

Ezra: Faith and Action Preacher

Ezra 10:1-12

¹ While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly. ² Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³ So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ⁴ Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it.” ⁵ Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear that they would do as had been said. So they swore. ⁶ Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God, and went to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, where he spent the night. He did not eat bread or drink water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles. ⁷ They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, ⁸ and that if any did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all their property should be forfeited, and

they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles. ⁹ Then all the people of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. All the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. ¹⁰ Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” ¹² Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.”

Theme Statement

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, the scribe Ezra discovered a violation of the Torah that threatened to wreak disaster. Ezra sanctioned radical steps to protect true Israel from destruction.

Exploring the Word

The eponymous personality Ezra does not appear in the book until 7:1. He was born in the Persian territory of Babylonia among the descendants of Hebrews whom the Babylonians exiled from Judah. In that community, he rose up as “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (7:6) and a man determined to do and teach the law in Israel. Armed with a letter from Emperor Artaxerxes I (464–423 BCE), Ezra was appointed the leader of the religious community in the territory of Yehud (Judah; see 7:11-28).

Ezra 8 reports the census of those Babylonian exiles who returned with Ezra to Jerusalem, their pious fasts, the surrender of treasure to the temple, and sacrifices. Quickly thereafter, however, officials complained to the scribe Ezra that earlier returnees back from Babylonia had violated

the law by intermarrying with local women, and “thus the holy seed [had] mixed itself with the peoples of the lands” (Ezra 9:1-2).

Ezra 10:1-12 The problem with “foreign” women

While the presenting problem seems to have been a matter of a violation of Exodus 34:11-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-6, the issue actually involved who could claim to be “true Israel” and who could not. Already in the eighth century BCE, the Assyrian policy of deportation of conquered peoples had left a mixed population of people in the former nation of Israel who came to worship Yahweh (2 Kings 17:24-28). The descendants of those living around Samaria offered to help rebuild the temple but were rebuffed by Zerubbabel and Jeshua as unorthodox and therefore illegitimate (Ezra 4:1-5). Jews of the first century CE continued to reject Samaritans on the same grounds.

Living alongside their northern neighbors, however, were the inhabitants of Yehud, already present when the exiles returned from Babylon. These included Judahites not forced into exile, as well as immigrant newcomers from Moab and Ammon, and other non-Jewish nationalities. Ezra regarded these people as outsiders and unwelcome at worship because they had not experienced the life of exile in Babylon. Some could not even speak Hebrew (Nehemiah 13:23-24)! Nevertheless, the companions of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and their sons found wives among this group. Shecaniah, a descendant of Elam, confessed as much (Ezra 2:7; 10:2). It was also Shecaniah who proposed a solution: the guilty men would make a covenant with Yahweh and divorce their “foreign” wives, banishing them and their children (10:3). Ezra, the interpreter of the law and the leader of restored Israel, agreed to this appalling solution and made leading religious officials and “all [true] Israel” swear compliance (10:5).

The priests and Levites proclaimed a mandatory assembly—declaring that all returned (male) exiles must gather in Jerusalem under penalty of forfeited property and banishment from the congregation (10:8).

Consequently, on a rainy day in December, returnees who had presumed to marry outside of the exile group agreed to confess their sin and to “separate [them]selves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (10:11-12).

The Word Today

Jews living in a post-exilic world struggled with a question familiar to modern people: What to do with the aliens and strangers among us? For Ezra and his contemporaries, the question was not one of language, food, or customs. Nor was the issue a matter of race, as it often is among us. No, the issue was that that Israelites who had returned from the exile had defiled the religious community by marrying non-Israelite women. This violation of Torah threatened their national existence (Ezra 9:10-15).

Nevertheless, the solution of forced mass divorce and banishment is ethically problematic in the extreme. No social safety net existed for the women and children. Ezra’s support of Shecaniah’s harsh solution imperiled the lives of the banished. Perhaps the solution can be explained, but not excused, by noting that in times of dire distress, it may seem necessary for a faith community to exclude strangers in order to ensure religious and ethnic survival.

Not everyone agreed with Ezra. Beyond the men mentioned in 10:15, alternative suggestions about what to do with the foreigner found voice, mostly in the form of stories.

The story of Ruth also offers a countersuggestion. The widowed Ruth proved herself to be a paradigm of fidelity

to the Lord and the Lord's people (Ruth 1:16-17; 3:11). As it turns out, Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David (4:17-22). And yet, no one reading her story can miss the seven references to "Ruth the Moabite" present in four chapters. Ruth is precisely the sort of woman Ezra would banish, even though she turned out to be helpful to God's people and a vital part of Israel's history.

Today, there are many among us who lean toward Ezra's excluding response to foreigners. Others remind us that foreigners, including people with different faith traditions, have already proved to be a blessing to us all.

How might the church treat "foreigners" as a blessing?

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Consider the proverb "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." When in your life has a big problem been prevented because you addressed it when it was small?

Exploring the Word

1. Examine Ezra's prayer on behalf of his people (9:6-15). In two columns, chart what Ezra says God has done and what the people have done.
2. Review Ezra 9-10 to identify specific steps Ezra took to resolve the religious and social crisis he faced.
3. Examine the following passages treating marriages: Exodus 34:11-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-6; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 1 Corinthians 7:10-17. For each, discover what is commanded and why the command was given.

4. Ezra seemed to think that the problem of foreign wives needed to be addressed immediately. What if he had not? Make a list of possible other solutions to Ezra's problems besides divorce and banishment.

The Word Today

1. Make a list of people who some say threaten faith and society as we know them. What exactly is the danger they supposedly pose? Are the fears we harbor about "foreigners" realistic?
2. Who are the "foreigners" in your community? How might you or your congregation assist them?

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, inspire us to be as zealous for our faith as was Ezra. We also pray that you teach us to keep our zealous faith from hurting others because we fear their difference. Remind us always that no one is a foreigner to you. Amen.

Further Study

Deuteronomy 10:11-22; Ruth 1-4; Ephesians 2:8-22

Daily Readings

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| M. Acts 26:19-23 | F. Nehemiah 7:73b—8:6 |
| T. Ephesians 4:17-24 | S. Nehemiah 8:9-12 |
| W. Leviticus 18:24-30 | S. Ezra 10:1-12 |
| T. Zechariah 7:8-14 | |

Memorization

Ezra 10:6

Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God, and went to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, where he spent the night. He did not eat bread or drink water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.