

### EZRA

#### Lesson 19, Chapter 10

As we enter the home stretch in our study of Ezra, we find ourselves neck deep in principles and applications that surprisingly transfer from Ezra's era to our own in a near seamless way. One application that I'd like to present to you in regard to Ezra's attempt to return His people, the Jews, to the purer ways of observing the Torah commandments and worshipping God instead of following the relatively new manmade traditions contrived up in Babylon is this: while he sought a return to the Law of Moses, he did NOT seek to return Jewish society to the days of Moses. His intent and challenge was to bring the divine principles of the Torah into the contemporary society of Judah in which he lived, and apply them to his modern circumstances guided by the spirit of the Law. And this, indeed, is also my goal and (if I can be so bold) it ought to be the goal of Christ's ekklesia, His church worldwide, without exception. But of course Seed of Abraham is hardly the first to express such a thing.

Occasionally we'll hear of Christian or Messianic groups who have the fervent hope of rediscovering and living out the obedient ways of the Bible, however they feel like this must necessarily involve turning our backs on modern technology, medicine, infrastructure, clothing, and instead look and behave as though we just stepped out of the movie set for the 10 Commandments with Charlton Heston leading the way. But sending society back in time is not only impossible, it is unnecessary. Perhaps the single most amazing quality of the Bible, including the Torah, is that it's laws and principles are never changing, are applicable to constantly evolving societies, and adaptable to life under virtually all government systems that man can devise. From the tribal system to monarchies, from Democracy to socialism, even to dictatorships and Communism, the divine principles of the Torah Law are transferable. However most of the academic world, and much of Christianity, sees especially what we find in the Old Testament as so primitive and ancient (sometimes even offensive) as to have no viable place in our modern lives. So, since God's laws reside there, they are declared irrelevant, if not null and void, for disciples of Yeshua.

Allow me to share with you a 21<sup>st</sup> century parable, if you would, as an illustration of this topic;

one that I personally experienced and its lesson has had a profound effect on my viewpoint. Several years ago an acquaintance of mine, a brilliant and highly educated lady, was working for the UN. She was tasked with finding a way to help 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries to develop by building industries to manufacture goods to sell. The issue that she was immediately faced with was that while many of these countries already had some low level manufacturing capability, they needed laborers to fill the jobs, and had been producing some sellable products, the poverty of their nation meant that there was little to no local market for the things they produced. So who might buy what they made? Their only salvation, then, was to market their products to the much more wealthy Western nations. And this had also been regularly tried, but usually wound up in failure. Why? My acquaintance investigated and found that the overriding failure point was that Western businesses ultimately couldn't do business with these 3<sup>rd</sup> world companies because in the long run they couldn't trust or rely on them to do what they said they'd do, or even to operate in an honest manner. Profit was impossible. There was little work ethic, almost no quality ethic, and bribery, stealing and embezzling was rampant, if not a given. Thus, well meaning Western businesses would try, but end up wasting millions of dollars before they simply gave up.

My friend believed that she had come to understand the core problem, so she wrote a Doctorial Thesis on the matter and before she presented it to her mentor, and then to the UN, she brought it to me because along the way she had discussed some of her theories with me, and because once I had told her of a similar experience I had had in my corporate career days in working with a High Tech company in a particular South American country (which I will not name). And that experience is best characterized by an eye-opening meeting I had with the manufacturing VP of this company when after months and months of failing to produce a viable product of sufficient quality and consistency to sell in the USA, we had a come-to-Jesus meeting. I was exasperated with promise after promise of getting things fixed, only to have nothing happen. I had set up distribution in the USA, based on samples and a promise of delivery that never seemed to come and I couldn't hold that network together any longer without product. Finally I said to this manufacturing VP, listen; I know that you're a good and capable man. We have agreed time after time exactly what you would do, you said it was no problem, and you haven't followed through with any of it. I don't understand this. I've operated on the basis of a deal is a deal, and I've been left looking foolish. He responded that he didn't understand what I meant by a deal is a deal. Since I was dealing with a non-English speaking culture, I figured it was only a matter of semantics and he didn't understand the expression. So I explained that the idea is that if we sit down in good faith and come to a mutually acceptable agreement then each side is morally and ethically obligated to make it happen. He told me that no such concept existed in his country. Rather, it was that a) an agreement at a meeting was always reached because it was the polite thing to do, and that trumped everything. And b), no agreement is really ever an agreement in principle. Agreements are merely gracious conversations held as a means to begin to do business, and then a contest gets underway to see who could be the most clever to get all he can from the deal, while necessarily defeating the other party. Thus all agreements are but contests of cunning if not outright deceit. But, these qualities are seen as good, normal and admirable in his country. And while he didn't say so (he didn't have to) in his eyes he was winning hands

down!

Very shortly the business relationship was terminated because I knew at that moment there was no hope of ever making it work. So what was the real issue at play here? It was the one that my acquaintance also understood as the major roadblock for other 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries: there is no standard business ethic or morality at work in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world as is generally understood (and unspoken) among the Western nations; thus doing business between the Western and 3<sup>rd</sup> worlds is made supremely difficult and usually not worth the trouble.

So in her report, she realized that she had to create (from scratch) a workable, understandable, adaptable (if not universal) system of business ethic and morality standards that could be sanctioned by the UN and taught to these 3<sup>rd</sup> world nations so that business could be consummated with the Western World. And so for well over a year this brilliant woman worked on it, talked to academics at Oxford where she was associated, brain stormed with executives of well known companies, and every time she thought she was making progress on a progressive new world 21<sup>st</sup> century ethics model, she found exceptions to the rule, and contradictions, and principles that simply wouldn't work consistently enough in every situation in every culture in order for it to be viable. Finally in desperation, being a Christian and an international lawyer, she picked up a Bible. And there it was; The Law of Moses; the perfect, universally adaptable business ethics model she had been seeking.

You see, what even the secular Western societies have forgotten is that our underlying structure of our business and social ethic, the utilization of which we take for granted, is Judeo-Christian in its source. Lying or stealing in business is just as bad in atheist Denmark as it is in still-Christian America. Breaking an oral promise or a written contract term is as unacceptable in Spain as it is in Germany. And the laws of our Western societies, and especially our business community, are based on God's basic laws even if we have turned other facets of Judeo-Christian morality (especially regarding sexuality) on its head. Even though this "new" business ethic model that she discovered could of course not be presented to the UN or any 3<sup>rd</sup> world country as essentially the Law of Moses from the Bible (nor could it be admitted in her thesis), in fact there is no other adaptable, transferable, PERFECT system of morality and ethics in existence on this planet than the 3500 year old Law of Moses as given to the ancient Hebrews on Mt. Sinai. And try as she might, with some of the best minds contributing, she could not come up with another, more modern, one that was seamless and could work in every nation and culture.

To all Christians I say this: it was the error of the ages, and draws on ingrained human hubris and arrogance, to think that we can pronounce God's Laws and Commandments as good for

primitive people of times past but no longer relevant or applicable for us. I'm talking now especially to Messianic and to Hebrew Roots Believers whose eyes and ears have been opened; we absolutely can, and must, rediscover our faith-ethic that is essentially wrapped up in obedience to our matchless God by means of obedience to His perfect Torah laws and all His Divine Word. And it doesn't matter where we might reside on this planet and in however a primitive or technologically advanced society we find ourselves, or even under what kind of government system. But in doing so we don't have to take on a fool's errand of donning flat leather sandals, scratchy burlap robes, living in tents without electricity, raising goats in the desert, or refusing modern medical care in order to achieve the kind of Godliness and righteousness that the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of Christ's disciples had. We can go on living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and enjoy most of its benefits and endure its headaches; the thing we must not do is to separate ourselves from God's Torah principles and instead rely on easier and more accepted manmade doctrines and religious philosophies. Otherwise we find ourselves in the confusing places and dead end streets that any manmade system of ethics and morals eventually leads us, just as my friend found out as she attempted to create one of her own design, in hopes of helping some of this planet's most downtrodden and desperate humanity. And it doesn't matter whether a secular government or church leadership tries to invent an alternative system, only God's laws and commandments are universal and timeless.

In Ezra's day, he lived around 900 years after when the Law was first given; as such there was no resemblance to Jewish society in his day as compared to Hebrew society at the time of the exodus from Egypt. And, he came back from Babylon to a homeland that was changed in so many ways from even the one his great grandfather had been exiled 130 or more years earlier. Technology had advanced; the society was far more ethnically diverse in the land; Aramaic was becoming the dominant language of the province; and no doubt everyday clothing and grooming styles had morphed due to foreign influences and modern trends. There were circumstances of modern Judah that didn't necessarily allow for a precise following of some Torah commandments to the letter. In fact there were circumstances that were barely, if at all, even contemplated by the Torah and so one couldn't merely thumb through the Scriptures like an encyclopedia and find a readymade answer to every situation that arose. Thus it became necessary to rediscover and relearn the Torah so thoroughly that the principles of the Law could be applied to new situations as they arose. Ezra was the one who loved the Torah so much that he made understanding not merely the letter, but the divine principles and the spirit of its laws and commands, his lifetime vocation and his passion. But that doesn't mean that he could expect smooth sailing ahead, or that applying it would be straightforward, or that everyone would agree with it. In fact, certain ethics and morals that described this Jewish society of returned exiles were in direct opposition to God's Torah principles and Ezra knew that something had to be done about it. The one issue that currently had Ezra's attention concerned mixed-marriage unions between Jews and pagan foreigners that the Lord said He found abominable, and therefore unacceptable in His sight.

Let's read Ezra chapter 10.

### READ EZRA CHAPTER 10 all

The first words of chapter 10 are actually in time-reference to the opening verses of chapter 9. That is, in chapter 9 when Ezra was informed of the mixed-marriage debacle he immediately went to the Temple, sat in the courtyard, tore his garments and publically mourned. Then he prayed his marvelous prayer of confession whereby he indicted himself right along with all Jews in Judah, as a collective body (even if many, probably most, individuals had not committed this particular sin). So chapter 10 opens by explaining that while he was grieving and making prayerful confession a huge crowd had gathered because of the sight of their leader loudly praying and wailing. The crowd consisted of men, women and children; every level of Jewish society. And because it was, and remains, the Middle Eastern customary way to make very public displays of emotion then others are drawn to see what is the matter so that they can commiserate.

Out of the crowd emerged **Sh'khanyah**, and he came up to Ezra. This man was a descendant of the family of **Eilam**, as listed in Ezra 2:7; they were part of the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of Jews to return to Judah, as led by Zerubbabel about 538 B.C. or about 80 years before Ezra's return. He was obviously a leader of some sort; however he is not given any official position. He goes on to confess that indeed Ezra is right and that "we have acted treacherously towards our God" in marrying foreign women. Let me immediately point out that it appears that like Ezra, **Sh'khanyah** was declaring guilt by association even though he wasn't himself guilty of marrying a pagan wife. The reason this seems so is that beginning in verse 18 we get an extensive list of all who were found to have been guilty of this sin, and he is not listed as among them. There is much dispute among scholars whether or not this is meant to be a complete, or only a representative list of the guilty. However since he is a Jew and part of the community of returned exiles, then by some being guilty all are guilty from a collective judgment standpoint.

He begins by essentially repeating what Ezra confessed; but whereas Ezra more or less left the situation as hopeless because what is done is done, and he sees no reason why THIS time Yehoveh won't just go ahead and do away with this stiff-necked remnant, **Sh'khanyah** says that even though the sin is very serious there **is** still hope for the Jewish people. Although he doesn't say why he feels this way, no doubt it is because he knows that God is a merciful God because of what He did in severely punishing His people with exile for their rebellion, yet still allowing a remnant to return to their homeland in relative safety and freedom. So the Lord's attribute of loving kindness is self-evident and thus hope remains for the Jewish community of not being destroyed for this latest trespass.

That's the easy part of verse 2; it gets a little complex after this. Because next it says that the treachery being referred to is that the Jews married foreign women from the peoples of the land. Let's look at this closely because it is pretty instructional.

The Hebrew expression that is usually translated into English as "marrying" in this verse is a little used word written only here and in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Nehemiah. The word is **yashav** and it doesn't so much mean to marry as it does "to cause to dwell" or "to give a home to". There are several Hebrew words used to indicate marriage unions, such **ya'ad**, **laqakh**, **yavam**, and **nathan**. They all indicate slightly different aspects of marriage such as betrothal, levirate marriage, the father giving his daughter, a man taking a girl for a wife, etc. But **yashav** is used ONLY in relation to a mixed (or better, illicit) union. In fact, there is reasonable doubt that from the viewpoint of the author, Ezra, whether in this context we ought to even use the term "marriage" to translate it.

Further, in this same verse the Hebrew expression for the **kind** of woman who has come into union with the Jewish man is **nokri** (meaning a foreigner who has no association with Israel; a foreigner in every aspect). Thus what we find in Proverbs for example is that when a Hebrew man takes a **nokri** for a wife, she is seen as a harlot. Thus the entire structure of the statement in verse 2 has this tone of saying that the terms "marriage" and "wife" probably aren't appropriate; that this wasn't a true marriage union, anymore than hiring the services of a prostitute constitutes marriage just because consummation is necessary to complete a marriage union from God's perspective. Now whether what we read here is the view of the author, Ezra, who might be intentionally using disparaging words to highlight his disgust at these unions, or whether it is God's view that while the Jews and foreign women may have considered themselves married, He didn't, I don't know. But the significance is that these are highly questionable unions, illegitimate for any number of reasons, and so it does leave the door open to not necessarily considering the coming dissolution of these unions as actual divorce. And we'll discuss that shortly.

Let me make one more relevant point before we move on. In looking at several popular commentaries about this chapter, almost all eventually devolve into embarrassed apologies for Ezra's decision to terminate these marriages, and even for God's decision to declare that no marriages to people from the short list of nations found in Ezra 9:1 is to occur. And the reason for their apologies is that they see what is happening here as blatant racism. This is what happens when we try to view any part of the Bible through the lens of modern culture; especially 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Western gentile culture. Or when we think we are on the same level as God Almighty, and that we therefore have the right to challenge and question the Lord's laws and commands, or even to decide that the Bible is really only collection of ancient Jewish folklore and that the existence of a God is more the product of myth than reality

anyway.

For some reason it seems to escape even the finest of Bible academics that especially in the early Biblical times of the OT, ethnicity and religion overlapped. Nations were defined as nations based first on the god they worshipped, and second on their territorial boundaries. Next in line came the king who ruled over it, then language, and then perhaps certain physical features of the people that made them distinct such as skin color, shape of eyes, hair characteristics, traditional clothing, and things of that nature. So from the Biblical standpoint, it is assumed that every ethnic group, race and nation had it's own unique god and it is only the descendants of Jacob, called Hebrews, who formed the nations of Israel and Judah, whose God was Yehoveh. Thus from the spiritual point of view, the issue of the Hebrews marrying foreigners, and specifying them by race or nation, assumed allegiance to their particular national or ethnic god. Thus a *nokri* (a foreigner) by definition worshipped a false god; on the other hand it was always possible for them to sincerely renounce their own god, which by definition renounced allegiance to their nation, marry a Hebrew and declare allegiance to Yehoveh and to Israel and now that person was an Israelite and a Hebrew. By switching gods, they switched nations. It is only in later times, long after the NT Bible era, where race, nationality and religion became disconnected such that we can think in terms of race and racism like we do today in the West where there is no automatic connection to religion. There is no racism of that kind in the Bible. All these commentators are achieving in their apologies is to inoculate themselves by means of modern political correctness so that they can remain accepted in their circle of academic peers. That might sound a bit harsh, but I assure you that is precisely the case.

So, once again; the women in this marriage issue that we're studying have come into union with Hebrew men, but the women stayed loyal to the god of the nation or ethnic group they were originally from. And for the God of Israel, that isn't Kosher.

In contrast to Ezra, *Sh'khanyah* has a plan to remedy the situation. The people should make a covenant with God to dissolve the unions with these foreign women and that the women and the children they bore should be sent away. Before we go any further I want to emphasize this point: it was NOT Ezra who ordered the divorces, it was *Sh'khanyah* who suggested it and in a rather democratic process the Jewish people who were present voiced agreement. As with the subject matter of verse 2, this suggestion and then agreement of the people in verse 3 has more to it than meets the eye.

First, to finish the verse, it says that this plan to rescue the Jews from their predicament comes from the advice of their lord (in the CJB it says, Adonai), and that this would be in compliance

with the commandments of the Torah. It has been noted by long past Christian scholars and Jewish Sages that when this speaks of making a covenant with God, this is essentially a covenant renewal ceremony. We've seen this a number of times to this point in the OT, and not only is there nothing wrong with the concept, it is no doubt the proper thing to do in God's eyes.

The concept is that the Hebrew people have veered so far away from the Torah in their beliefs, lifestyle, worship practices and observances, which while God has remained faithful in His part of keeping covenant, the Hebrews have not. So the only right thing to do is to renew the covenant (meaning the Mosaic Covenant), which by definition means to turn away from all the practices of lifestyle and worship that have not been in accordance with the Torah law and principles. To be clear: a new covenant of some sort is not being contemplated; rather it is a renewal of the existing covenant.

It is not at all uncommon among modern day Believers to want to be re-baptized when we have gone far astray and want to renew our covenant with God. Many Christian leaders and laypeople question whether a re-baptism is ever appropriate; and while I wouldn't say it always is, under the kind of circumstance just described in Ezra I personally find it as not only appropriate but necessary. That doesn't mean that every time we sin, or suddenly feel guilty or especially close to the Lord, that we should be re-baptized as I see those purposes as cheapening its value. However, if we have gone far astray for an extended time, or perhaps we've come out of a denomination or individual congregation and realize that what we had believed and practiced was not in accord with the Holy Scriptures, then it is good and appropriate to be re-baptized as a public and personal expression of allegiance to God and His Word, and by definition it is also a public and personal renouncing of our former ways. That is essentially what **Sh'khanyah** is proposing.

He says that he is doing this on the advice of the lord and of those who are in proper fear and awe of the commandments of God. The CJB says "Adonai" and most English Bible versions say "The Lord" gave **Sh'khanyah** this so-called advice; in other words God told him to do this. However other versions like the KJV don't say "The Lord", they say "my lord" (little 'L' lord), meaning that a human being told them this, and in our context that human being can only be Ezra. Which is correct and why the difference? It is quite simple: in Hebrew the word for Lord is **Adonai** and it can mean either God or it can mean human lord or master. How can we tell the difference? First is context. But second is how the word is vocalized. **Adonai** is spelled **aleph-dalet-nun-yud**. And as those who have studied Hebrew know, it is an alphabet of consonants and no vowels; one has to know by memory the vowel sounds to insert. So, by way of example: if in the English alphabet you take the consonants t and n, by adding different vowels between those letters you get different words, which sound differently when spoken, and so they have different meanings. And an a, and you get tan. Add an e and you get ten. Add an o



and you get ton, etc. Thus depending on what vowels you add to **aleph-dalet-nun-yud**, you get a different word with a different meaning. So, if you add the vowels a and i at the end of those letters you get **Adonai** (Adon-eye), and that is referring to God. But if you add the vowel i alone, you get the **adoni** (adon-eh) and that is referring to a human lord or master. But Biblical Hebrew doesn't give us vowel sounds, so at times how to pronounce the word is ambiguous, therefore the exact meaning becomes ambiguous.

Here, however, I think the context is self-evident that the word is **adoni** and NOT **Adonai**, thus referring to a human lord and not the divine God. And that lord is Ezra, and "those who tremble at God's commandments" are mostly those priests and Levites who came to Judah with Ezra and were already Torah followers as a result of Ezra's teaching. Thus it is key that we grasp that God Himself did NOT tell **Sh'khanyah** to suggest mass divorces. However, it is equally obvious that Ezra and his cohorts did make an unmistakable implication (but did not directly order it) that divorce from these pagan women was the only possible solution.

Now it gets even more interesting. Almost all English versions that I checked do NOT say that the men were to **divorce** their wives, but rather they were to **put away** or **send away** their wives along with their children. The Hebrew word being translated is **yatsah**

and indeed it doesn't mean a formal divorce. In Hebrew there are two other words that directly mean divorce, and those are **shalach** and **kerithuth**. Certainly if you divorce a woman, you are sending her away. But you could also send away, **yatsah**, a disobedient son, or a no longer wanted concubine, or a slave and none of those involves divorce from a marriage union. So what we see from this is that the Book of Ezra puts a very different light on the dissolutions of these unions with foreign women, and doesn't really classify them as true marriages in the first place, and so also not as divorce in the second place. I acknowledge that this might seem to be slicing the onion too thin, to arrive at a certain conclusion but I don't believe so. I believe that the context and the precise Hebrew words bears this out, but it is obscured by the English translations and by not understanding ancient Hebrew and Middle Eastern culture.

Further, it is important to recognize that divorce is discussed in the Law of Moses and while not encouraged, it is allowed for. But there are rules and boundaries.

### Deuteronomy 24:1-4 CJB

<sup>CJB</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1 ***"Suppose a man marries a woman and consummates the marriage but later finds her displeasing, because he has found her offensive in some respect. He writes her a divorce document, gives it to her and sends her away from his house.***

<sup>2</sup> ***She leaves his house, goes and becomes another man's wife;***

<sup>3</sup> ***but the second husband dislikes her and writes her a get, gives it to her and sends her away from his house; or the second husband whom she married dies.***

<sup>4</sup> ***In such a case her first husband, who sent her away, may not take her again as his wife, because she is now defiled. It would be detestable to ADONAI, and you are not to bring about sin in the land ADONAI your God is giving you as your inheritance.***

And here is what the Apostle Paul says about the same subject:

**1Corinthians 7:10-17 CJB**

<sup>10</sup> ***To those who are married I have a command, and it is not from me but from the Lord: a woman is not to separate herself from her husband***

<sup>11</sup> ***But if she does separate herself, she is to remain single or be reconciled with her husband. Also, a husband is not to leave his wife.***

<sup>12</sup> ***To the rest I say- I, not the Lord: if any brother has a wife who is not a believer, and she is satisfied to go on living with him, he should not leave her.***

<sup>13</sup> ***Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband who is satisfied to go on living with her, she is not to leave him.***

<sup>14</sup> ***For the unbelieving husband has been set aside for God by the wife, and the unbelieving wife has been set aside for God by the brother- otherwise your children would be "unclean," but as it is, they are set aside for God.***

***<sup>15</sup> But if the unbelieving spouse separates himself, let him be separated. In circumstances like these, the brother or sister is not enslaved- God has called you to a life of peace.***

***<sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?***

***<sup>17</sup> Only let each person live the life the Lord has assigned him and live it in the condition he was in when God called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the congregations.***

We are not going to get into a discussion of divorce; I just wanted to be honest with you about what is said in both the NT and OT about the subject. However notice one thing about Paul's statement that MUST not be set aside: only verses 10 and 11 are said to be from God; from 12 through 17 is Paul's advice and he lays it down as a rule of behavior for all the congregations (literally it would be the congregations of Corinth).

Further, this is why it is so important to know the Torah thoroughly, so that we can delve deeply and understand the principal and spirit behind each law and commandment. Because when it comes to divorce, there are only a very few cases and conditions covered in the Bible, and because of different cultures and the centuries that have passed since these instructions, it is imperative to understand God's mind as best we can to know what to do in marriage situations that have become difficult and perhaps untenable.

And, by the way, the Ezra situation is not so different from what many encounter today. The only difference is that there was no such thing as atheism in Bible times. So when Paul speaks of an unbeliever, he only means someone who has not accepted Yeshua as Messiah, not someone who is an atheist. The only question was WHICH god or gods did each marriage partner worship?

We'll continue our study of Ezra 10 next time.