenly plaster on a big smile. He was not that way back stage, but he wanted to sport the glowing smile for public view. Ezra was not like that, for he went to Jehonanan's private room (apparently in the temple) and continued mourning (in Hebrew it's a participle, indicating continuing action), refusing to eat food or drink water.

Is Ezra's fasting not a reflection of Moses' fasting (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:18) after the bull-calf episode of Exodus 32?² Is Ezra a "second Moses" here?

C. Public assembly (Ezra 10:7-14)

Apparently the leaders ("they"), not Ezra, called the assembly. No one was over 40-50 miles from Jerusalem. Non-participation would mean excommunication (verse 8). This was before the days of the pampered church.

The date (verse 9: 9th month, 20th day) was December 19, 458 B.C. This was the rainy season. As Yamauchi notes, December and January are cold months in Jerusalem, with temperatures in the 50's and 40's. Both their offense and the heavy rain made them tremble. Note the breakdown of the passage:

Accusation (verse 10) [You have been unfaithful -- *m^ealtem*, from *maal*]
 Demand (verse 11) [make confession, separate yourselves]
 Willingness (verse 12)
 Postponement (verse 13)
 [reasons: rainy conditions (13a) and extensive numbers (13b)]
 Proposal (verse 14)

¹ On Jehonanan and the debate on the date of Ezra's mission, see Fensham, *NICOT*, 136.

² A connection Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:670, points out.

Their proposal was that offenders appear by appointment. Fensham³ notes: “Their local leaders and judges who knew their circumstances were to accompany them [the accused]. This last proposal is very important. The people wanted a fair investigation in which every case would be carefully scrutinized with the aid of leaders who had an intimate knowledge of the circumstances.” The design was “to turn away the heat of the anger of our God from us.”

Note the reason for separation from these foreign wives was not because these wives were ethnically different but because they were pagan and didn’t convert to Yahwism.

D. Minority resistance (Ezra 10:15)

Fensham seems to see them as opposing such a deliberate process as was proposed, but it is probably more likely that these men stood opposed to the whole procedure. Perhaps they thought it too harsh; perhaps they wanted to protect relatives involved. Yamauchi⁴ points out that if Meshullam in verse 15 is the same as the Meshullam son of Bani in verse 29, then he himself had married a foreign wife.

E. Careful work (Ezra 10:16-44)

The investigation/hearings lasted from the first day of the 10th month (verse 16, cf. verse 9) until the first day of the first month (verse 17), three months of work, finishing on March 27, 457 B.C.⁵

They had probably married these foreign wives after their return to Judah. There were offenders at all levels — priests, Levites, laity. According to the listing, the offenders included 17 priests, 6 Levites, 1 singer, 3 gatekeepers, 84 laity, for a total of 111 (depending on the text).

This indicates pretty careful work, weighing, investigating about 1.2 cases per day, or a little more than that, assuming they took Sabbaths off. It was not done in haste; this was no hatchet job. It took about 75 days for 111 cases.

Note what is *not* told, viz., what happened to the divorced women and children. Probably they went back to their extended families, but that is not the concern of this text.

³ NICOT, 140.

⁴ EBC.

⁵ Yamauchi, EBC, 4:668.

F. Necessary measure

The marriage crisis here is on a par with the crisis of the earlier community in 4:2. But there is a difference. The 536 B.C. community repulsed being diluted; the 458 B.C. community had begun to succumb. Israel resisted the direct danger, but submitted to the subtle one.

As Myers⁶ has noted, we have 111 names in a community of 30,000 (or maybe 50,000). If all the offenders are listed, that is a very, very small percentage. Yet the purging must be done.

Yamauchi⁷ says that what happened to a community that was lax about intermarriage is clear from the Elephantine settlement [Jewish settlement in Egypt], where both lay leaders and priests married outside the confessing community. The Jews at Elephantine worshiped not only Yahweh but the goddess Anath-Yahweh.

8. Remaining questions

Remember the exact problem Ezra and Judah faced here: some of them had taken pagan wives who had remained pagan; there had been no conversion to Yahweh.

The question faces us: *Is Ezra 9-10 a model for the church to follow?* What follows is my attempt at an answer; it is not likely the last word on the matter.

Principally, yes. What we see in Ezra 9-10 is Exodus 34:11-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5 applied in a new post-exilic situation. Do those texts not still apply to the church? Aren't such texts what informs Paul's stricture in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that, e.g., a Christian widow is free to marry "only in the Lord" (see the commentaries on this text)? Marriage within the covenant people is regulated by the word of God — there is always a concern for the seed, for godly seed. So much trouble and compromise inevitably enter the Christian's calling when he/she marries an unbeliever. Ezra's action in these chapters could be viewed (anachronistically) as a corporate application of Matthew 5:29-30.

Particularly, no. Let us make a distinction at the outset. The situation Paul faces in 1 Corinthians 7:12ff. is different from that of Ezra 9-10. Paul is speaking of marriages that were originally marriages between pagans but *became* mixed because one of the spouses was converted to Christ. In that situation, if the unbeliever is willing to continue the marriage, the Christian should not try to end

⁶ *Anchor Bible*.

⁷ *EBC*, 4:677.

the marriage. In such a case, Paul may see the influence in the union going in favor of the gospel.

The problem in Ezra involves covenant people contracting marriages with pagans. If this occurs in a new covenant context, i.e., in the church, such Christians should be — in accord with Matthew 18:15-20 — admonished and pursued to repent of such deliberate, blatant sin. If there is repentance, would that require divorce? I don't think so. Why not? Wouldn't Ezra 9-10 point that way? Not necessarily. Is not Ezra 9-10 a unique situation, a unique emergency? Remember what was a stake *a la* the Elephantine example above: the survival of a definable people of God in this world. Hence the drastic measures. As Holmgren has said: "Sometimes preservation of a way of life dictates a policy which disappoints the democratic, ecumenical spirit" (cited in Breneman). In this light Breneman's view is probably correct: Ezra 9 and 10 "are descriptive, not prescriptive."⁸

⁸ NAC, 165.