

EZRA

Lesson 16, Chapters 8 and 9

For rightly dividing God's Holy Scriptures, context is the key. Without proper context we follow rabbit trails to nowhere, or worse, we establish dubious doctrines based on misunderstanding, unaware of what we've done. So we're going to spend a little time this morning adding more background to our study of Ezra to try to gain as much as possible from this wonderful book that speaks so forcefully about today as times past.

We left off in this historical Book of Ezra about halfway through chapter 8 as Ezra was organizing a caravan of about 5,000 men, women and children for a one-way journey from Persia to Judah. The year is 458 B.C., the 7th year of King Artaxerxes' reign over the vast Media-Persia Empire. The King has graciously given the great Torah Teacher Ezra authority and funding for the trip, encouraging him to establish the Torah Law among his people, in order to reform their religion and worship practices, where ever they might reside in the Beyond of the River satrapy. Two things should not be missed: first, how the Torah (which was essentially the Bible in that era) had become separated and forgotten within the religion the exiled Jews practiced; and second, how supportive the kings of Persia have been towards the Jewish people as well as encouraging their aspirations to repopulate their homeland, rebuild their Temple, and to re-establish their unique culture. It could be nothing else but the invisible hand of Yehoveh operating within the minds of these gentile kings that would cause them to behave in such an unexpected way.

The rallying point for these many Jewish families to meet up and make final preparations was at a place our narrative calls the Ahava River, either a small tributary or more likely a manmade canal attached to the Euphrates River. From there Ezra would lead this group on a high-risk trek of about 1000 miles; it would take 4 1/2 months.

Any time there is an occasion like this one, where a significant number of people pull up stakes

and migrate in mass, leaving behind a settled life and established ties, it is good to ask why they might do that. Too much as we read the Bible we get so caught up in the enormity of the event that is usually told with frustratingly little detail, we lose connection and empathy with the actual people involved. In modern times moving even 10 miles causes disruption in our lives; moving a long way to another country means big changes and not just a little anxiety and so we usually don't do it lightly. And while the issue of the motivation for the 15 Jewish families spearheading this migration to Judah isn't addressed, the circumstances make it self-evident that it could have been nothing less than an unction of the Spirit of God upon them, which (for most) resulted in a zealotry to obey the Lord by returning to the Promised Land He set apart for them through the Abrahamic Covenant.

Of the 15 families listed to begin chapter 8, the 2 priestly families no doubt had the greatest enthusiasm because they would finally be able to utilize their God-ordained heritage and vocation at the newly rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. For several generations, essentially since Solomon's Temple had been reduced to a heap in 586 B.C. by the invading army of Nebuchadnezzar, the priesthood was essentially defunct and without purpose. The loss of their status, power and position among the people would have been terribly discouraging and no doubt many gave it up forever as they dealt with the realities of 70 years of exile in Babylon and the every day matters of simply supporting their families. Yet this group of priests that volunteered to accompany Ezra had retained (or perhaps regained) their desire to rediscover their vocations even though none had ever seen, let alone served at, the Temple; all had been born in exile.

The royal descendants of King David represented by **Hatush's** family that joined with Ezra leaves us wondering why they would go. I offered several suggestions last time that I won't review, but no doubt there was something in it for **Hatush** and his family or they wouldn't have gone. The political circumstances at the time were such that the Persian Empire was powerful, enlightened, fair and decent with its many races and peoples, and the government generally allowed freedom of travel and residence and each person could worship his or her own gods as they saw fit. But it also meant that a member of the royal line of David had no thought that he could merely show up in Judah and be installed as its Jewish king.....the job of king was taken and there would only 1 king in the Persian Empire and that was King Artaxerxes. However one thing was at play that might be a game changer: Egypt, which was located on Judah's southern border, was in rebellion against Artaxerxes and perhaps **Hatush** hoped that there might be an opportunity to secretly ally with Egypt in exchange for Egypt helping Judah to break away from Persia. Part of the bargain, of course, would have been that **Hatush** would have demanded to be king of Judah. Further, there is no doubt that one of the main reasons that Artaxerxes was so inclined to be gracious to Ezra and encouraging of the Jews to repopulate Judah was to strengthen that province to act as a loyal blockade against the Egyptian army marching up towards the north via either the coastal highway or the inland road

to invade southern parts of the Persian Empire. Judah was the perfect strategically located buffer to protect the southern flank of the Persian Empire from Egypt. And I think that some other passages in this chapter and the next and in Nehemiah and in some extra-Biblical Persian records bear out my speculation on this matter.

But what of the 12 ordinary, common Jewish families who had volunteered to go? What might have been their motivation? 80 years had passed since Zerubbabel had led the first wave of Jews back to Judah, and if any family had an overriding concern of recovering their hereditary land rights from squatters who had moved in after the Jews were exiled, they would have accompanied Zerubbabel back to Judah many years earlier. Waiting until now and still hoping to gain back their land was highly improbable; way too much water had passed under that bridge.

Thus once again the only reason that fits as the motivation for their return is a spiritually-driven zealotry to be obedient to God whatever the personal cost. No doubt Ezra, so passionate to teach the Torah of God to his people in order to restore the true Biblical religion to the Jewish people, was the catalyst behind their desire. And like so many of you who are listening to my voice, you have opened your heart to God's calling to rediscover your true faith roots, and there is no other place to learn it than to begin with His Torah. And yet, the road to change and reform is not so easy. It has, and will continue to, require much perseverance and dedication. My hope is that our study of Ezra will prove an encouragement to you and a validation that while following the Lord in truth and light is not easy the rewards far surpass the barriers. As our Messiah so eloquently said:

Matthew 7:13-14 CJB

¹³ ***"Go in through the narrow gate; for the gate that leads to destruction is wide and the road broad, and many travel it;***

¹⁴ ***but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.***

Let's read from Ezra 8:21 to the end of the chapter.

READ EZRA 8:21 – end

As we discussed last time, Ezra proclaimed a fast accompanied with a prayerful petition to Yehoveh to grant the group safe passage to Judah. And one of the reasons that Ezra did this is because he had pushed all his chips into the center of the table when, even though the King had offered a military escort, Ezra refused it. His reason? What does it demonstrate to preach to the people about having God's hand of blessing upon those who love Him, only to turn around and depend on swords and spears wielded by gentiles to guarantee their safe arrival to God's holy city of Jerusalem? This is far more than putting your money where your mouth is. This is putting your life on the line for your belief that the Lord is able to protect His people, and an acknowledgement of the distinction that the Lord says He makes between those who love Him versus those who forsake Him. Ezra was highly connected in the Persian royal court, smart and aware (anything but naïve), and so he knew of the imminent hazards that awaited him on this long journey. His was not stubborn idealism; it was well-founded trust. Idealism is based on human philosophies; trust is based on faith in the power of our Lord. By doing this Ezra unequivocally established that this migration was in fact a religious mission with a purpose higher than themselves.

This brings us back to why it is that Ezra insisted on a High Priest family, a common priest family, a number of Levites, and 12 regular Jewish families as the make-up for this group of migrants. It was his intent to symbolically relive the Exodus Wilderness Journey. Partially it was, I think, to make a point to the group of the important and holy nature of this endeavor, but also because he believed that indeed this was an actual 2nd exodus. It was a journey of God's people from a foreign land of captivity (although that captivity under Babylon had ended 80 years earlier) to the land promised to Abraham so long ago; and it was also an establishment of God's Laws and commandments for the people. Moses had received the Torah from God in a foreign place (the Sinai of Egypt) and in a sense so did Ezra (Babylon). For Moses the Torah had never before existed; for Ezra it might as well have not existed because it had been relegated to the dust bin and replaced by the customs and traditions of earliest Judaism. Moses was the supreme Torah Teacher and leader of the original exodus, and Ezra is now the supreme Torah Teacher and leader of this exodus. And that is the context for how he, and we, need to understand this return to Judah. Anything else and the point is missed.

Next beginning in verse 24 is the practical matter of safeguarding the significant quantities of gold and silver that were donated by the King and his court, and also by others. Part of the reason for this safeguarding was so it would be properly accounted for; none should go missing. And because Ezra saw this as Exodus part two, he then turned to the Torah for guidance on just how to safeguard and transport these valuables that were intended for use by the Temple. And essentially the “how” boiled down to “who”. Thus we read that he selected 12 priests, and then two more fellows plus 10 of their kinsmen. The two fellows, **Sherevyah** and **Hashavyah**, were Levites and thus their kinsmen were Levites. So the leaders who were in charge of the gold and silver items were 12 priests and 12 Levites (here we see the symbolic number 12 at work again). From the Book of Numbers 3 and 4 it is clear that the Levites, supervised by the priests, are to be the only authorized transporters and caretakers of Temple furnishings, and for certain this is what Ezra was endeavoring to follow.

Ezra intended on being scrupulous about the accounting of the gold and silver so the items were carefully weighed, recorded, and then packed. However the amounts that we find in our modern Bibles have to be suspect. The idea that they had in their possession and were about to transport 43,000 pounds of silver and another 7,000 pounds of gold (a total weight of 25 tons) in addition to other items they would necessarily have brought with them like food, water, precious personal items, etc., strains credulity. Naturally, the original language doesn't use terms like pounds or tons; these are extrapolations made by modern editors to try and ascertain what the Hebrew terms for weight might mean in modern weights and measures. The Hebrew term used is **kikkar** and it is often translated to talent, and then talent is sometimes re-translated to pounds or tons.

Just for fun I did a little research on how much weight a camel could carry, and to my surprise a single camel can carry almost 1,000 pounds for short distances. For average distances however a camel is usually loaded to no more than about 450 pounds and for long distances around 350 pounds. The camels on Ezra's journey would be loaded the lightest since they were going to be traveling for 1,000 miles. Thus it would have taken around 150 camels just for the gold and silver items and of course there was more in addition that would have been transported. This is certainly NOT an impossible number of camels, but it is VERY large and exceeds most anything known as a maximum size for a camel caravan.

Bottom line: almost certainly there wasn't 25 tons of gold and silver, but no doubt it was a King's ransom nevertheless.

Then in verse 28 the Torah scholar Ezra reminds the priests and Levites that these items are holy; and according to the Law he is correct. The principle of dedicating anything to the Lord is that once it is given, it becomes God's property. Anything that is God's property is holy. Thus the moment even the decision is made to consecrate something to God, from the Lord's eyes the transfer has just occurred whether the item has been presented or not. So the instant that the King and his court offered these items to Ezra for the Temple, the gold and silver items became God's property and so were holy-fied. Therefore from this moment forward technically they should be handled only by priests and Levites, and must be carried in a prescribed manner. But it also means that for any item to be lost, borrowed or stolen would be a direct offense against God's holy property and the penalty for this can be death. No wonder such care was being taken.

The procedure was that upon arrival in Jerusalem the gold and silver items designated for the Temple would be turned over to the currently presiding High priest, priests, and Levites. They would then carefully weigh and count the items, check them against the accounting records made here by the Ahava River, to be sure there were no discrepancies.

Verse 31 explains that the caravan began its trek to Jerusalem on the 12th day of the 1st month. Since Ezra left the City of Babel on the 1st day of the 1st month, then we see that it took him a total of 9 days to get from Babel to the Ahava River, where he then camped for 3 more days. And sure enough Ezra's faith in God was rewarded; the caravan was not attacked, and with no military escort the entire caravan laden with treasure arrived safely in Jerusalem. On the fourth day after their arrival, the gold and silver were turned over to the Temple authorities who counted and weighed and the totals matched.

It is not surprising that Ezra's exiles were anxious to present sacrifices and burnt offerings at the Temple: something none of them had ever had the privilege of doing. And again we find the use of the symbolic number 12 is involved in the amount of sacrifices that were offered. 12 bulls, 96 rams (12 X 8), and 12 male goats. We also see the symbolic use of the divine ideal number 7, as the number of lambs offered is 77.

This chapter ends with Ezra delivering the King's written orders concerning the authority he had given to Ezra, to various government officials in Judah and the Beyond the River satrapy. And the upshot was that the King made it clear that these officials were to give Ezra, the Jewish people in general, and the Temple their full support. They complied.

Let's move on to chapter 9.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 9:1 – 4

If we were to give a title to Ezra chapters 9 and 10 it would be, "Ezra's crusade against unauthorized marriages". I can't begin to tell you the heartburn these two chapters have caused many within traditional institutional Christianity, and especially so in modern times. And the reason is that many gentile Christian scholars say that there is no more blatantly racist section of the Bible than here. The solutions have ranged from apologies for God's actions, to a belief that Ezra didn't act according to God's principles but rather made mistakes, to an accusation that the text is highly corrupted, but the most adopted solution is to express a relief that since mainstream Christianity has long ago thrown out the Old Testament anyway, why worry about? This just provides one more good justification as to why modern Believers shouldn't look to the Old Testament at all.

The irony is that if these same Christian scholars and leaders knew much about the Old Testament, and about Hebrew culture, and about the Torah, their heartburn would never have occurred.

Before we take this matter on, however, it is best that we take a brief detour. Around this same era as Ezra and Nehemiah lived a prophet named Malachi. Very little is known about him, and he may not have actually appeared until maybe 20 years after Ezra first arrived back in Jerusalem, but it could have been at around the same time; it is difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless Malachi lived in essentially the same era and so had much to say about the

goings on around the Temple and the spiritual condition of the Priests, Levites, and lay persons of Judah. Therefore we would be remiss not to look at least at part of what Malachi has to say about pertinent circumstance of that day.

Something that we should realize before we read Malachi is that especially Christianity sees the Law of Moses (or the Torah), and the Prophets, as two quite distinct entities. But in fact they were and remain closely associated. More often than not the Prophets were reminding the people of their unfaithfulness and sins based upon their lack of obedience to the Law of Moses. Even though technically it was the Priest's job to teach the Torah and the Law to all Israel, it was the Prophets' job to bring God's oracle of warning to the people when they were not obeying it. And those consequences (often catastrophic consequences) were just around the corner unless God's people repented and their actions changed drastically. Interestingly Prophets didn't usually quote Scripture (although they did sometimes). Instead they tended to speak of God's principles that were being violated. They spoke in terms of the intended spirit of the Law, as opposed to the letter of the Law, much the same as did Christ around 5 centuries later..

Thus when in Matthew 5 during the Sermon on the Mount when Yeshua refers to "the Law and the Prophets", it is because for Him the Law and the Prophets are organically connected. The Law of Moses sets up the God-given statutory rules and commands for the worshippers of the God of Israel (the legal system); and the Prophets instruct the people (by means of oracles from God) on the spirit of the Law. And the spirit of the Law was the core message of Messiah's sermon that day before huge crowds on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

So let's read a section of Malachi, remembering that he is delivering God's message on the spirit of the Law to folks in Judah at around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

READ MALACHI CHAPTER 2 all

I must tell you; if a recognized Prophet of God today in 2014 (and I know of none by the way) were to stand up and say these words to adherents of Judaism and of Christianity, the subject

matter would be as appropriate and timely as when it was originally spoken to the Jewish people in Judah 2500 years ago.

Substitute the office of Rabbis and Pastors for the Levitical priests mentioned in Malachi and the inference couldn't be stronger. Notice how the Lord, through Malachi, essentially indicts the priests (the leaders and teachers of God's people) for not honoring God's name. And the main way they are not honoring God's name is that they are not teaching the people the TRUE Torah (verse 6). The priests were assigned to safeguard knowledge (of God's Torah) and the people should seek to hear the Torah from priests lips because the priests are messengers (similar to prophets) from the Lord.

But, according to Malachi, what did the priests do instead? Starting in verse 8, God says, "you turned away from the path and you caused many to fail in the Torah, and you corrupted the covenant of Levi". We know what the Torah is, but what is the covenant of Levi? Is that a new (or older) covenant that we've never heard discussed before? No. It is just a way of giving a name to the body of Torah Law that concerns the separation of the Tribe of Levi away from Israel and of their special holy status as God's servants.

Num 3:5-13 CJB

⁵ ***ADONAI said to Moshe,***

⁶ ***"Summon the tribe of Levi, and assign them to Aharon the cohen, so that they can help him.***

⁷ ***They are to carry out his duties and the duties of the whole community before the tent of meeting in performing the service of the tabernacle.***

⁸ ***They are to be in charge of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting and to carry out all the duties of the people of Isra'el connected with the service of the tabernacle.***

⁹ Assign the L'vi'im to Aharon and his sons; their one responsibility in regard to the people of Isra'el is to serve him.

¹⁰ You are to appoint Aharon and his sons to carry out the duties of cohanim; anyone else who involves himself is to be put to death."

¹¹ ADONAI said to Moshe,

¹² "I have taken the L'vi'im from among the people of Isra'el in lieu of every firstborn male that is first from the womb among the people of Isra'el; the L'vi'im are to be mine.

¹³ All the firstborn males belong to me, because on the day that I killed all the firstborn males in the land of Egypt, I separated for myself all the firstborn males in Isra'el, both human and animal. They are mine; I am ADONAI."

The point of the oracle in Malachi is that the Priests and Levites are not living up to a contract between them and God made back in the days when Moses was leading them through the desert. And specifically they are not teaching or keeping the Torah.

But then later starting in Malachi 2:11 the Lord declares that Judah as a nation of people has broken faith. Broken faith with whom? The Lord. And they have done this by Hebrews marrying foreigners. This is expressed by saying that they married a "daughter of a foreign god". This is not referring to a girl being the offspring of a pagan god. It means that every foreign nation had a chief god and a bunch of other gods as well. The god and the nation were seen as inseparable. Thus we'll find in many places in the Bible that the nation of Assyria, for instance, is also called Ashur. Ashur was the name of the god of Assyria and so both the name of the god and that's god's nation are alternate terms for the same people and place.

So the accusation is that God's sanctuary (the Temple) is profaned because the males of Judah married foreign women (who by definition worshipped other gods).

But what comes next is this: starting in verse 13 the Lord says that as a result of the Lord no longer accepting their worthless sacrifices (of atonement) then the people have troubles and they fall on His altar and weep bitter tears. And they look heavenward and ask, “WHY??!!” Why are these bad things happening to me? I’m a good person. I come to the sanctuary. I contribute. I say the prayers. They are oblivious to their rebellion against God and deny it when they’re told. And why are they oblivious? Because they don’t know God’s Torah. And why don’t they know God’s Torah? Because the Priests have stopped teaching them the Torah and instead teach customs and traditions.

And then the explicit issue of breaking faith in marriage is addressed (the issue that Ezra deals with in Ezra 9 and 10). And what we are hearing is that apparently many men of Judah with Hebrew wives divorced them in order to marry these foreign women. “I hate divorce”, says the Lord. And the Lord says in verse 17 (and I paraphrase) enough of your lip service! I’m tired of hearing your nonsense and your insincere pleadings. And what is it that the people are saying and pleading? They are saying that anyone who does wrong is actually doing good in God’s eyes and that God is delighted with them.

Now; let’s have the rubber hit the road. Pastors and Rabbis it is our jobs, our responsibility, to teach people God’s Word. And God’s Word begins with, and is dependent upon, His Torah. If we as leaders claim that we have been called, or anointed, or ordained to be a Pastor or Rabbi to represent our Lord to His people, and we choose instead to dish out manmade doctrines and weak sayings and amusing speeches on social issues instead of teaching the Lord’s people His Word, we have broken our covenant with God. It’s not just a matter of “style” when we choose to avoid teaching the Bible or we make it but a minor part of our sermon, or perhaps only use it as a prop. And it’s not OK with God to declare that everything before the Book of Matthew is irrelevant if not dangerous and thus ought to be avoided by Believers. This is an affront to God and it causes grave damage to His people and His ekklesia.

And here is what this refusal to teach His Word truthfully and adamantly eventually results in: in Malachi God says that people who are doing wrong insist that despite what God’s Word says (a Word they actually do not know because they aren’t taught), the wrong they are doing is good. And more, that God is delighted with them for doing it! In other words, God’s Laws have been turned on its head and simply don’t have any true meaning; they can be avoided and even God Himself will approve of it. Folks I’m sad to say that this has been a foundational doctrine of a goodly part of institutional Judaism and Christianity for hundreds of years. Today, after centuries of sliding down a hill of deception, we are close to rock bottom. The very things that the Lord calls abominations, we say are good and claim that the Lord delights in them.

Everything from couples living together without marriage; to homosexuality being normal and good; to gay marriage being lovely in God's eyes; to claiming that God is through with Israel and that we should stand up for Israel's enemies and against Israel. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. .

When I read this chapter in Malachi I want to dissolve into grief, anger, and bitter tears. And not surprisingly that is precisely what we find Ezra doing to begin chapter 9, and he's doing it for all the reasons that Malachi is pointing out. Thus the basis for Ezra not wanting the Hebrews to marry foreign women has nothing to do with racism. Race isn't the issue. It's that in this era and age, each race represented a nation, which represented a culture, which worshipped one false god or another. The issue was not ethnicity or skin color; the issue was polluting God's people with foreign spouses who worshipped false gods.

The OT is full of instances of women from foreign nations marrying Hebrew men, but at the same time giving up their false gods in favor of the true God. The greatest example of this must be Ruth. The moment foreigners of any race or nation give up their false gods and accept Yehoveh, all Biblical objection to such intermarriages is dropped.

Next week we'll continue with Ezra chapter 9 and see the pain that can be involved in trying to right many years of wrongs that can't be undone by ignoring it or wishing them away.