

Lesson 12: Ezra 8:35 – 10:44

Verses 35-36

Ezra 8:35 At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD. 36 They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God.

With verses 35-36, the narrative switches back to the third person. (“I” and “we” become “those” and “they.”) In 7:17, Artaxerxes commanded that certain offerings be made, and here in 8:35 we see that command being carried out.

The offering included 12 bulls, 96 rams, and 77 lambs. Why those numbers? Some say that the use of 12 is clearly symbolic, and 96 they note is divisible by 12. But why 77? Some argue that 77 should be 72, which is also divisible by 12, while others argue that 77 itself was symbolic for a large number. Most likely there were simply 77 lambs. (Or perhaps 77 was included just to give these commentators something to do!)

The plural “satraps” in verse 36 is seen by some as a problem because Trans-Euphrates or Beyond the River was a single satrap. Most likely the phrase also includes the Egyptian satrap, which was nearby and which also had a substantial Jewish population. We should also note that the phrase at issue is “to **the king's** satraps and to the governors **of the province** Beyond the River.” That is, the text itself suggests that the satraps, unlike the governors, were not limited to the one province but were instead the king's satraps.

The final phrase in Chapter 8 is important: “they aided the people and the house of God.” What that phrase shows is that Ezra's mission was not solely to discipline the people. His intention was constructive, although, as we will soon see, discipline was needed as well.

Ezra 9

Verses 1-5

Ezra 9:1 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and 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 to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” 3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 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. 5 And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God,

In verses 1-3, the officials approach Ezra to tell him about the problem of foreign marriages. Already Ezra’s campaign to teach people the Law was bearing “the characteristic fruit of reform.” Apparently, these same officials had not tried to solve the problem themselves (or perhaps been able to solve the problem) prior to Ezra’s arrival.

According to 10:9-11, where Ezra denounces the foreign marriages, the assembly of the exiles gathered on the 12th day of the 9th month. That is more than 4½ months after their arrival, which has caused some to wonder why it took so long for Ezra to notice the foreign marriages. In fact, he does not notice them himself, but rather is told about them in 9:1-2, and we can see his shock and dismay in verse 3.

What is the reason for the delay? The first few words in verse 1 may answer that question. The phrase “after things [that] had been done” in verse 1 may refer back to the weighing of the valuables or to the sacrifices. But another possibility is that it refers back to verse 36 and that Ezra needed some time to deliver the king’s orders to the governors and satraps. The most likely explanation for the delay is that Ezra had been travelling extensively after his arrival to visit the officials in the surrounding areas.

Marriages between the Israelites and certain foreign nations were prohibited under the Mosaic Law:

- **Exodus 34:11-16** “Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 12 Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. 13 You shall tear down their altars and break

their pillars and cut down their Asherim 14 (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), 15 lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, 16 **and you take of their daughters for your sons,** and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.”

- **Deuteronomy 7:1-4** “When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, 2 and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. 3 **You shall not intermarry with them,** giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.”

Not only do these passages prohibit the foreign marriages, they supply the reason for the prohibition – the foreign marriages would turn the Jews away from following God. The influence of the foreign mother would turn the husband and the children to her foreign gods and would introduce the foreign worship and idolatry into the worship of God. And, of course, we see that very thing happening over and over again throughout the Old Testament. The issue was not that of race but rather that of religious purity.

But we also know that foreign marriages were not that unusual. Joseph had an Egyptian wife, Moses married a Midianite and a Cushite, and Ruth, a Moabitess, holds an honored position in Jesus’ genealogy. The danger remained, however, that foreign wives could lead the people away to foreign gods, particularly when, as here, the problem had become so widespread.

The peoples mentioned in verse 1 are similar to those listed in Exodus and Deuteronomy: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. The Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians are included to bring the list up to date. While the Hivites are excluded, some of the

other ancient nations (Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites) are retained, likely to confirm the link to the original prohibition under Moses, or possibly to remind the Jews that they too could cease to exist. The names may have changed, but the sin remained the same.

Verse 2 is telling: “And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” Why were the chief men so willing to overlook the sin? Because they and their families were the most involved in it. But we know that not all of the leaders were involved in the sin because some of the leaders had told Ezra about the sin in verse 1. Some of the leaders had integrity, but apparently many others did not.

We can see here a modern parallel with a problem faced by the people of God today. It is a sad fact in the church today, but one that has been frequently confirmed by experience, that you can sometimes determine an eldership’s view on the issue of marriage, divorce, and remarriage simply by looking at the divorces and remarriages in their own families. We are given a word for that in verses 2 and 4 – faithlessness. And Ezra will give us another word for it in 10:10 – treason! They have broken faith with God.

Verses 3-5 show the effect that the news of the people’s infidelity had on Ezra – he tore his garments, pulled out his hair, and sat dumbfounded (overcome or appalled). He was not blasé when it came to sin, and he wanted those around him to know that. He understood the seriousness of the situation. Such sin as this was the reason they had been exiled in the first place – and here they were doing it again! He must have wondered if they would ever learn!

We can see a big difference here between Ezra and Nehemiah. When Ezra hears about the sin, he pulls out his own hair in verse 3. In Nehemiah 13:25, here is how Nehemiah responded when he was faced with the same problem: “I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out **their** hair.” I suppose there is a time to pull out your own hair, and a time to pull out the hair of others! Maybe that should be added to the list in Ecclesiastes 3.

Ezra is upset. Ezra is overcome. Ezra is worried. So what does Ezra do? Ezra prays.

Verses 6-15

6 saying: “O my God, I am ashamed and blush 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 fathers to this day we have been in great

guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. 8 But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. 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 grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem. 10 “And now, O 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 take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that 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, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ 13 And 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 practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? 15 O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.”

Verses 6-15 give us Ezra’s prayer, and that prayer is centered around the confession of sin and the importance of the remnant. We can compare this prayer of Ezra in Ezra 9 to that of Daniel in Daniel 9 and that of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9.

We see the first confession of sin in verses 6-7. (We will see a second in verses 10-14.) Ezra uses two metaphors to describe their sin – “our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.”

The switch from the first person singular in verse 6 (“I am ashamed”) to the first person plural in verses 6-7 (“our iniquities have risen” and “we have been in great guilt”) is interesting. Ezra identifies himself with his people and with the sin of his people. He did not come into Jerusalem to accuse them as an outsider – he was instead standing with them and describing their sins as “our” sins and “our” guilt. This scribe was praying the Publican’s Prayer!

In verse 7, Ezra looks back through their history – and he recognizes that it has been a history of sin and rebellion against God, and he understands that their exile had been caused by that sin and rebellion. “It is as if Ezra has realized that immediately in front of him are all the cumulative iniquities which have heaped up through history. What an extraordinary view of sin!”

Humiliation by foreign kings was nothing new for Israel and would continue to be nothing new. After the conquest by Babylon, the Jews were under the rule of the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Turks, and the British. The Jews have enjoyed only two periods of independence since their exile by Nebuchadnezzar: their modern state (since 1948) and from 165 to 63 BC following the Maccabean Revolt.

In verses 8-9, Ezra comes back to their current situation under the Persian kings. During the time of the Babylonian kings, the Jews had no hope of returning to Judah, but that situation had changed when the Persian Empire took over. The “brief moment” in verse 8 was a period of about 80 years during which the people had been allowed to return to Jerusalem. Ezra understood that that window could close at any time. Yes, God opens doors, **but God also closes doors**. We should not presume those open doors will remain open forever, especially if we fail to walk through them. We know of one great open door that will close with a permanent thud on the final day of judgment, but that is not the only door that God will close.

In verse 8, Ezra also recognizes that they were a remnant, and that God had spared that remnant for a purpose. The Hebrew word means “escaped remnant,” which suggests that the remnant included only those Jews who had escaped from the exile and returned to Judah. That is, those Jews who remained behind were not considered part of this remnant, at least in the eyes of Ezra.

Verse 8 also mentions the “secure hold” or “foothold” that God had given the remnant. The literal Hebrew term is “tent peg,” and it refers to a place where a nomad could pitch his tent after a long journey.

“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 the soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery.”

Finally, verse 8 says that their eyes were brightened and that they were revived in their slavery. The people were dead while in exile, but now they had been revived. The word “little” in “little reviving” is a reminder that many Jews remained in exile, which Ezra describes as slavery.

But verse 9 tells us that God had not forsaken them, even in their slavery, but had “extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia.” God had demonstrated his love to them while they were in exile. Doesn’t this bring another verse to our minds? “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

Verse 9 reminds us that this remnant had a purpose: “to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.” Some argue, based on this verse, that the temple had been destroyed during the reign of Xerxes and was rebuilt again during the time of Ezra. It all depends on how we interpret “we” and “our” in verse 9. We have already seen Ezra use those terms to refer to his people in the past as well as in the present (see verse 7). Thus, it seems most likely that the rebuilding in verse 9 refers to the earlier rebuilding under Cyrus and Darius (which all occurred during the “brief moment” of verse 8).

The word “protection” in verse 9 literally means “fence.” Some have argued from this word that when Ezra arrived the wall around the city must have already been constructed. From this they argue that Ezra must have arrived after Nehemiah built the wall, and they rearrange the chronology accordingly. The Hebrew word for “fence” used here, however, does not refer to a city wall, but rather refers to a stone fence that forms a border between property owners. It simply meant a protected area. In fact, we can see that from how it is used in verse 9 – “to give us protection **in Judea** and Jerusalem.” How could a city wall have been built around all of Judea?

Verses 10-12 are directed to Ezra’s listeners as well as to God, causing one commentator to describe the prayer as a “sermon prayer.” Ezra wanted the people to understand that all the disasters that had befallen them as a people had happened because of their disobedience to God’s commands, and so he uses the language of the Bible to help them understand. (Even today, we can often tell from a man’s prayer how well he knows and loves the Bible.)

Ezra also connected those commandments with the prophets who had warned the people about their peril. The citations in verses 11-12

come from Genesis, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Lamentations, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, although the texts are not literally quoted. Despite all that had happened to the Jews, Ezra understood that they had been punished less than their iniquities deserved. They deserved death, but God had given them life. Where is the gospel in the Old Testament? A better question might be where isn't it!

In verses 13-15, Ezra returns to the remnant. The Jews could have been completely wiped out – as had happened to many of the peoples who had opposed the Jews – but they were not. Instead, God had spared a remnant and brought that remnant back to the promised land. This remnant was evidence of God's love and God's grace. But if that remnant sinned and rebelled, then it was in danger of being destroyed. God could find another remnant – there were communities of Jews scattered all around, even down in Egypt.

A clear message here is that remnants have responsibilities! The Lord's church is also a remnant. Do we understand what that means? Do we understand our own responsibilities? If the Lord's church turns its back on God's word, then what will be left? Will we cause God to look elsewhere for a faithful remnant? "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) It is our responsibility to make sure the answer to that question is yes!

Ezra 10

Verses 1-6

Ezra 10:1 While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "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 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put 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 Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it." 5 Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. 6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking

water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Ezra 10:1 brings us back to the situation described in 9:3-5 and tells us what happened at the temple after Ezra's prayer. Notice that while Ezra 9 speaks of Ezra in the first person, Ezra 10 speaks of him in the third person. One commentary suggests that this back and forth shift is a literary device intended to let the reader see the events from different perspectives.

While Ezra prayed, he lay prostrate and weeping. "Casting himself down" in the Hebrew implies that Ezra kept "casting himself down" to the ground. This caused a crowd to gather, no doubt wondering what had caused this important official to behave in this manner. By the time the prayer was completed and the events in Chapter 10 began, we are told that a very large crowd had gathered.

Ezra's emotional state infected those around him, and by the end of verse 1 they were also weeping bitterly. Most had heard all or part of Ezra's prayer, so they knew what was causing his great distress.

Shecaniah speaks out in verses 2-4. He was likely a leader of the people, as well as someone who agreed with Ezra over the problem of intermarriage. (He also held Ezra in high esteem, calling him "my lord" in verse 3.) His father was Jehiel, and we also find a Jehiel in verse 26. If they were the same person, then Shecaniah was denouncing his own father here in verses 2-4.

Yes, Shecaniah says, we (note the first person) have sinned, and yes, the sin has been great ("we have broken faith with our God"), but there was still hope. It was not too late to repent and make things right with God. But how?

In verse 3, he tells them how. "Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children." The marriages were illegal, and there was one and only one solution to an illegal marriage – it must be ended. Both the foreign wives and the children from the mixed marriage must be put away, presumably sent back to where the wife had come from in the first place.

To many and perhaps to most today, this solution seems very harsh. And there is a reason for that – it was very harsh, but something much more important was at stake. Had the intermarriage continued, the Jewish race and the Jewish religion would have become unrecognizable in just a few generations. God had a plan for the Jews, and that plan required that they maintain their purity and

their faithfulness to God's law. This small group of Jews was surrounded by a large group of hostile, polytheistic neighbors that threatened to consume them. Ezra also knew the devastating problems that had come from the foreign marriages of Solomon and the kings who followed him. Drastic measures were called for in such a situation, and drastic measures were taken. History tells us that other Jewish communities in exile gradually disintegrated – that happened, for example, to the Jews in Egypt that we have previously discussed.

“Ezra’s decision was at a watershed in the history of Judaism, when the future of monotheism was at stake. It was a matter of deep principle, not of ethnic exclusivism, to reject marital links with the people of the land.”

And for those who point to the departure of the children as being excessively harsh, perhaps they should have asked the departing mothers for their opinion. In ancient societies (as today), when marriages were dissolved the children typically went with the mother. The harshness of that edict was directed more to the fathers, who would likely never see the children again. But sin has consequences—then and now—and often those consequences affect the innocent along with the guilty—then and now.

Continuing to address Ezra, Shecaniah says in verse 4 what every leader wants to hear: “Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” He recognizes the obvious (or at least what should be obvious) – that it is the task of the leader to lead, but he tells Ezra that the people are with him. And he encourages Ezra to “be strong and do it,” which is good advice for leaders in any generation. Sadly, rather than “be strong and do it,” leaders sometimes follow the opposite command: be weak and do nothing! And perhaps in situations like that, we, like Shecaniah, should stand up and encourage them to “be strong and do it” because “we are with you.”

Shecaniah was a man of action who recognized the urgency and seriousness of the situation. He knew what needed to be done, and he did what he could to see that it was done. He encouraged his leaders to act when action was required. We should pray that God will continue to raise up Shecaniahs!

In verses 5-6, the leaders and the people take an oath to do what had been said, and Ezra withdraws to a chamber to fast and mourn.

Earlier we mentioned that some commentators argue that Ezra arrived *after* Nehemiah rather than before Nehemiah. Verse 6 is often quoted as the best evidence for that position. Nehemiah 12:22 tells us that Johanan was the grandson of Eliashib, whom we also see in Nehemiah 3:1. They argue that the grandson of Eliashib could not have invited Ezra to use his chamber in 458 BC, but only much later. But that argument falls apart with the simple observation that Johanan was very common name, and particularly so once it had already been used in a family. That is, since we know that Eliashib had a grandson named Johanan, it is even more likely that Eliashib had a brother or a son named Johanan. As one commentator noted, “the proper name Johanan in those days is somewhat like Smith in our times.”

Verses 7-17

7 And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 8 and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles. 9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And 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 And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. 11 Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers 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. 13 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 we have greatly transgressed in this matter. 14 Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.” 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them. 16 Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers’ houses, according to their fathers’ houses, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter; 17 and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

In verse 7, a message is sent out commanding all men to appear in Jerusalem within three days for an investigation. Those who failed to do so would have their property confiscated and would be banned from the community. From 7:25-26, we recall that Ezra had authority from the King to take such actions – and in fact had authority to take much more drastic actions than this. Ezra is restraining himself!

The Hebrew word translated “confiscated” originally meant that the property would be destroyed (Joshua 6:21), but by this time it meant that the property would be delivered to the priests (Ezekiel 44:29).

Exclusion from the community meant that they would not be allowed in the temple and might even lose their citizenship. They would not be allowed to participate in the daily sacrifices, and they would not be able to call upon their kinsmen for help. They would be regarded as foreigners by the Jews.

In verse 9, all the men from Judah and Benjamin gather in Jerusalem. As for Judah and Benjamin, we saw the same phrase back in 1:5, and it likely refers to a geographical area.

The 20th day of the 9th month was in midwinter, and we see in verse 9 that the people were trembling because of the cold and the rain. In the Hebrew, “the rain” uses a plural of intensity to tell us that these were heavy, torrential rains. At this time of the year, the temperature could have been in the 40’s, which along with the rain explains the trembling. But verse 9 tells us that they were also trembling because of the matter that was being discussed.

The bad weather prevented a long speech, so Ezra gives a short one – and it is amazing how much he manages to say in such a short speech. (Again, we see the focus of Ezra. He was prepared for the occasion. He was not just winging it!) He says: “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” What more needed to be said? They had broken faith with God, and they needed to restore that broken relationship. Either they would do it, or they would not. There was no need for Ezra to repeat the same message 12 different ways in a longer speech.

And what was the key to restoring that broken relationship? Verse 11 tells us – separation. Separation from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives. And that is still God’s message today:

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:17-18)

We cannot be right with God if we refuse to separate ourselves from that which is unclean. That was true then, and that is true now.

Here in Chapter 10, what that meant was that these men had to separate themselves from their foreign wives. But I thought that God hates divorce? Yes, that is what Malachi 2:16 tells us, but we need to look more closely at that prophecy. Malachi was most likely a close contemporary to the events described here in Ezra, perhaps prophesying in the early 5th century prior to Ezra's arrival. If we look at the context of Malachi 2:16, we will find that he fills in an important piece of the puzzle here. Let's start reading at verse 11:

Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, **and hath married the daughter of a strange god.** 12 The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. 13 And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. 14 Yet ye say, Wherefore? **Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously:** yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. 15 And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. 16 **For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away:** for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

What those verses tell us is that some of these men who were marrying foreign wives were abandoning their Jewish wives to do so.

Thus, the complaint (still heard today) that Ezra was destroying families would have and should have fallen on deaf ears – Ezra was not the home wrecker here! If anything, he was trying to put the homes back together.

Another reason behind the foreign marriages suggested by some commentators is that the men may have largely outnumbered the women among the returning exiles. And while that is a possibility, that is not an excuse to disobey God's word.

We might pause for a moment and consider what relevance, if any, these chapters in Ezra have with regard to current questions about divorce and remarriage. I would make just two quick points on that issue:

1. The question often arises today about whether a remarriage without scriptural grounds should continue or should be dissolved. Those who argue for its dissolution stress (rightfully) that one can hardly be said to have repented of a sin that one continues to engage in. And those who argue for the opposite view often say that God hates divorce, and so the marriage should continue, perhaps for the sake of the children. Ezra would seem to have something to tell us with regard to that point of view. God has our eternal destiny in mind, and we should as well.
2. Many sermons and lessons on divorce and remarriage have been preached and written from the pages of Ezra, but when I read such lessons I think of what Abraham told Lazarus in Luke 16:31 – “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” To paraphrase, I would say, “If they do not hear Jesus in Mathew 19:9, they will not be convinced by Ezra.” “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” One has to work pretty hard to misunderstand that verse! It certainly needs no clarification from Ezra.

In verses 12-13, the people agree about what needs to be done, but they have three reasons why it should not be done right now. First, there are too many people here. Second, it is raining. Third, there are too many cases to be decided.

But they also had a proposed solution for those problems, and we see that in verse 14. (This shows that they were not just trying to delay and avoid fixing the problem.) Their proposed solution was for the officials to organize things locally, and then for those affected to come to Jerusalem with their local leaders and judges. They understood that these were very delicate matters, and they wanted things to be handled fairly. Ezra apparently agrees with the proposal because this is what they do in verses 16-17.

But in between verses 12-14 and verses 16-17, we have the opposition in verses 15: “Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.” (And there will always be a verse 15 between the problem and the solution!)

Verse 15 has been called “one of the most difficult verses in the whole book of Ezra.” To what do “this” and “them” refer? The most likely interpretation is that Asahel and Jahzeiah opposed the delay – they wanted to take immediate action. But it also possible that they opposed the drastic measures, perhaps because they themselves had foreign wives. And what about Meshullam and Shabbethai? Did they support the delay, or did they support the proposal for the delay? The Hebrew could mean either. (Verse 29 might provide a clue in that Meshullam is listed among the offenders, but that was a very common name – there are perhaps as many as 10 different Meshullam’s in Ezra and Nehemiah!) In short, all we can say for sure is that they were opposed to something – which is probably all we need to say.

The process begins on the first day of the tenth month and ends on the first day of the first month – which is about 75 days. If we compare that with the list of 110 cases that concludes this chapter, it means that they dealt with fewer than two cases a day on average. Why so few? First, they were complicated matters, and the people had been told to come to Jerusalem in an organized manner. Second, some may have been found innocent, which means their cases would not have been listed in verses 18-44, Third, it is possible that not all the cases were listed in verses 18-44.

Verses 18-44

Ezra 10:18 Now there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah, some of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers. 19 They pledged themselves to put away their wives, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt. 20 Of the sons of Immer: Hanani and

Zebadiah. 21 Of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah. 22 Of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasa. 23 Of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers: Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri. 25 And of Israel: of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. 26 Of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. 27 Of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. 28 Of the sons of Bebai were Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. 29 Of the sons of Bani were Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. 30 Of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh. 31 Of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. 33 Of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. 34 Of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu. 38 Of the sons of Binnui: Shimei, 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah. 44 All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.

The book of Ezra ends with what has been called a list of shame – a list of those who had married foreign wives in violation of the law. But it is also a list of the repentant because verse 44 tells us that each of them sent the foreign wives and children away.

The list begins with the priests, which shows how deeply this problem ran among the exiles. It even affected the high-priestly family of Jeshua.

The guilt offering in verse 19 is also described in Leviticus 5:14-26. Interestingly, it usually referred to an unintentional transgression, which means that it is possible that these marriages were considered an unintentional act. Favoring that view is the notion that the people may not have been aware of the finer distinctions of the law until Ezra was sent to teach them. But is the prohibition against foreign marriages really a fine distinction? Also, when read alongside Malachi, it is hard to see how this sin could be called unintentional.

Also interesting is that the pledge and the guilt offering in verse 19 are mentioned only for the priests. If they were the only ones who did it, then it may have been because their transgression was worse due to

their position. But a more likely explanation is that verse 19 was the example that all the rest also followed, but it was simply not repeated over and over again in the text for each group.

A final interesting observation is that the temple servants were not mentioned. Perhaps they were too numerous to list, which would also answer our earlier question about the paucity of cases. Or perhaps this problem was one that affected only the higher social classes.

After listing the priests and the Levites, verse 25 begins the list of those “of Israel.” Sometimes Israel is used in this book to refer to all the people (priests and Levites included), and sometimes (as here) it is used to refer to people other than the priests and the Levites. Four of the families mentioned here do not also occur in the list of earlier returnees found in Ezra 2.

Verse 44 is an unusual ending, and there seems to have been some corruption from the original text. Literally the verse reads: “All these had married foreign women and there was from them women and they put children.”

But is verse 44 the last word from Ezra? No. He will disappear from the written record for about 13 years, but we see him again in Nehemiah 8 sometime after Nehemiah’s arrival in 445 BC– and we see him, in this same city square, still reading the Law, still doing the Law, and still teaching the Law! If you are looking for an example of faithfulness, godliness, commitment, and integrity, you won’t do much better than Ezra. And for an example of faithfulness, determination, and courage, you won’t do much better than Queen Esther.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are a single book, and Nehemiah follows immediately after these events in Ezra 10. But our study must end here in Ezra (at least for now!).