



## Ezra - Chapter Ten

### **IV Ezra 9:1-10:44 - Ezra Discovers and Confronts the Problem of Intermarriage (continues/concludes)**

#### Summary of Chapter Ten

The people wept bitterly with Ezra with the realisation of the enormity of their sin. Shecaniah came forward to Ezra to say that the people of God should make a covenant with the Lord and send away their foreign wives. Ezra put this to the people and they agreed.

Ezra mourned and fasted all night as he considered the faithlessness of the returned Jews. He then issued a decree that all the people should assemble in Jerusalem within three days or forfeit their possessions and be banned from the temple. The people gathered as commanded and accepted the charges Ezra laid against them, agreeing that they should separate from their foreign wives and children. However, as it was the rainy season and because there were so many people they asked to be allocated a time to come before judges to rectify this matter. This was agreed by a majority. The book concludes with lists of all those, including priests and Levites, who sent their wives away.

#### **IV.b Ezra 10:1-5 - The People's Response**

Refer to the first paragraph of the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Ezra 10:1

While Ezra prayed and made confession. Ezra's own report of the events in Ezra 7:27-9:15 now gives way to a different narrative voice, although the account continues without a break. The power of Ezra's confession was not merely in the words recorded in Ezra 9:6-15. It was in the depth of heart that brought forth the prayer, here evidence by weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God. He prayed this prayer and humbled himself on behalf of the people publicly, before a very great assembly of men, women, and children.

Daniel seems to have prayed just as fervently and he received an immediate response with the appearance of Gabriel: <<*While I was speaking, and was praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God on behalf of the holy mountain of my God – while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He came and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding'*>> (Daniel 9:20-22).

Throwing himself down before the house of God. The Hebrew grammar implies that Ezra kept on throwing himself repeatedly down on the ground.

A very great assembly. Under God, Ezra's public prayer and demonstration of grief bring a large number of people to repentance, as shown by the statement that they wept bitterly. The term assembly is used for a formal gathering of Israel as a religious community.

The people also wept bitterly. This shows that the people were also struck by the conviction of sin and the need to confess and repent. They sorrowed over the sin of the covenant community just as Ezra had done. Through the centuries, one mark of a powerful movement of the Holy Spirit among the people of God is that they are convicted of their sin and feel compelled to confess it and to put it away. This is also seen in the life of the apostle Peter after he had denied knowing Jesus: <<*And he went out and wept bitterly*>> (Luke 22:62).

<sup>2</sup> 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.'

## Ezra 10:2

Shecaniah speaks for the whole gathering, perhaps by prearrangement. Shecaniah was a descendant of David and thus a natural choice to show leadership on behalf of the nation.

Jehiel. Shecaniah's own father may have had a mixed marriage (v.26).

We have broken faith with our God, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. Shecaniah recognised the severity of their sin; yet he also knew that their present brokenness over their sin was an emblem of the work of God's Spirit among them. Thus it was reason for hope for Israel in spite of this. It is interesting that Ezra himself did not suggest the course of action that Shecaniah did. Perhaps Ezra was so deeply troubled by the sin of the community that he could not think of a wise response. Perhaps Ezra knew what to do, but knew that the suggestion had to come from the community itself instead of from himself, who was a newcomer to Jerusalem and Judæa. Refer to the comment made on Ezra 9:1-2 concerning faithlessness.

The word translated married is not the usual one, but means literally 'we have given a home'; Shecaniah's words may imply that these illicit relationships were not marriages in the full sense but that the women were what would today be called partners.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

### Ezra 10:3

Shecaniah's belief that there is hope for Israel (v.2) and that it is dependent on making a covenant with God, meaning in this instance a solemn and binding promise to send away the foreign wives and their children. As with the term for 'marriage,' this is not the usual expression for 'divorce,' and may also imply that these were not proper marriages. The word means simply 'bring out.' In effect, this meant excommunicating them from the community of returned exiles. The text does not make clear any other details concerning matters of ongoing support and protection for these wives and their children (v.44), or concerning what happened to them; refer also to the comments made on vv.18-44. Because this represents a different situation in a different context as compared to 1 Corinthians 7:12-14, where Paul tells Christians not to divorce their unbelieving spouses, and because this example was recorded here in Ezra for descriptive rather than normative reasons, there would be no justification for anyone to take similar actions today. In Ezra's context, members of God's people had defied God's law in taking these wives, while Paul gives his instructions to people who probably converted after their marriage.

**This was a strong command, because not only would the wives be put away but also the children. Because of this, some commentators think that this was excessive zeal in reforming, going beyond God's will and causing great harm.**

Yet it should be seen that this was in fact God's will. This was understood by the ancient culture that naturally the women would stay with their children. It seems that because of God's mercy in this difficult situation, there were relatively few children affected (v.44).

The counsel of my lord, i.e. Ezra. Ezra may have already outlined a plan for taking care of the foreign wives and their children, even though it is not recorded here. Certainly it seems that his views were known by Shecaniah.

Those who tremble at the commandment of our God is an expression for pious eagerness to obey God, and respect for his holiness: <<*All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word*>> (Isaiah 66:2). There were those in the community who were also horrified at the sin of their community. These, who were marked by their respect for God's Word, assembled together with Ezra.

Let it be done according to the Law. That is, Deuteronomy 7:1-5; refer to the comment made on Ezra 9:1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it.'

#### Ezra 10:4

Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you. Shecaniah both exhorted those guilty to do what was right and stood beside them in support. This was especially meaningful because it seems that although Shecaniah was not guilty of marrying a pagan woman, both his father and his uncles were (v.21).

Be strong, and do it. This is like the charge to Joshua at the first entry of Israel into the land: <<*Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go*>> (Joshua 1:6-7), and relates both to overcoming enemies and to keeping the law.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

#### Ezra 10:5

Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear that they would do as had been said. The counsel of Shecaniah seemed good to Ezra, so he immediately called upon the people to swear an oath to do

according to this word. Significantly, Ezra began with the leaders; he expected them to make things right with God first.

**So they swore.** The oath is in effect the same as the covenant (v.3). All three main sections of the community take this oath. Nehemiah too made the leaders take a similar oath but in that case it was not to oppress the poor: *<<And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised>>* (Nehemiah 5:12b)

#### IV.c Ezra 10:6-44 - Foreign Wives and Their Children Rejected

Refer to the second paragraph of the chapter summary above.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

#### Ezra 10:6

**Jehohanan son of Eliashib.** Both names are common and appear in several lists in Ezra and Nehemiah. It is not always possible to know whether the same name refers to the same person. This family evidently had a caretaking role in the temple: *<<Now before this, the priest Eliashib, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah>>* (Nehemiah 13:4).

**He did not eat bread or drink water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.** For Ezra, this whole tragedy was as bad as if someone had died. He could not think of himself or his own needs when he knew God was being so greatly dishonoured. Ezra observed a complete fast, abstaining from both food and water. This same kind of fast is rare in the Bible, but was observed twice by Moses: *<<He was there with the Lord for forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments>>* (Exodus 34:28), and: *<<Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, for forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the Lord by doing what was evil in his sight>>* (Deuteronomy 9:18) and also by the people of Nineveh: *<<Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water'>>* (Jonah 3:7).

<sup>7</sup> They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, <sup>8</sup> 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.

#### Ezra 10:7-8

All the returned exiles should assemble at Jerusalem. Such assemblies normally occurred during the three regular pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles; this was a special gathering, since the survival of the community was at stake.

If any did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all their property should be forfeited. Ezra was given great civil authority by King Artaxerxes; refer to Ezra 7:26. Here, he put that authority to use by making the people fulfil the oath they had previously made (v.5), or else they would face the consequences for failing to do so.

And they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles. Anyone who refused to participate in the plan to renounce the foreign wives and children would share their excommunication.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

#### Ezra 10:9

Then all the people of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. This was a remarkable response to the remarkable call Ezra made in the preceding verses. Their unified response was more evidence of the moving of the Holy Spirit among the people of God. Judah and Benjamin are mentioned specifically as they were the majority of the people who had been taken into captivity and therefore it was their descendants that had mostly returned: <<***The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites – everyone whose spirit God had stirred – got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem***>> (Ezra 1:5). However, members of other tribes had moved from the northern kingdom to Judah before the exile and it is likely that other tribes were also represented here.

The ninth month, Chislev, is roughly November/December, the time of the so-called early rains; January is normally the month of the heaviest annual rainfall. The people are trembling partly for fear of God, as in Ezra 9:4, and partly because they are cold and wet in the heavy rain. The average temperature in Jerusalem at that time of year is around 10°C but adding in the rain and possible wind, it would have felt very cold out in the open.

<sup>10</sup> Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, ‘You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel.

#### Ezra 10:10

The terms of Ezra’s accusation is that their actions have already increased the guilt of Israel. The return from exile had signified that all of Israel’s past sins had been forgiven: <<*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins*>> (Isaiah 40:1-2). Ezra now points to renewed sin, beyond that which had previously been forgiven, and thus the possibility of the renewed wrath of God. Ezra’s word to the people was clear and strong. Although the moving of the Holy Spirit was evident, it was important to carry the work through to completion and to not be satisfied with partial compliance.

<sup>11</sup> 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.’

#### Ezra 10:11

Make confession is based on Hebrew words that could also be translated in other contexts as ‘give thanks or praise,’ Hebrew *natan* + *todah*, for example: <<*then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me’*>> (Joshua 7:19). Some overlap of these meanings is not surprising because rightful confession is itself a kind of worship of God. This was a clear call to both confession and repentance.

Charles Spurgeon comments, “Perhaps you have the notion that repentance is a thing that happens at the commencement of the spiritual life, and has to be got through as one undergoes a certain operation, and there is an end of it. If so, you are greatly mistaken; repentance lives as long as faith. Towards faith I might almost call it a Siamese twin. We shall need to believe and to repent as long as ever we live.”

<sup>12</sup> Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, ‘It is so; we must do as you have said. <sup>13</sup> But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a task for one day or for two, for many of us have transgressed in this matter. <sup>14</sup> Let our officials represent the whole assembly, and let all in our towns who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every town, until the fierce wrath of our God on

this account is averted from us.’<sup>15</sup> Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levites supported them.

#### Ezra 10:12-15

Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice. The people as a whole respond with a solemn admission of their guilt and with resolution to act to address the problem, as in the making of a covenant, as in: <<*The people all answered as one: ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord*>> (Exodus 19:8), and: <<*Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’*>> (Exodus 24:7). They then propose a practical means of conducting the procedure.

It is so; we must do as you have said. This was still further evidence of the remarkable moving of the Holy Spirit upon the people. They immediately answered, and did so with a loud voice, in agreement to what Ezra said.

But the people are many; nor is this a task for one day or for two. The people asked Ezra for a period of time to make it right. This was necessary because so many people were involved in this sin; yet the principle was agreed upon with very little opposition.

Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this. This probably means that these men opposed the entire resolution to put away the foreign wives. However, the verse contains some ambiguity in Hebrew, and some interpreters think these men opposed the proposed means of proceeding because they wished to act more swiftly.

<sup>16</sup> Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of families, according to their families, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter. <sup>17</sup> By the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

#### Ezra 10:16-17

Then the returned exiles did so. This summary account of the proceedings shows that it was undertaken by duly appointed authorities in the community, and thus it was not merely Ezra’s doing.

On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter. Although Ezra was wisely willing to accept the delay because of necessity, he also held the assembly accountable to do what they agreed to do in the months after

the great assembly. The need for rigorous inquiry was an established part of the duties of judges: *<<and if it is reported to you or you hear of it, and you make a thorough inquiry, and the charge is proved true that such an abhorrent thing has occurred in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or that woman who has committed this crime and you shall stone the man or woman to death>>* (Deuteronomy 17:4-5).

By the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women. The whole inquiry took three months. The questioning was necessary because they needed to examine if one of these wives had genuinely decided to serve the Lord God and to forsake her native religions. If the pagan wife had decided to keep her primary allegiance with her former people and their idols, she could not live among the covenant community and had to be divorced or expelled. To the end of the chapter, there is a list showing that only about 114 of these pagan wives refused to embrace the God of Israel and had to be sent away. It has been calculated that it was less than one-half of one percent of the people who were guilty of this pagan intermarriage and who had to divorce their wives. Although it was such a small percentage, it still had to be dealt with strongly, and it was. It also shows that most of the foreign wives joined the people of God in their heart as well as their home.

In the NT believers are also instructed to marry within the faith. Marriages to unbelievers are opposed by Paul: *<<Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?>>* (2 Corinthians 6:14), and widows, as one example of the unmarried, are directly commanded to marry within the faith: *<<A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord>>* (1 Corinthians 7:39). However, Paul specifically commanded that if a believer is married to an unbeliever, they are to remain in the marriage if at all possible, both for the possibility of a witness to the unbelieving spouse and for the benefit it brings to the children; refer to 1 Corinthians 7:12-17.

<sup>18</sup> There were found of the descendants of the priests who had married foreign women, of the descendants of Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. <sup>19</sup> They pledged themselves to send away their wives, and their guilt-offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt. <sup>20</sup> Of the descendants of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. <sup>21</sup> Of the descendants of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah. <sup>22</sup> Of the descendants of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah.

<sup>23</sup> Of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. <sup>24</sup> Of the singers: Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.

<sup>25</sup> And of Israel: of the descendants of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. <sup>26</sup> Of the descendants of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. <sup>27</sup> Of the descendants of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. <sup>28</sup> Of the descendants of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. <sup>29</sup> Of the descendants of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. <sup>30</sup> Of the descendants of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh. <sup>31</sup> Of the descendants of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, <sup>32</sup> Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. <sup>33</sup> Of the descendants of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. <sup>34</sup> Of the descendants of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, <sup>35</sup> Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, <sup>36</sup> Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, <sup>37</sup> Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu. <sup>38</sup> Of the descendants of Binnui: Shimei, <sup>39</sup> Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, <sup>40</sup> Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, <sup>41</sup> Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, <sup>42</sup> Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. <sup>43</sup> Of the descendants of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah. <sup>44</sup> All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children.

#### Ezra 10:18-44

These verses provide a list of those who were implicated. The list is divided, typically for Ezra, into priests (vv.18-22), Levites (vv.23-24), and Israel (vv.25-43). The list of around a hundred names is surprisingly short, and may suggest a more limited problem than one might have expected. Either the list has been abbreviated or in fact those involved were few. In the latter case, the severe reaction of Ezra and the community recognises the extreme danger that the whole community could face by the actions of only a few in this fundamental area of its covenantal life; this can be favourably prepared to the command of God to: <<*purge the evil from your midst*>> (Deuteronomy 17:7b).

There were found of the descendants of the priests who had married foreign women. Those who had to put away their wives because they refused to convert to Judaism are here listed. This is a somewhat shameful list, and not a very good way to get one's name recorded in the bestselling book of all time.

Jewish rabbis speculated on the reason why Jewish men divorced their Jewish wives and married women from the pagan cultures, as the prophet proclaims in Malachi 2:10-16: because the Jewish women who returned from exile lost their beauty and aged before their time. Rabbi Johanan commented, “When the Jews drew near from the Exile, the faces of the Jewish women had become blackened by the sun. They therefore left them and married heathen wives.”

The guilt-offering (v.19) was presumably to be brought by each person in the list. The extensive inquiry must have considered each case separately. In some cases, a wife and her children might actually have adopted the religion of Israel, as anticipated and permitted in Ezra 6:21. The inquiry might have come down to an examination of such people’s beliefs. Those who were turned away probably returned to their non-Jewish families.

All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children. The Hebrew has more the meaning of pagan rather than foreign, as also seen shortly after Israel arrived in the Promised Land: **<<and they took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they worshipped their gods>>** (Judges 3:6). This was not a case of ethnicity but one of spirituality. Historically, taking a pagan wife had drawn the husband away from their faith in the Lord alone, epitomised in the life of King Solomon. It was important for this newly established nation to set themselves right in the eyes of God and to show they would now be faithful only to him. Sadly, history has shown that it has not always been the case among the entire Jewish nation. This is something that Paul knew would happen: **<<It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants; but ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you’>>** (Romans 9:6-7).