

Chapter Nine

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Where in the Bible have Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Amorites been mentioned before?
2. What marks of a good leader did Ezra show when he was confronted with the people's sins?
3. What does Ezra's prayer reveal about Israel's economic conditions at this time?
4. Do you think Ezra was racially biased?

OUTLINE

In this chapter Ezra is made aware of the problem of mixed marriages: marriages of the people of Israel to foreigners.

- C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
1. Ezra is informed of the problem (vss. 1-5).
 2. Ezra prays about it (vss. 6-15).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
1. Ezra is informed of the problem.

TEXT, 9:1-5

- 1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of 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, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands or the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.”

- 3 And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.
- 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.
- 5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;

COMMENT

Verses 1, 2 reveal how Ezra received the information.

Verse 1 indicates a space in time since the previous verse: it could have been a few weeks, but it couldn't have been much more than four months (cf. 10:9). It was the princes, the civil authorities and not the religious leaders who came to Ezra. They indicated that the three groups mentioned earlier in the book, the people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, were all involved. They may have mentioned the people of Israel first to soften the blow for the priests and other religious leaders, or else because it was the group of which they were a part.

The people of the lands were of two kinds: (1) people who had not been driven out of Palestine when Israel had settled there originally, but who had remained even through the period of Israel's exile (Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites. Josh. 9:1); and (2) neighboring nations (Moabites, Egyptians, and Ammonites). These had introduced abominations into Israel's culture.

The problem of mixed marriages has already been discussed in reference to the Samaritans at Ezra 4:3. It was nothing as simple as a marriage between a Baptist and a Presbyterian, or even between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic or a Jew.

These foreign people worshiped other gods in ways that were incompatible with Israel's worship, i.e., by sacred prostitution and human sacrifice. Remains of infants buried alive in jars throughout the land testify to the reality of this evil.¹ Thus the things that were most religious to them were absolutely irreligious to Israel. The O.T. never sanctions freedom of religions in this context.

For a further description of the sin involved in these marriages to foreign (strange) women, and of the warnings against them, see Prov. 1-9, especially 2:16; 5:20; 7:5, where "foreign" is used as a synonym of "adulterous."

There was a way to marry a person of another ethnic background, as the story of Ruth illustrates, if conversion had taken place. Rahab, the harlot at Jericho, entered the Messianic line (Mt. 1:5), and Uriah the Hittite married a Jewish girl (Bathsheba, later David's wife) and became one of the thirty most respected men in David's army (II Sam. 23:39). In the O.T. nationalities of persons are more descriptive of their religions than of their citizenship or ethnic origins.

Some of these people of the land may have been outside landholders,² and therefore wealthy. We know from Malachi (2:11, 14) that at a date not too far from Ezra a number of Israelites divorced their first wives, who were of their race, to marry foreign women. If this is the situation which Ezra is describing, then there was a second sin, of unfaithfulness and violation of a previous marriage, involved as well. The temptation would be strong; intermarriage would offer the people of Israel a chance to move up economically; it would offer the foreign peoples a way to enter the approved social structure of the country and solidify their holdings. In the process, spiritual and human values would be crushed.

It was all the more disgrace that the nation's leaders, religious as well as civil, were the leaders in this evil.

1. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (abridged), p. 12, mentions these, but minimizes them. Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*, devotes an entire chapter to the "abominations of the heathen," p. 270ff.

2. *Anchor Bible*, op. cit., p. 77.

Verses 3 to 5 portray Ezra's reaction.

Verse 3 shows Ezra alone, but in public view in the Temple compound, expressing his dismay. The tearing of garments was a method frequently used throughout the Bible for this purpose (Num. 14:6; Ac. 14:14). Pulling out a part of his hair and beard would be a much less frequent mark of profound humility, sorrow, or disgrace, since the beard in particular was a symbol of one's age and therefore wisdom and honor (Isa. 15:2). Note that Mephibosheth neglected his beard at a particularly evil time (II Sam. 19:24).

His sitting down and showing his horror (cf. Job 2:13) would continue to impress his feelings on the public.

Verse 4 testifies of the effect this had on the community. All of those who feared, i.e., revered God (trembled at the words of God), who were similarly dismayed at the conduct of the evil-doers, gathered about him as he continued to sit in an attitude of apparently speechless astonishment into the middle of the afternoon.

Verse 5 portrays Ezra's taking the problem to God in prayer, torn robe and all. Stretching forth the hands was the attitude of petition.

2. Ezra's prayer is set down for us.

TEXT, 9:6-15

- 6 and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.
- 7 "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of 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, and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day.
- 8 "But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to

- give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.
- 9 “For we are slaves; yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.
- 10 “And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Thy commandments,
- 11 which Thou hast commanded by Thy servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to take possession of is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.
- 12 ‘So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’
- 13 “And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since Thou our God hast requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us an escaped remnant as this,
- 14 shall we again break Thy commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Wouldst Thou not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?
- 15 “O LORD God of Israel, Thou art righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before Thee in our guilt, for no one can stand before Thee because of this.”

COMMENT

Verses 6-9 rehearse the story of the captivity to Ezra's time. *Verse 6* records his embarrassment over the people's sins.

Though he had not committed them, yet he uses the first person, "our," indicating his full identification with the people. This was the function of a priest, as a mediator, interceding in behalf of his people. This is the mark of any great leader, understanding those whom he leads, and sharing in their fortunes. So Moses had asked God to include him in any punishment of His people (Ex. 32:32).

Note the parallelisms so characteristic of Hebrew poetry in his prayer; "iniquity" paralleled by "guilt"; "risen" or "multiplied" paralleled by "grown"; "above our heads" paralleled by "to the heavens."

Verse 7 is particularly a confession of the sin of the people; by praying it in public he would hopefully be voicing or shaping the thoughts of all who heard. Ezra acknowledged that their military defeat and captivity had been occasioned by their sin. It may not be possible to say positively today that the nation which does not sin would be spared military defeat, but it would at least remove one of the causes.

Next, in *verse 8*, is a mention of God's grace, which must ever follow the acknowledgment of sin. By God's grace a remnant had been able to return from exile. By His grace they had been given a firm hold, or abiding place (this is the significance of the peg, or nail, driven in securely, on which other things could depend), within God's house. So the table of showbread with its twelve loaves (Lev. 24:5-9) within the Tabernacle and Temple had been a reminder that the twelve tribes had a place before God and were on His mind continually. By His grace the sparkle would be brought back to their eyes (that is what enlightenment accomplishes) and they would be renewed.

Verse 9 tells us that their bondage was not completely over. Their nation was still very much under the control of the Persians, and all their activities could only be undertaken with their permission. The wall referred to here is not the physical wall of stone which surrounded the city; that had not yet been rebuilt; it was that protection with which God surrounded His people. That protected not Jerusalem alone, but all Judah as well.

Verses 10-15 deal with the situation which was before Ezra at that very moment.

Verse 10 acknowledges that what the people had done was a violation of the commandments which God had made known previously to them.

Verses 11, 12 are a composite, made up of quotations from many Scriptures. The *Anchor Bible* lists a number of different passages:

- a) the land you are going to possess: Dt. 4:5ff
- b) a polluted land, polluted by the peoples of the lands: Lam. 1:17; Lev. 18:25ff; 20:22ff.
- c) their abominations: Dt. 18:9; II Ki. 16:3; 19:2; II Chr. 28:3; 33:2, and Ezekiel often.
- d) have filled it from one end to the other: II Ki. 21:16.
- e) do not give your daughters: Dt. 7:3.
- f) do not even seek their peace or welfare: Dt. 23:6.
- g) that you may be strong: Dt. 11:8.
- h) eat the good things of the land: Isa. 1:19; Gen. 45:18.
- i) bequeath it to your sons forever: Ezek. 37:25b.

This says something of Ezra's knowledge of the Scriptures, and of his expectation that they would be available or familiar to his hearers.

Moses is quoted (Dt. 7:3) among the prophets, for this is how he spoke of himself (Dt. 18:15). Add this to the fact that the books of Kings were classified among the prophets in the ancient Hebrew canon, and every one of these phrases can be found among the writings of the prophets.

Verse 13 calls to mind two gracious acts of God. (1) The punishment of the Captivity was merciful; it was less than they deserved. This evaluation varies from Isaiah's (40:2), who proclaims that God had meted out double for Israel's sin. There is no conflict between the two: Isaiah is speaking of the fact that God has counted the debt more than paid, and they may rest in the enjoyment of forgiveness. Ezra is showing humility in acknowledging that God would have been justified if He had required more. The person standing in the place of the sinner can

never claim that forgiveness is deserved or earned; he has no right, being the offender, to say what is a reasonable repayment for his offense.

(2) The second gracious act of God was in allowing them to return from captivity. History does not record the names of many nations as completely vanquished as Israel was, who have been spared and given another opportunity to rise to worldwide significance. Ezra has already listed the many ways in which God led a foreign power to assist their reconstruction.

Verse 14 draws the conclusion therefore that it would be most unwise for them to repeat the selfsame error that brought them to captivity before. It would be presuming too much to expect that God would spare them and deliver them again, or that He would leave the slightest remnant of their nation the next time.

Verse 15 repeats the conviction that God is righteous in the things He has done for them. The last half of the verse is in the frame of reference of a court scene; Israel stands before God having been taken in the very act of sin and known to be guilty. No one can stand, i.e., abide or be acquitted (cf. *Psa. 1:5* for similar language) before God, the judge from whom no transgression is hidden.

WORD STUDIES

PEG: Nail, tentpeg (vs. 8, *Yathed*): the basic idea is of that which is driven in firmly, or fixed fast, to render something stable. A good ruler or prince, on whom the welfare of the state depends (i.e., hangs down), would be described as a tentpeg (*Zech. 10:4*).

BONDAGE (vss. 8, 9): condition of laboring, working, serving. A servant or a slave would be described by this term. It occurs in the name Ebed, or Obed; remember David's grandfather in *Ruth 4:17*? It is used of tilling the ground also (*Gen. 4:2*). In slightly different form it is used in a religious sense, of our service or worship.

WALL (vs. 9, *Gader*): that which surrounds or encloses. The

three consonants appear in different order in our words “guard” and “garden.” So God guards His people, as His garden.

OFFERING (vss. 4, 5, Minchah): for a description of this particular offering see Ex. 29:38-46. The word emphasizes its nature as a gift or present. Although it can describe offerings of either meat or grain (it is used of both Abel’s and Cain’s offering, Gen. 4:3, 4), it usually designates the meal (grain) offering. By its nature as a gift, its chief purpose was to portray fellowship between God and His people.

SUMMARY

Ezra was informed by the rulers that a number of the people, including religious leaders as well as citizens and rulers, had violated God’s law and married foreigners. This would involve the introduction of pagan religion into their culture, and would endanger their social structure. Ezra reacted by tearing his clothes, pulling his hair, sitting in silence, and finally praying. People gathered about him as he confessed his countrymen’s sins, as he recalled how God had dealt with similar infractions in the past, and as he acknowledged that they had no excuse for their action and no reason for believing they could escape punishment.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the particular sin the people were committing, and who were involved?
2. How did Ezra react to news of their sin?
3. What can we learn from Ezra’s prayer to make our own prayers more meaningful?