



Ezra

Trauma, Bigotry, and the Will of God

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Introduction

Overcoming Devotional Haze

Ezra and Nehemiah are two extremely popular books to study devotionally. Nehemiah probably wins out between the two in terms of popularity because of its narrative – the building of the walls of Jerusalem is easier to relate to hurdles in our own life than ancient bureaucracy. The two are often looked at uncritically. Ezra and Nehemiah both are lifted up as heroes who led their people through hard times and did everything they had to do no matter the opposition. That impulse is not unfounded and much can be learned from the leadership of both figures – but not all of it is positive.

There are thousands of leadership studies that extol all the virtues of these two, and I think that much of that praise is warranted. However, I do not believe that we are given Ezra to simply look at what their response to their situation was and give it a rubber stamp of approval. Instead, I believe the revelation offered by the story of these two leaders is more complex. There are definite high notes, signs of devotion and strength. There are also many low notes, the lingering effects of trauma and the use of bigotry to establish a new normal.

In the aftermath (and truly the continuation,) of a Global Pandemic, we all have to respond to changes around us. To do this, we must make tough choices about what of the old world stays, and what of it has to go. What Ezra can offer us is a guide to what this sort of work looks like, if only we can see past our devotional haze.

Ezra's Central Trauma

The Babylonian Exile is the center point on which all of the Old Testament turns. While God's people trace their origins to a proto-Babylonian man named Abram, and while the Torah shows us prior troubles in Egypt and the Wilderness, these stories were written and refined in the shadow of Babel. The narratives laid out across the Hebrew Bible are written by people trying to make sense of a world that keeps striking out against them. The relative peace of one era is often short-lived and quickly consumed by the violence and warfare of another. One empire rises, another falls, but the one that started it all was Babylon.

There is some debate over just how much autonomy Israel ever had in the ancient world. While David and Solomon ruled a united, autonomous kingdom at the beginning of the first millennium BCE, the subsequent nations of Israel and Judah were less fortunate. Egypt was the major power in the world in the initial years of their formation, and it is likely that the two nations were heavily influenced by their neighboring power if not directly under its control. The Merneptah Steele makes mention of "Israel," as one of Egypt's defeated neighbors in Canaan. This is likely referring to the earlier tribal confederation, as the Monarchy would not reign for another 200 hundred years after this Steele was written.

The early influence of other nations and empires would not be a totality until the Assyrian Empire launched a Southern Campaign against Egypt, conquering everything they ran into along the way. This campaign resulted in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the conversion of Judah into a vassal state. Assyria deported the survivors of the conquest to other parts of the empire, excepting those that escaped to Judah. Of the twelve tribes, only Levi and Judah remained in any significant numbers. The rest scattered to the wind or else were killed.

The Assyrians ruled over the Levant for about one hundred years, gradually losing control of Egypt and then being conquered themselves by the neo-Babylonian empire at the end of the seventh century BCE. The brief instability following this would not have given much relief to Judah, who immediately shifted their focus to defense against Babylon. Initially, Judah served as a vassal state, Jeconiah the king being deported to Babylon and his brother, Zedekiah given the throne. In Jeremiah we see this period explained through the Prophet's ministry. The popular idea was that God would use Zedekiah to free Judah from Babylon, something that Jeremiah actively worked to reveal as a false prophecy.¹ Sure enough, Zedekiah tried to rebel against his masters, resulting in the complete destruction of Jerusalem in 587.

The loss of their homeland devastated the people of God. The rich, along with some laborers, were deported to become dignitaries and slaves of the empire. Those that remained in the land were serfs to regional government. Finally, a small contingent escaped to Egypt, being guided by an ever reluctant Jeremiah in their new diaspora existence. The many threads of people, now called Yehudiim after their provinces name, became the Jewish people. Babylon would eventually shift to be under the rule of the Medes but retain most of its lands. Then the Medes fell to the Persians under Cyrus the Great. The shift in Babylonian and Median to Persian is what begins the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, and sets up its central conflicts. Ezra and Nehemiah are both on the Persian payroll, and their work in Judah will be a sign of their subservience, and resistance to their imperial masters.

¹ Jeremiah 28:9 gives us a grim vision of how low expectations were at the time, as Jeremiah refutes positive prophecy by essentially saying, "God only gives bad news these days, I'll believe your 'peace,' when I see it."

Ezra Chapter 1-2: The Edict of Cyrus

Persian Politics of Return – Ezra 1

The opening of Ezra is a record of a statement put out by Cyrus the Great's government following his conquering of Babylon. The "Edict of Return," was not a single statement to any single group, but a call for those displaced under Babylonian and Assyrian rule to return to their ancestral homes and to rebuild their kingdoms. In particular, a call is put out to rebuild religious centers. The Temples and Shrines of the Gods are to be rebuilt throughout the Empire. The proclamation of Ezra 1 is either a rewriting of this proclamation for a Jewish audience or the specific proclamation given to the Jewish people. The only existing copy of an original edict of return is found on the "Cyrus Cylinder," a football sized record of an edict of return.²

The cylinder presents a romanticized version of Cyrus's conquest. The ruler of Babylon is called a "low person." His offerings to the Gods are described as offensive to Marduk, the chief God of Neo-Babylonian religion. In this presentation, Marduk looked out at the nations of the world and chose Cyrus to rule over his empire. The fierce battles of the war are erased as the cylinder describes armies laying down their arms and cheering as Cyrus enters Babylon. Cyrus then mandates that the Gods of each kingdom, whose idols were taken to Babylon as "slaves," to Marduk be returned to their sanctuaries so they may be worshipped.³ This worship is self-serving on Cyrus's part. The cylinder names the Gods as praying for the welfare of the King. Beyond this though, such a demonstration of goodwill builds the strength of the empire.

² Image and profile available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941

³ Translated full text available at: <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/cyrus-cylinder/cyrus-cylinder-translation/>

Ezra's presentation of the edict is consistent with what the Cyrus cylinder tells us, however it is clearly shaped to be more palatable to the Jewish exilic community. Rather than Marduk being the one who ordered the return of the people, Ezra places Israel's God as the actor. The general call to equip people to rebuild their temples becomes specific – the Jewish people are to return to rebuild their Temple. The language of the cylinder speaks in the past tense when it discusses building temples, and so does not explain how the building projects are to be paid for. Later in Ezra we will get an idea of the particulars of funding.

Cyrus's return of the vessels in the Temple reflects the "return of Gods," theme in the Cyrus Cylinder. Because there are no (surviving,) idols to Israel's God, only the vessels of the Temple remain to be returned. For people who had representations of their God, those would be given in the same way. The collection of money from neighbors is described in similar terms to the "plundering of the Egyptians," in Exodus 12. The exact nature of the collection is not stated. It is not likely that the Diaspora Jews would go house to house until they had enough money to make the journey. There were likely specific collections led by local officials to facilitate funding the trip, although we can never be sure of the exact process.

The List of the Exiles – Ezra 2

The list in Ezra 2 explains in detail the number of the returnees and the families they came from. A special attention is given to the descendants of the Temple Servants, priests, Levites, and Royal servants. The list is given to legitimize the exilic community. A theme that develops throughout Ezra is the idea that the only real Jews are those that return to Jerusalem when given the chance. This exclusive vision of Judea is not to be taken as a true ideal (Esther would be excluded for example,) but it is what Ezra presents as the ideal.

Ezra Chapter 3-4: Laying the Foundations

The Joy and the Sorrow of Return – Ezra 3

Chapter 3 opens up with another glimpse into one of the themes of Ezra Nehemiah – religious fervor. The exilic community is who will begin putting together the Hebrew Bible as we know it today. Until now the pieces of scripture which we know and love are scattered. Some people and communities might have copies of one or a few books, some may have ones that we have never even heard of, but all these disparate pieces are brought together and edited during the Persian period of Judean history. Part of this consolidation is to look at the history of God's people through the lens of Exile. An answer needs to be given for why God allowed Babylon and Assyria to conquer Israel and Judah.

The answer is not given as one single cause throughout scripture. Some prophets see a lack of religious devotion as the root cause of exile, others focus on the moral failings of God's people, and still others seem to see it as the unfolding of history without any particular reason other than happenstance behind it. The two dominant themes of religious devotion and morality are the ones that win out as the primary explanations that scripture gives as to why God's people have suffered. Ezra is not concerned with moral questions of caring for others in community, though we might see some elements here and there of protecting the Exilic community. Instead, religion is the basis of Ezra's analysis of Israel's history.

This religious devotion is focused on "orthopraxy," or "right action." The community is expected to live together in accordance with the laws and ordinances of God as much as physically possible. They are to eat, sleep, and breathe devotion. This means obeying all sacrificial and ritual practices exactly as prescribed. This is reflected in the altar predating even the foundations of the Temple. God must be worshipped before God even has a home to rest in.

The religious fervor seen here is, largely, value neutral. However, we will see in the coming chapters the beginning of a dark side to Ezra's reforms. Before we go into this though, we need to look at the reaction of the people to the foundations of the Temple being laid. The people weep, some out of joy and some out of sorrow. The exact reason for the mourning of the people is not clear. The emphasis is placed on them being older members of the exilic community. The time from the destruction of Solomon's temple to the building of the foundations here was about 50 years, so it was likely that some among the exiles would have seen Solomon's Temple before its destruction. To those exiles, the new foundation probably seemed puny, it wasn't what it once was, and so they wept at the loss of fortune their people had seen.

The balance of living after disaster is in building back some semblance of the comfort we once knew while not being consumed by it. We naturally long for a simpler or better past, but as Ecclesiastes 7:10 reminds us, "Do not ask, 'Why were the former days better than these?'" For it is not from Wisdom that you ask this." The past is not truly some golden place we need to return to, it is something that no longer exists except in memory. We build up a new future, and while it must build up from the past and honor the memories we hold, it cannot consume them all.

It is my belief, as an interpreter, that the exilic community gave in to their nostalgia, and so attempted to create a perfect vision of Judah-as-it-was. The sad fact is that the world they create as a result is not truly what Judah was once, not even in its greatest moments in history. The Kingdom is smaller, the people are fewer, and the edicts that come from the leaders of the people are far crueler. As we step to the first instance of exclusionary actions on the part of the Exilic community, I hope we can see that not everything about the return was a step forward – indeed many parts of it were steps backward into far darker places.

Building Delays – Ezra 4

The opening of Ezra 4 shows us that there is still a diversity of people in Judea and its surrounding areas. While we often imagine the land to be barren, devoid of any people or life, Ezra is clear that there are plenty of people in the land that was once Israel. The various deportations from Judah to Babylon, and from Israel to the wider Assyrian empire before it, were not total displacements of people. There were those who lived in both the Northern and Southern Kingdom. The exile of the Northern tribes was on a far larger scale than the Babylonian activity in Judah. The policy among Assyrian deportations was that, by displacing people, it was harder for rebellions to form. Babylon, however, was more interested in bringing nobility from one place to another to become cogs in the administrative machine of the Empire.

Those who remained in the land developed a culture separately from those who were deported. Unfortunately, we have very little record of what this looked like. The Northern Culture was preserved more than the Southern, as the Northern “people of the land,” became known over time as “Samaritans.” Yes, the origin of the New Testament people is seen as far back as the return of the exilic community. The Samaritan communities were distinct in their religious practices from the exiles, having worshipped apart from them for generations before the deportation and without any of the Babylonian influence that defined Exilic Judaism.

Despite these differences, the two groups were still connected by more than just the land they lived in. The people of the land worshipped the God of Israel, they were almost certainly descended from the original tribal people of Israel, and they sought after the good of the Exilic community through participation in the building of the Temple (at least a party among them.) The Exilic community, however, saw them as outsiders. Any connection they had could not overcome the differences imposed by exile.

The exact reason for this rejection seems to be rooted in community formation. By being exclusive in their interpretation of what it means to be “God’s people,” the Exilic community regains some of the power they lost through their displacement. No longer able to hold political power outside of what Persia allows them, they can assert themselves as distinct from the “rabble” around them. The “People of the Land,” even though they are their siblings in faith, and very likely by blood, become outsiders in a power play against Persia. This move is given a legal justification, that it was the exilic community alone that was asked to build the temple, but it will take on a religious tenor when Ezra arrives later in the book.

It is probably not only because of this back and forth of exclusion that opposition to the Temple arises in Judea. The presence of the exiles was probably cause enough for some conflict – you cannot have a large amount of people enter an area without some amount of conflict emerging. The specific actions taken against the people is vague – bribery was used to prevent certain amounts of progress. Definite action was taken when a formal request was sent to Persian authorities to halt the construction of the Temple. The local detractors seemed to have been waiting for a ruler to take power that would be less interested in the religious reconstruction programs of Cyrus.

The letter is made out to “Ahasuerus,” which is likely a title rather than a name. It is used elsewhere to describe Darius I and the emperor in the narrative of Esther. Whoever this king is, his reign allowed for the opponents of the exilic community to write their initial statement to Persian authorities. This letter echoes the accusations against Jews in the Greek version of Esther. The substance of these accusations are secondary to their existence, however they seem to be based off of Zedekiah’s rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. Either way, the plan works, and Persia shuts down the Temple work for a time.

Ezra Chapter 5-6: Bureaucracy to the Rescue

Chapter 5: Build it Anyway

The way to begin our discussion of chapter 5 and 6 is by reading Haggai. Take a break, pick up your Bible and read what Haggai's prophecy was all about. I'll see you in about ten minutes (it is pretty short.)

Haggai gives us the religious justification for why the Exiles begin to build the temple again. God, speaking through the prophet, points to the absurdity of building a city around the foundations of an uncompleted temple. The particular claim is that the people have built up houses for themselves but not for God. Interestingly, this episode contrasts God's response to David in 2 Samuel 7. There, David sees his own palace and decides it is not right that God's presence, the ark of the Covenant, stays in a tent while he lives in luxury. David sets out to build the Temple, but God stops him from doing so – putting an emphasis on building up Israel before building a temple. The opposite seems true for the exiles, perhaps because the temple acts as a nucleus for the exiles to cling to, something that solidifies their identity under empire.

Laura Carlson Hasler discusses the impetus behind something like this in an article she wrote for *The Bible and Critical Theory*.⁴ We will return to her thesis a few times. Essentially, the argument goes that in the face of an empire that spans most of the known world, it is necessary for the oppressed in that empire to build up little places of their own. The “Everywhere,” of the Empire is contrasted with the “Somewhere,” they build and the “Nowhere,” that they put outsiders within. The ultimate act of building “Somewhere,” in this schema is the construction of the Temple, the house of God, once again in the midst of the people.

⁴ Laura Carlson Hasler. “Persia is Everywhere Where Nothing Happens Imperial Ubiquity and Its Limits in Ezra-Nehemiah” in *The Bible & Critical Theory*. Vol. 16 no. 1. 2020

Haggai is mentioned as the one who motivated, alongside Zechariah, Zerubbabel to order the temple to be built once again. The reasoning is as is explained above, but this movement makes the local governor concerned. Looking at the sudden movement of people, he sends investigators to give an account of what exactly is going on and who signed off on it. A consistent theme of Persian era scripture, whether Ezra or Esther, is the overly litigious nature of Persian leadership. Everything is recorded, everything has a paper (or clay in this case,) trail leading from who planned it to who did it. This is what saves Mordechai in Esther, and it is what allows the Temple to proceed in Ezra.

The next chapter records the search for the document that the Exiles cite as justification for their building project. However, in this chapter we are given enough to explore another angle of the complex relationship between the Exiles and Empire. Now, after some time has passed, the same cogs that halted construction again are called upon to protect the project. While the return to building the temple was done without the explicit permission of the current regime, it should be noted that it is not in God that the exiles find justification to keep building, but in Cyrus's edict. The exiles are using empire against empire.

This back and forth shows one of the most difficult messages of Ezra to nail down. Is earthly power friend or foe? Do we bow to the systems that are to get what we need? Or is it possible to resist openly the evils of the powerful and to remain morally clean in as complex a situation as the Exiles found themselves in? In more New Testament terms, what does it really mean to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's? We will find no clean answer in Ezra, but we will definitely go head to head with this issue again and again.

Chapter 6: Paperwork to the Rescue

We typically think of Paperwork as a modern phenomenon, but as long as people have been able to write they have been recording anything and everything however they can. In the Ancient Near East, clay tablets were some of the most common ways of transmitting information. Papyrus was used for some documentation, but if you wanted something to last it had to be carved into something. The clay tablets from the Persian period are the records which we can glean the most from. Extensive libraries dating back further than Israel's existence give us snapshots of a world long past, and point to a complex system of dignitaries and scribes often lost to time.

Chapter 6 shows that Darius, having received the news that the Jerusalem temple was commissioned during the edict of return calls for a search to be made for any surviving document of the particular arrangement made with the exiles. The search shows nothing in any of the expected places, like Babylon itself, but in the Median capital an answer is found. The language of the edict is far from the grandiose statement made in Ezra 1, and so reflects a parallel statement regarding financing or perhaps a more original version of the document than Ezra 1 records. The text of this decree is written in Aramaic as opposed to Hebrew, suggesting it does have an extra-biblical origin. However, it should also be acknowledged that the whole of 4:8-6:18 and much of 7 are in Aramaic. This entire section, and not just the edict, are therefore likely from a secondary version of Ezra.

Beyond the language used to write this section, the word choice leads to some interesting possibilities. The basics of this are already known to us, that the people are to come into their ancestral home and build the Temple. Darius adds to this in his edict to not only ask for the construction to continue, but to make clear that it is for the good of the Empire that every God

supports the reign of the king – adding sacrificial animals to the list of supplies given to the builders.

We saw that the vessels were given to the people in their return from Babylon, and even pointed to them as substitutions for idols that were returned to other holy places. The vessels served another function, they legitimized the Exiles in the eyes of their own people and in the eyes of their imperial oppressors. The vessels, probably now the third or fourth iteration since the time of David, were not original to Israel's founding myth, but they were *representative* of it. To hold up censers and candlesticks that were lit in Solomon's temple, placed now in the Exile's temple, shows that God's presence continues, and the people who now sit in the land are inheritors of their ancestors' legacy.

The worm turns, however, in how this legacy is lived out. By acknowledging themselves as the heirs to their predecessors' religion, they are living into the promises God made to Abraham and his progeny. However, they also deny the distance that sits between them and their ancestors in making this move to worship as it was. The Exile has changed the people of God, they have new ideas of who God is and how God works in the world. Yet, as the Temple is built and the vessels returned, they will put on the trappings of the good old days, asserting that their version of the faith is the way things had always been.

Think of us now, after so many upheavals in our lives, and especially this pandemic. Facing all kinds of situations that demand us to examine our way of life, and way of worship, and way of being – are we finding ourselves rushing to wrap ourselves in what was? Our exile from Church is solved by our return to in-person worship, we are transformed, but will we acknowledge that transformation? Or will we languish in nostalgia for a world that never was.

Ezra Chapter 7-8: Enter Ezra

Chapter 7: The Glory of God in Political Texts

I cannot think of a single time when I have read a statement by a politician and thought, “This is God doing something amazing.” Perhaps I am a cynic, but political activity is so often rooted in personal gain and powerplays that I find it hard to find anything to be overly hopeful. Even the things I do like, often have their dark side to them. An endless struggle, a constant back and forth between respecting the powers that be, and holding them accountable, and the fatalism that constant abuse of power encourages in us. Still, there is often a feeling that God, being in control of all the universe, does have influence on leaders of the world. Whether they listen to the call upon them to govern faithfully is a personal choice, but it is one that still rings out to them daily.

Ezra, now entering into the narrative, presents the current kings – Artaxerxes – as another servant of God in the style of Cyrus. While not quite as grandiose as the opening of Ezra 1, there is still a sense that the King sending Ezra is an act of extreme piety and devotion. The letter recounted by Ezra is a mishmash of what is likely original text and what is likely a later scribal edit to conform the letter to a more pious audience. The amounts of silver offered, for example, exceeded what would have existed in the area at the time, almost tripling the known tax revenue of Judah in more stable times.⁵

The letter sees in Ezra the utmost representative of Israelite piety. He studies the law and lives according to it. Ezra is a priest, but also a scribe. A scribe, but also a student. He is engaged with God’s law in every way he possibly can be. Ezra 7 serves to introduce us to Ezra, but also to show just how big a deal he is supposed to be – a new Moses to the people of God.

⁵ “Ezra” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Vol. 3*

This is written, at least by the attestation of the text itself, by Ezra. One of the chief reasons to see in Ezra 7 a gloss on the actual letter provided by Artaxerxes is that it sounds like something Ezra would want to be said. The king is not just providing money for the offerings in the temple, but money to pay for specific kinds of offerings (Grain, animal, and drink.) The money that is provided is so extreme because the King so favors Ezra's mission. The closing of the chapter shows Ezra thanking God for providing someone like Artaxerxes to restore the temple and appoint a man like Ezra to exercise the law.

The giving of more vessels to Ezra is another legitimization of his authority. Like how the vessels showed that God was still with the exiles, and that they were a continuation of the previous temple community, now Ezra takes vessels to similarly show that he is the real deal. Every bit of this introduction is carefully crafted to legitimize Ezra's mission. The mission that Artaxerxes authorized for Ezra is an extension of what Cyrus had done previously, namely ensuring that all Gods in the empire supported the King. Ezra, however, has a more optimistic view of the king's proclamation.

Ezra sees in the King's actions, whether selfish at their root or not, God's will being carried out. To Ezra, the motivation and content of the King's declaration is secondary to what is accomplished. Whether the text literally spells out what the money is to be used for, whether it is calling for millions of dollars or hundreds of thousands, it is a King ensuring the Temple is all that it can be. The King of Persia is serving the God of Israel, and Ezra says as much in his praise of God at the close of the chapter. Perhaps, even in our cynical political outlooks, we can try and do as Ezra does, seeing in the good a politician does the outcome, and not just the motives.

Ezra, of course, has motivations of his own, but this is something we will discuss later.

Chapter 8: Building an Exodus

The opening list of returnees establishes another form of legitimacy for the second wave of returning exiles. The family heads, and their people, are each tied to prominent families. The exact breakdown has some discrete meaning, but for the most part it suffices to say that the list here is simply a continuation of the pattern of establishing legitimacy. The gathered people, however, have no Levites among them. While there are two priestly families present, they are not sufficiently Levitical for the purposes of the delegation. This seems to reflect a later development in Biblical texts where Levites, rather than being *the priests* are relegated to maintenance roles within the temple.⁶ The two priestly families, directly tied to Aaron's descent, would not be in this category of priesthood and so more are needed.

When the Levites are found and added to the group, the "marching order," of the group begins to reflect the group that entered Canaan following the exile.⁷ Ezra's march to Jerusalem, bereft of any army to protect it and being so forward with the riches they carry, is anticipating the same protection God gave to the Hebrews long ago. The delegation safely makes it into the city, succeeding in the ultimate act of legitimization – survival. The group offers the treasures they brought and are integrated into the existing exilic community. The closing lines of the chapter show that they are, all together, the exiles who came out of Babylon.

Ezra is now there as an administrator in the finished temple and begins to administer this authority broadly. The vessels are placed, the people have returned with Levites to attend to the needs of the Temple. A second exodus, following the celebration of Passover and peopled by a consecrated group of exiles, is ready to assert itself in the Holy Land of their ancestors.

⁶ "Priesthood: Jewish Priesthood ." Encyclopedia of Religion. . Encyclopedia.com. (August 25, 2022). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/priesthood-jewish-priesthood>

⁷ "Ezra" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. 3*

Ezra Chapter 9: God Wills It

Introducing Expulsion

We will break from our usual pattern of tackling two chapters a week for the final two chapters of Ezra. Here we have to tackle the hardest consistent theme of the book – the exclusion of entire populations of people from God’s promise. As Christians, we often come up to these sections and nod as if it is evident that this was what had to happen. Something of our distance from the events at the time make it so that we are willing to sign off on this ethnic cleansing in ways we never would in the modern day.⁸ Moreso, our identity as Gentile Christians shows that, for our faith, such expulsion is a relic of the past. We use the present reality of Christ’s allowing us in, to ignore past expulsions.

It is also important, as we go into this discussion, for me to take a step back and make clear something that has been implicit up till this point. The discussion of the Exilic Community which we have taken part in up till now, is simply that. We are discussing a particular epoch in the history of God’s people. While certain aspects of the Exilic Community continue into modern Judaism, the criticism of exclusionary practices in this study are limited to Ezra. Modern Judaism has tackled these issues in their own way, and while I hope to bring to light some of those discussions, our focus is historical and not rabbinical. Trust that when I say, “The Exilic Community,” I mean a historical moment and not the modern Rabbinical Judaism which has dealt with these texts in their own ways.

So, we are going to look unblinkingly into the void of bigotry here – the complete expulsion of all “foreign,” blood from the community, and not let ourselves diminish the evil present within. We are at the fulcrum of our study. We are going to see how Trauma become Bigotry and how that is all justified as the Will of God. Yet, do not disparage Ezra too much, he is fighting for the survival of his people, and his story is a complicated one.

⁸ *This line has aged poorly.*

Precedents for Expulsion – Attitudes toward Foreigners in Hebrew Bible

Because of the aforementioned tendency of Christians to take exclusionary practices and assume they are the norm in the Hebrew Bible, we might not realize that there are a diversity of ideas about marriage between different people groups in scripture. While in Genesis there is a special interest on showing that the Patriarchs married within their family group, Jacob has several children with slaves that are almost certainly “foreign.” Exodus tells us Moses marries a Midianite woman and has children with her that are considered Israelites. The same is true of David, and Solomon, and many others throughout the Biblical text. Some of this is reflective of the originally limited scope of the Torah’s prohibitions, and also to a wider reality of syncretism that could not be stopped just by willing it away.

The original prohibition against taking foreign wives is found in Deuteronomy 7 and lists the following nations, “the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” These would have constituted the people groups in and around Canaan. The reason for this prohibition is linked to themes of pollution and idolatry throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, but a simpler and more original reason may be found in the text of Deuteronomy itself. The peoples are described as, “more numerous,” than the people of Israel. More than that, the people are going to be at war with one another when the Israelites enter the Holy Land. While the conquest narratives are their own can of worms we will not be opening here, we can see in those two provisions why the initial commandment might exist.

When you are a small community it is easy to get assimilated into a culture rather than to exist in and alongside the existing populations. If the small number of Israelites entered the land and immediately married into the larger cultural groups there, then there would be a risk that Israelites as a cultural group would disappear entirely. The issue at this point is not based in ethnicity or race, but in the survival of traditions and cultural norms. To protect this small group, their stories and their practices, from disappearing, it was imperative not to marry into the larger groups that would probably push them to assume the dominate culture. To protect the legacy that had survived Egypt, it was considered necessary to not be lost in the dominate culture of the time. This was a limited prohibition however, and not a universal ban on foreign marriage.

The prophets begin the initial work of expanding exclusionary marriage practices. Throughout the prophetic witness the presence of idolatry of the people is explained in sexual and covenantal terms. The marriage of God and Israel in Covenant is reflected in the marriages of God's people. Because the people of God married foreign wives, Malachi says that the people fell away from true faith.⁹ Jeremiah argued differently, endorsing foreign marriage in 29:6 and encouraging the Judahites not taken to Babylon to remain in the land rather than flee to Egypt or seek somehow to join exilic communities. Ezekiel did not see those who remained as being a part of the community any longer, making clear that the glory of God left the temple before it was destroyed and rested among the Exiles in Babylon.¹⁰ Those who remained in the land, rural and more likely to follow Jeremiah's teachings, were among those excluded in Ezra's policies. Even the Judahites who remained are now foreign for the purposes of the exilic community.

⁹ Malachi 2:10-13

¹⁰ Ezekiel 11: 22-23,

The difference in perspective on in-groups and out-groups, the land and all who live within it, are also reflective of the moral accusations which the prophets put against the people. Jeremiah saw the sin of Judah primarily in abuse of the poor, and secondarily as idolatry and popular religion. Malachi centers the sin more squarely in idolatry. Ezekiel and Isaiah offer something of a middle point between the two, prioritizing social evil but also acknowledging the idolatry of the people. Ezekiel, and parts of Isaiah, show the tendency for the true identity of God's people to be centered in the Exilic community rather than in the people of the land. Malachi, the most similar to Ezra in its approach, was written after the Temple was built but before Ezra's reforms. Malachi, then, gives us a view of what the religious atmosphere among the exiles was like.

The emphasis on idolatry, and centering the conversation around the "foreigners," in terms of corruption and wickedness, should not be new to us. Whether talking about Jews in Germany or refugees in Europe and the Southern Border, the language of filth and evil are used by anyone who wants to "other," a group outside their own. The move here, however, is not as simple as bigotry seeking an easy enemy. As we have said multiple times, the conflict here is that the Exilic community is trying to find a way to survive, responding to a trauma bigger than themselves. Desperate people do desperate, and sometimes wicked, things.

Ezra Chapter 10: Explaining Expulsion

The Plight of Widows and Orphans

The actual expulsion of women and children from the community has been the specter behind all of our study so far. When we look at scripture as a whole we can sometimes cut out the parts that we don't like to sit and reflect on. The invasion of Canaan is unpleasant and so we usually skip from Moses to the Judges when we tell the story. The rape of Bathsheba is something we all acknowledge in David's life, but we dress it up as some clandestine and illicit romance rather than a powerful man kidnapping a woman and killing her husband. And so on and so on, until our scriptures are white washed of their darker shades. The reality of scripture is that it is the inspired word of God, but it is the record of human activity alongside God. This history contains all heights and depths of human nature.

Ezra 10 shows us that Ezra's prayer was not something done privately, but a protracted act of lamentation in front of the people of Judea. Those in the Temple would have been shocked by the mourning of the priest, especially for a moral outrage that uniquely upset him. The respect afforded to Ezra allowed him to quickly gain traction with his opposition to foreign marriages. Bit by bit, the Levites signed on to the plan which Ezra had concocted, and representatives from all of Judea gathered in the Temple Square.

Rain beats down on the assembly, they are all worried why they were gathered here on pain of being excommunicated and robbed of their possessions. Standing in the rain they would be worried about their health, their crops, and the flooding that comes with the rainy season in the Levant. Compounding worry would have led to the congregation being weakened in their convictions, it would not be hard to get them to agree to the decree of the Temple anyway, but with the additional weight of all these things the people capitulate quickly.

Only two priests disagree with this ruling, Meshullam and Shabbethai, and they stand up for the dissenting men among the congregation. Likely, if the whole of Judea's leading men came to the Temple, the two dissenters, were representatives of a faction of dissenters and not just the only two to speak up. Either way, the majority wins and a program is launched to push the foreign women and children out of Judea. Where would they go? What would they do? It did not matter, as long as Ezra's vision of racial purity wins out.

Ezra, by rooting Jewish identity in Matrilineal descent insured that men could only ensure a legacy for themselves if they married within the faith. Because conversion did not develop in Judaism until the first century, there was no hope for non-Jews to become part of the community either. There was a clear in group and out group now. Those who were descended from the Exiles were the only real heirs to Israel, all others were to be excluded. This appealed to Persian sensibilities, which wanted each nation to remain distinct under their control, but worked against some of the weightier matters of the law.

For one thing, Malachi, the critic who was so firm in his prophetic opposition to marriage outside the people of Israel, opposed any and all divorce. For another, these women were now all effectively widowed, their children without any support. Rather than support from the community, they were now abandoned to die in the wilderness or find refuge among the Samaritans and Judahites – people they may have nothing in common with. The command to protect the vulnerable that the Torah was so adamant on was wiped away. Finally, this rejection of the foreigners violated one of the Torah's most sacred tenants. "Love the stranger, for you yourself were a stranger in Egypt." This message is echoed time and time again in the Torah, and here it is completely rejected.

The shadows of history allow us to dress this up as a religious necessity, but we must not let that be. There is a barbarity to this message, something that asks us to reject our neighbor simply because of where they were born. If we want to really embrace the message of the Gospel, we must reject any and all exclusion of this kind. Ezra was working under the constraints of Empire, trying to ensure his people survived the oppression of Persia, and for this perhaps these actions made some sense at the time. However, it is hard to justify any action so cruel as abandoning vulnerable people to the elements. In a time when racial violence continues to escalate, we must fight back against anything like what we see here.

One article consulted for this study pointed to the reality that Asian people, especially women, are never considered truly American no matter how long they live here. Their appearance leads to people always asking, “Where are you from really?”¹¹ Black and white immigrants have an easier time integrating into American society, but anxiety still exists over intermarriage despite years of legality and much social progress. Muslims and their descendants are marked, regardless of color, as other by their dress and their names. Jews singled out and made subject of many conspiracies simply for their dogged pursuit of respect and survival.

We live in a nation divided, and we embrace rather than reject that division. We will always have cultural differences in America, as we should! However, the cultures ought to live alongside one another in harmony, seeking good for one another. We should stand up for the rights of our Muslim siblings to worship safely. We should see that there is no difference in the fare between people of all colors and creeds. We should fight against any lies or injustices perpetuated against our neighbors. We must reject Ezra’s solution, and forge our own.

¹¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim. “Foreign Women: Ezra, Intermarriage and Asian American Women’s Identity,” in *Feminist Theology* 2014, Vol. 22(3) 241-252