**Ezra – Nehemiah Bible Study**

**Ezra 7:1 – Ezra 10:44**

Notes from [**www.enterthebible.org**](http://www.enterthebible.org) **Author:** [Mark Throntveit, Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament](http://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=931)

**Initial Questions:**

1. Ezra is an important figure for Jews because he reestablished the centrality of the Torah (Law of God). When making an important decision what role does scripture and/or prayer play in your decision making process? What role do you feel it should play?
2. How do you make determinations about what laws in scripture are still applicable?

**Read: Ezra 7:1-10, 21-28; 8:31-36**

**ANALYSIS: Ezra 7:1-8:36 – Ezra’s Commission and Return**

In this section we see the second of the great returns. Just as the first return was structured around the decree of Cyrus that allowed the exiles to return home and rebuild the temple, this second return is structured around the decree of Artaxerxes that calls for all Jews to obey the law of Moses.

Most important, this passage demonstrates Ezra's unique qualifications for his mission. First of all, he is included in the Aaronide line of priests and thus authorized to perform sacrifice and conduct temple worship, though nowhere is it said that Ezra functioned as high priest (7:1-5). Second, Ezra was a scribe, that is, someone trained in the interpretation of the law (7:6). This important qualification means that Ezra could function as an authoritative link to Israel's preexilic past, reinterpreting the law of Moses for a community no longer under the auspices of a Davidic ruler. Finally, Ezra enjoyed the favor of God (7:6, 9).

Ezra also enjoyed the favor of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, the present ruler of the province of Judah (7:12-26). Artaxerxes's commissioning of Ezra includes a description of the contributions for the temple (7:15-24) and a royal decree to reestablish the people based upon the "law of your God" (7:13-15, 25). The people are thus asked to define themselves as part of the Jewish community by their acceptance of the Torah. Since the leaders of the community were authorized by the emperor through Ezra, the officially recognized religion of Judah was what we know as Second Temple Judaism. Persian law permitted the observance of both local law ("the law of your God") and the law of the Persian Empire.

The account of the return itself begins with a list of those who accompanied him (8:1-14). A three-day stay at the Ahava River provides the occasion for Ezra's examination of the fifteen hundred males in the company, where he discovers that there are no Levites present (vv. 15-20). No reason is given for this crisis; perhaps the Levites were aware of the inferior status they would have in the new order and either resented the curtailment of their duties or preferred the lack of liturgical responsibility they had in Babylon. Ezra realized that their presence was necessary, at least for a symbolic representation of all Israel, and he successfully persuaded thirty-eight Levites and 220 temple servants to join the company.

**Question:**

1. What role does ritual have in your life? When is it appropriate? When is it misused?

**Read: Ezra 9:1-15; 10:1-19**

**ANALYSIS: Ezra 9:1-10:44 – Ezra Works to Reconstruct the Community**

In addition to condoning, even prescribing, divorce, this troubling passage has been used to support varying degrees of intolerance and exclusivism by forbidding mixed marriages of any type. Contemporary readers are especially scandalized by the lack of provision made for the divorced women and their children.

These serious objections may be unanswerable, but the following considerations should at least be noted: Divorce was a serious matter and one which God "hated" (Malachi 2:16), though it was permitted in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 24:1). Here, the issue is theological in that it concerns extensive marriage with foreign women. There is, however, precedent for marriage outside the tribe as opposed to Israel's normal position of endogamous marriage: Esau's marriage to two Hittites (Genesis 26:34); Joseph's marriage to an Egyptian (Genesis 41:45); Moses' marriage to a Midianite (Exodus 2:21) and a Cushite (Numbers 12:1); David's marriage to a Calebite and an Aramean (2 Samuel 3:3); and the several foreign marriages of Solomon, to name the most flagrant.

The book of Ruth's portrayal of David as a descendant of a mixed marriage is often set against Ezra's reforms. Yet Boaz, her "next-of-kin," does not use her foreignness as a reason for not marrying her (Ruth 4:6). Old Testament proscriptions of intermarriage do exist (especially Deuteronomy 7:3-6), but they all seem to come after the fall of the north to Assyria in 722 B.C.E. to counter the political and religious crisis in the south.

This last observation seems to fit with Ezra's implementation of Artaxerxes' edict to reconstitute Israel as a religious community under the political rule of Persia. This redefinition of Israel's identity on religious grounds helps to explain, if not condone, Ezra's opposition to foreign wives, not for their racial or national ties, but for the effects their religious practices would have on the newly constituted community. If the people were to continue marrying outside their faith and adopting those beliefs, there soon would be no distinctively Jewish community in Jerusalem.

The reforms must be seen as a purification of the people according to a priestly ideal of separation from all that was (ritually) unclean to preserve the identity of the community. That this seems impossibly narrow-minded to us is clear. It was also absolutely necessary for the survival of the community. Furthermore, many of the returnees had divorced their Jewish wives to marry women from the indigenous population (Malachi 2:10-16). Thus, Ezra's reforms may be seen as a correction of an earlier problem of divorce and the lesser of two evils.

As regards the alleged, callous lack of provision for the divorced women and their children, the text, concerned about other matters, actually says nothing about their fate. Most modern translations (for example, NRSV) substitute the Greek parallel of 1 Esdras 9:36, "and they put them away together with their children," for Ezra 10:44, which is notoriously difficult to translate. The Hebrew text probably read something like "but there were among them wives (with whom) they had had children."

**Question:**

1. Have you ever witnessed well-meaning people use scripture to hurt others? How do we distinguish between God’s calling to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and our natural desire to be comfortable?