



Ezra - Chapter Nine

Summary of Chapter Nine

Ezra is appalled at the news of the marriages to adherents of other religions and he prays to God, acknowledging the perpetual guilt of the Israelites, God's favour in allowing a remnant to survive and asking that the Lord continues to look favourably upon his people by steering them away from the pagan religions of the foreigners whom they have intermarried with.

IV Ezra 9:1-10:44 - Ezra Discovers and Confronts the Problem of Intermarriage

Ezra discovers that the Jewish community has mixed with idolatrous non-Jewish groups in religion and in marriage; he then leads the community in an act of repentance and in a systematic separation from the foreign women and their children.

IV.a Ezra 9:1-15 - The Problem of Marriage to Idolaters

Refer to the chapter summary above.

IV.a.i Ezra 9:1-4 - Denunciation of Mixed Marriages

After his arrival and the proper accounting of all the gifts brought from Babylonia, Ezra was presented with bad news. The spiritual condition of the postexilic community was bad and this was evident in their failure to separate themselves from the pagan peoples that still populated the region. Their failure to separate resulted in intermarriage with the surrounding pagan communities.

¹ After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the

Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ² For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.'

Ezra 9:1-2

The peoples of the lands, included the ethnic groups mentioned and also the Samaritans who were brought into the region following the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel; refer to the comment made on Ezra 3:3. They are further identified with the idolatrous nations for the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites are among the seven nations that Israel was commanded by Moses to drive out of the land; refer to Deuteronomy 7:1-5.

The Ammonites and the Moabites were nations east of the river Jordan, outside the Promised Land, who were regarded as especially hostile to Israel: <<*No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you*>> (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). And Egypt is regarded as morally equal to Canaan: <<*You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes*>> (Leviticus 18:3). The peoples of the land who keep themselves distinct from the returned temple community are thus portrayed as the same in principle and in character as these ancient enemies.

These are specifically the wives of the Israelites that they have taken from these foreign nations who had not abandoned their worship of other gods, for Ezra 6:21 makes it clear that such people could join the people of Israel if they were willing to follow the Lord God alone; refer also to the comment made on Ezra 6:21.

It was not that this intermarriage was the only problem; but as these communities intermarried, there would be no areas left untouched by pagan associations - business, government, social life. To allow intermarriage with idolaters was to allow all these other areas of compromise.

Their abominations refers to these peoples' worship of other gods and the associated practices that Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel, regarded as particularly wicked: <<*You must not do the same for the Lord your God, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods*>>

(Deuteronomy 12:31). It is implied that the foreigners' religions in Ezra's day were just as idolatrous as in ancient times, and thus it is clear that the issue is not one of ethnic purity but of spiritual purity: *<<It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel>>* (Ezra 6:21). Intermarriage with the indigenous population carried the danger of religious apostasy, and therefore was expressly forbidden by the law: *<<Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons>>* (Deuteronomy 7:3).

The holy seed or race alludes to the offspring of Abraham, who bore the ancient promise of covenant and land: *<<Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'>>* (Genesis 12:1-3), *<<He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'>>* (Genesis 15:5), and: *<<I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God>>* (Genesis 17:7-8).

The holy seed was also seen in prophecy as the surviving remnant that would be brought to life again after the terrible judgement of the exile: *<<Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.' The holy seed is its stump>>* (Isaiah 6:13). With this forsaking of Jewish identity and at least a partial embrace of idolatry or its toleration within the Jewish community, then in a few generations there would cease to be any distinctive Jewish community in the Promised Land.

The involvement of all classes of the community, i.e. the priests, the Levites, and the people of Israel, as well as the officials and leaders, shows that the problem included all the people.

Verses 1-2 recall passages from the Mosaic Law, especially Exodus 34:11-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-4, which speak out against intermarriage between Israelites and the surrounding Canaanite tribes. This conviction of sin on the part of the people and their leaders, and the way that the conviction of sin was phrased, can be seen to indicate (spiritually speaking) that Ezra's arrival to bring the ministry of teaching God's Word was bearing fruit. The people heard the Word, looked at their lives, and saw that the two did not match.

Leading aristocratic families were foremost in contracting the foreign alliances. It is such as they who would profit most, as it is such as they who would be most tempted to consider worldly motives and to forgo the austerity of their fathers.

The term faithlessness, Hebrew *ma'al*, is an extremely strong expression for abandonment of the faith, especially by leaders; refer to 1 Chronicles 10:13, where it is translated as unfaithfulness or as a breach of faith in some translations.

³ When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled.

Ezra 9:3

When I heard this. Ezra had just finished a dangerous four month journey from Babylonia to Jerusalem. He had perhaps over-romanticised the spiritual commitment of the returning pioneers and had expected to find something completely different than the culture of compromise that he found.

I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard. Ezra expresses his deep dismay by performing ritual acts of mourning. His severe reaction results from the fact that the holy race of God's chosen people had compromised its newly won salvation by returning to the sins that had brought judgement on their ancestors in the first place.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were confronted with the sin of pagan intermarriage. Nehemiah responded by pulling out the hair of the guilty: <<And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves'>> (Nehemiah 13:25); Ezra responded by pulling out his own hair!

Ezra sat appalled. Certainly one of the reasons for his mourning was that Ezra remembered that it was these same sins of idolatry, disobedience and compromise that had caused the tribes of Israel to be exiled before. He no doubt wondered how the people could endanger themselves like this again.

⁴ Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Ezra 9:4

Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel 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.

IV.a.ii Ezra 9:5-15 - Ezra's Prayer

Ezra opens his prayer by acknowledging the guilt of God's people throughout the ages and how God has graciously given the remnant this chance of a fresh start. He asks for the Lord's help to steer them away from their sinful behaviour and back on to a path of righteousness.

⁵ At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God, ⁶ and said, 'O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. ⁷ From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case.

Ezra 9:5-7

At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting. Ezra knew there was a time to mourn and he did that for a long time. He also knew that there was a time to pray, and now he would begin his prayer. As Ezra prayed, he alone prayed - yet because he stood before an assembly of the people of God, there was a sense in which he led them in prayer.

The evening sacrifice commenced at about 3pm and was concluded before sunset: <<*You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight*>> (Exodus 12:6), and: <<*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon*>> (Acts 3:1). The informants had probably visited Ezra in the morning, so that he must have sat in this position for many hours. The time of the evening sacrifice was also the appointed time for prayer and confession.

Fell on my knees. Ezra was one of many in the Bible who prayed on his knees. Solomon prayed on his knees (1 Kings 8:54), the Psalmist calls worshippers to kneel (Psalm 95:6), Daniel prayed on his knees (Daniel 6:10), people kneeled before Jesus (Matthew 17:14, Matthew 20:20 and Mark 1:40), Stephen prayed on his knees (Acts 7:60), Peter prayed on his knees (Acts 9:40), Paul prayed on his knees (Acts

20:36 and Ephesians 3:14), and other early Christians prayed on their knees (Acts 21:5). Most importantly, Jesus prayed on his knees (Luke 22:41). The Bible has enough example of people praying in other postures to show that it is not required, but it also has enough prayer from people on their knees to show that it is good.

Spread out my hands to the Lord my God. Ezra also spread out his hands to the Lord. This was the most common posture of prayer in the OT. Many modern people close their eyes, bow their head, and fold their hands as they pray, but the OT tradition was to spread out the hands towards heaven in a gesture of surrender, openness, and ready reception.

I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God. Although Ezra's hands were raised his face was down in shame and humiliation before the Lord. He senses that the sins of the people of Israel had weighed his head down so much that he could not lift his head. God had been so often provoked, and had so often pardoned them and they had continued to transgress, that he was ashamed to go back again to the throne of grace to ask for mercy in their behalf. This was the attitude of the tax collector as he came before the Lord: *<<But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!">>* (Luke 18:13).

For our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. Ezra confesses sin on behalf of the covenant community, beginning with the historic sins of Israel that had led to the Babylonian exile. Significantly, Ezra prayed saying our iniquities instead of 'their iniquities.' Ezra had just arrived in this community and he had not shared any kind of life or conduct with them. Yet he knew that because they were bound together in the same covenant before God, their iniquities were in fact his.

Our iniquities and our guilt. These two strong terms: Hebrew 'awon or iniquity, and 'ashmah meaning guilt, are each repeated twice here. Ezra recognises the justice of the punishment of exile.

From the days of our ancestors refers to the time before the exile: *<<Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or heed me, says the Lord>>* (Zechariah 1:4).

We have been deep in guilt. Ezra recognised the generally sinful past of the tribes of Israel, and how their exile was a righteous work of God against his sinful people.

The terms sword, captivity, plundering, and utter shame sum up the disasters experienced by the people because they failed to keep the covenant, and bring to mind the covenantal consequences for disobedience noted in Leviticus 26:14-39 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68; refer also to 2 Kings 17:20 and Jeremiah 24:9-10.

⁸ But now for a brief moment favour has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery.

Ezra 9:8

But now for a brief moment favour. Ezra refers to the time since Cyrus' edict. Ezra then reflected on the remarkable goodness of God in bringing a remnant of his people back from exile and allowing them to live in the Promised Land again. This was nearly a century before, but was short in the sweep of Israel's history.

The idea of a remnant could be attached to notions of God's judgement, for it can refer to a small remnant left afterward, or to the subject of renewed punishment: <<*Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled*>> (Isaiah 6:13a), <<*But thus says the Lord: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt*>> (Jeremiah 24:8). However, prophets also spoke positively of a remnant of Israel who would repent and be restored after the purifying judgement of exile, and who would continue to bear the identity and destiny of Israel: <<*On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God*>> (Isaiah 10:20-21); Jeremiah 24:4-7 also has the idea, although not the term. Ezra applies the term to the returned exiles, as does Nehemiah: <<*one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem*>> (Nehemiah 1:2).

Paul confirms that the Lord will keep for himself a remnant of the Jews even throughout the church age: <<*But what is the divine reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'* So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace>> (Romans 11:4-6).

And given us a stake in his holy place. The idea is that Israel once again had a safe position, a standing in God's favour and in his temple. In those days, houses did not really have cupboards for storage as found in a modern home. Things were stored on pegs, translated stakes here, set up all around the room. If something was on its peg, it was safe and secure, stored properly and ready for use at the appropriate time. Only a few days before this, Ezra had seen the temple for the

first time in his life. He was impressed that God had given his people a peg or stake in his holy place once again, and was therefore afraid that their casual disregard for this blessing would once again stir up the righteous anger of God. His holy place refers narrowly to the temple and more broadly to the land of Judah.

In order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery. Ezra rejoiced to see even a measure of revival, and knew that this was an emblem of God's mercy and favour that should not be despised with disobedience and compromise.

⁹ For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judæa and Jerusalem.

Ezra 9:9

For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery. The idea that the exiles remain slaves is unexpected after their restoration to the land, but acknowledges that they are still under the foreign authority of Persia: <<*Here we are, slaves to this day – slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress*>> (Nehemiah 9:36-37). Therefore, the favourable view of Persia thus far does not prevent the exiles' aspiration to complete freedom. Even so, although they are under this foreign authority, God has shown steadfast love, the special quality of faithful love that characterises his attachment to Israel in the covenant, and that he expects in return: <<*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings*>> (Hosea 6:6).

The freedom that the Jews feel when they are true to God explains the mindset of the Jews who were debating with Jesus, even though their history had seen them enslaved by the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans: <<*They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'>> (John 8:33). What they failed to grasp was the spiritual freedom that Christ offers to those who believe in him: <<*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed*>> (John 8:36), and: <<*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*>> (Galatians 5:1).*

To give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judæa and Jerusalem. Ezra was impressed by all these signs of God's mercy and favour to his people, signs he had only seen a few days before for

the first time. It made him appreciate how good God had been to his people, and how dangerous it was for them to sin and compromise in response to his goodness.

Some critics take this reference to a wall as an argument for the priority of Nehemiah over Ezra, assuming an allusion to the wall that Nehemiah had repaired in his day. However, most scholars agree that the reference here is not to be taken literally but metaphorically regarding the security they had under grace. They had the fence of the king of Persia's favour. They had also God's providence, as a hedge or wall of fire round about them.

The Jewish commentator Slotki observes poignantly: "A little grace had been granted by God to his people; a small remnant had found its weary way back to its home and driven a single peg into its soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery. How graphically Ezra epitomises Jewish experience in these few words!"

¹⁰ 'And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹ which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, "The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹² Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever."

Ezra 9:10-12

What shall we say after this? Ezra offers no excuses and not even an explanation. Their conduct was indefensible and a direct disobedience to what God commanded by his servants the prophets. As Paul puts it: <<*Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse*>> (Romans 1:20).

For we have forsaken your commandments. Ezra alludes to Deuteronomy 7:1-5 and the present community's breach of its prohibition of intermarriage.

The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean. Ezra uses language from the holiness vocabulary to stress the incompatibility of the indigenous people's way of life and worship with that mandated by the holy God of Israel.

¹³ After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our

iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴ shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practise these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor? ¹⁵ O Lord, God of Israel, you are just, but we have escaped as a remnant, as is now the case. Here we are before you in our guilt, though no one can face you because of this.'

Ezra 9:13-15

You, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved. As severe as the exile was, Ezra recognised that it was less than what the people of God deserved. As he looked at their present disobedience, he understood that it was a way of despising the great mercy God had shown in the past and made them deserving of a complete and final judgement.

As the tribes of Israel piled sin upon sin before the fall of the northern and southern kingdoms, God still showed remarkable mercy to them. He did not have to preserve them through exile; there could have been genocide instead. As well, he did not have to bring them back from exile into the Promised Land once again. Each of these was a wonderful example of God's mercy in the midst of judgement.

Ezra knew that God is just, righteous and merciful: <<*The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he*>> (Deuteronomy 32:4), and: <<*You are righteous, O Lord, and your judgements are right*>> (Psalm 119:137). The very existence of the postexilic remnant proves his mercy; yet equally God would be justified in bringing renewed judgement on this sinful people. The prayer serves as a petition for mercy, and it prompts Ezra and his close associates to turn the people away from their sin and back to the Lord.

Here Ezra wisely appealed to the Lord as the God of Israel. Although they had been unfaithful to him, Ezra still hoped for covenant mercies from the Lord because he was their God.

Here we are before you in our guilt. Ezra wisely did not claim an excuse or a reason for their sin. Israel had sinned and they were guilty. The appeal must be made for mercy to the guilty, not as a favour to the deserving or semi-deserving. It is noted here that Ezra also did not claim special circumstances nor did he tell God that their difficult environment made their present compromise understandable, or that all their other good works or faithfulness somehow excused their idolatry. He simply realised that no one can face you because of this!