

The Meaning of Ezra

Scripture's ultimate Author is the Creator of language. So we should understand that Scripture has far more meaning than we expect in profane texts, meaning that emerges from seeing a text as a component within the whole, unified canon. We easily see this, for example, in Genesis, where almost everything narrated there is proleptic of persons or events of greater significance to come in the future. I therefore submit that we should seek in the Hebrew Scriptures meaning that goes beyond their plain historical-grammatical interpretations. We will not, however, be certain of what we think might be there. Let's survey the Book of Ezra with this understanding.

The prophesied 70 years of exile from the Land were up, and it was therefore time for a remnant to return to the Land. It was 538 B.C.(one year after Persia overthrew Babylon), and a second Exodus was needed. It would be a miraculous departure from a Gentile nation, Persia instead of Egypt, with Ezra as a second Moses. But at that first Exodus, failure occurred (the Golden Calf episode, for example); so . . . would failure occur again? The Exile had occurred because of idolatry, disloyalty, ungodliness and disobedience; would these returnees be different? The people of the Exile in pagan lands had already comfortably assimilated (see the Book of Esther), what will make this return to the Land any different from the sordid story of the Book of Judges?

The first Return is under Zerubbabel, a descendant of David. But Israel is not an autonomous nation; it is under Gentile rule. The story opens referring to a "house." This is a play on words, that is, the Hebrew word used has a double meaning: it also refers here to a people of God. The "house" was to be holy—a clear reference to the remnant now populating the Land. On arrival, the returnees built altars to sacrifice to God, reprising what Abraham did when he arrived in this Land. Doing this, both Abraham and this remnant were claiming the Land for God. They then undertook the rebuilding of the Temple, and with this there was weeping. Weeping was because this second Temple lacked the grandeur and majesty of the first. And almost immediately, opposition erupts. The book of Ezra, like all of Scripture, has as its plot the conflict of good versus evil. The leaders of this remnant recognized that the people of God are to be separate from the surrounding Gentile peoples because, if not, the story of Israel from the Book of Judges on would be reprised, a story of syncretism.

The opposition was formidable. The enemies of Judah wrote a letter to the Persian emperor alleging that Judahites were rebellious people, which is why the Chaldeans had to destroy the city. And so, the opposition claimed, Persia should not permit Judah to rebuild. That was false. The returnees' leaders explained that it was due to Judah's covenant failures that their God handed them over to the Chaldeans. The Persian emperor ordered the rebuilding to continue, stifling the opposition. It was clearly the Lord's will that the Land be occupied with His people again. Again and again, the author of this book exclaims how it was the Lord who enabled the resettling of the Land

Half-way thru the book, Haggai and Zechariah appear. These prophets represented the Lord to the people, and their oracles persuaded and encouraged the people to continue rebuilding the Temple and the city, Jerusalem. And so the work was completed and the people celebrated. The rebuilding of the Temple and the celebration of a Passover established continuity with the past, with the Mosaic covenant (but not the Davidic!), although this was a new beginning.

In 458 B.C. some eighty years after the return under Zerubbabel, Ezra came onto the scene. Ezra is a godly man, a descendent of Aaron and a teacher of the Law. He came as an official representative of the King of Persia, responsible to the King. He's there to build, not a wall (that's for Nehemiah to do), but the people. They were to have such godly hearts and minds that they would be separate from the Gentile peoples, that is, they would be holy. The very problem that caused the Exile was lack of holiness, and Ezra was determined that wasn't going to be repeated. He was sent from Persia with orders from the King to set up a government in the Land and with a decree that the people of Judah were to obey the Mosaic Law under penalty of death!

Let's understand that it's only by an edict of the Gentile King that Jews can resettle the Land. These are the Times of the Gentiles, when Israel exists only by the will of the Lord and the permission of the Gentile rulers. It's still that way today! Israel is still in Exile, biblically, until the Messiah/King comes to establish His Kingdom, and that's in the future when Jesus returns in glory. Jeremiah prophesied that the Jews would return to the Land after 70 years in Babylonian Captivity. But Daniel was given the prophecy (in his Chapter 9) that the Exile would be continued for 7 times 70 years (490 years), with an indefinite era prior to the last 7 years of this period. A greater, future Exodus awaits, and it'll be like a resurrection from the dead.

The last two chapters of the Book of Ezra are probably key to understanding the book. There is greater danger to Judah than the opposition described earlier. That danger was external. God controlled that. This now is internal. The problem is the people (the "house") don't have circumcised hearts, they don't have a heart for God to obey Him. So the men married foreign women, who bring their pagan values and detestable idolatrous practices into the marriage. Solomon married Gentile women, and they turned him into an idolater. Is that going to happen again now? How can foreign wives be part of the "house" of God? Will post-Exilic Israel repeat the failures and sins of the pre-exilic nation?

Realizing what they had done, the Israelites wept. There was weeping earlier in the book, and there's weeping again now at the end. Ezra is weeping. And the people are weeping. And it's raining, so we probably should understand that even God in heaven is weeping too. How grieved must God have been at this stark unfaithfulness, right at the start of a new beginning after disastrous discipline.

So, forced divorce. Huh? The Book of Ezra ends with this bizarre episode of breaking up families. The Jewish husbands had to send away their wives and children. Too bad if they were bonded in love. Too bad if the women had adopted Israel's God as their own. Yes, there absolutely had to be adherence to the Law. That was necessary as a boundary separating the holy people from the ungodly. But . . . can any of us even imagine the pain that this involved? Nowhere does the text indicate that this plan is from God! Is what they're doing good? Does this show how extreme, how radical we must be in effecting sanctification? Or, is this evil? Is this ending setting up the canonical reader for the hyper-separatist, Pharisaic movement that rejected the Messiah when He came? The Book has an ambiguous ending, for we wonder, Was Ezra a story of success? Or of failure?

The exile is over, yet it isn't. It's over (sort of) for these who've returned to the Land, but the vast majority of Jews remained contentedly in Gentile captivity, in the Gentile nations to which they'd been dispersed. And these who have returned are still the same as their ancestors, personally oblivious to the demands of God. Why weren't they thinking godly thoughts and gladly obeying His will *before* they took these foreign women as wives? They need a new heart, a circumcised heart, and that will only come with the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31, which will be when their Davidic, Messiah-King comes. The lesson of Ezra is, the hope for mankind is a future restoration based on God's covenant faithfulness, mercy, and goodness. In this life there's only . . . messiness. Failure. The strange ending of the Book of Ezra may be because, from a human standpoint, everything seems hopeless, impossible. Only an irruption of God Himself will resolve things.

It was absolutely necessary for a contingent to return to the Land to be there to receive their promised Messiah-King at His advent. In the Gospels we read about those Jews in the Land. They were hard-hearted, blind and deaf to spiritual matters, indifferent to what their Scriptures told them. The Jews in the world today are in the very same category as during the period of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Some are in the Land, still dominated by the Gentile rulers of the world, and many are still dispersed among the Gentile nations. Jews must be in the Land now to receive Messiah Jesus when He returns. When He returns, Jeremiah 31 will be fulfilled and Israel's Kingdom will not only be restored but all Israelites will have a new heart, one that loves and obeys the Lord.

I contend here that we believers in Jesus are in the same position as the Jews in the Book of Ezra. The Church reprises that story. Or, to say it differently, that story in Ezra is proleptic of the Church era. We need to enter into the worldview of the Bible to understand the world we live in.

The Jews of the Book of Ezra lived under Persian domination. The world today spiritually is as it was in Ezra, as it was in the Book of Acts, except that we have electricity today and back then they didn't. Our vaunted "progress" is Cainite; our "technology" is just another Tower of Babel. We live under Roman domination. So Rome's influence is palpable everywhere: militarism, lust for power over people and for conquest, self-exaltation, love of a radical form of freedom, ethnic bigotries, worship of a multiplicity of gods, contempt for the God of Scripture, domineering government, and a pagan culture. Into this ghastly milieu, Jesus came and suffered humiliation, rejection, suffering and death. And resurrection and ascension. And into this very same milieu, Jesus sends *us*. The Book of Acts has no real ending because it's continuing, even up to today.

Into the depraved world of Genesis 10, God sent Abraham. Into the depraved world of the Persian Empire God sent Judah. Into the depraved world of Rome, God sent the eternal Son. Into the equally depraved world of Acts-and-today, a world of danger and wickedness, God sends us. The purpose of Israel was to be godly and so glorify God, and to bear testimony to the Gentile nations that their God, the great Creator, is their God also. It would mean going into that dangerous, pagan world that overflowed with violence and hatreds and lies. But God would see to it that some would respond and glorify Him. The purpose of the Church is the same.

Ezra demanded holiness. Jesus demands holiness. The people didn't know what holiness is and so they ignored it. We in the Church today do the same. We don't even know what sanctification is. The Church today exists in a similarly ambiguous era: We possess a sense of the transcendent, but we live for self, for happiness, oblivious to the demands that the transcendent places on us. We desire to see Jesus known and loved, yet our lives are too engaged with our culture to fulfill that calling. We carefully teach and preach and honor the Word of God, but few of us take it seriously enough to actually obey it.

The people in the Land in Ezra's time were dependent on God for their survival, whether they were conscious of it or not, because they were surrounded by violent, hate-filled Gentiles (or syncretists). We today likewise are dependent on God because we too are surrounded by the very same kind of people. As did the people in the time of Ezra, we've lost any sense of dependence on God. Yes, it recurs in our prayers, but it's absent in our lives. We're occupied with living as we please instead of living according to God's revealed will. In a tragic sense, we reprise the Jews' indifference to God's Word. They repented, although at extreme cost. Will we? Do we know what good is? What evil is?

The Church exists in the West only because the powers in control allow it. (This can change with unexpected suddenness.) Biblically, we are rejected followers of the rejected King. To the extent we repudiate that identity in order to not be rejected, we're syncretists, and that places us in opposition to what God is doing. Yes, the Church is carrying out missions, expanding the Church. But compared to what we *should* be doing, what we've actually accomplished should cause us to weep. Billions of people in the world today still have never heard of Jesus. Do we even care?

Our problem today, as I see it, is exactly that of those living in Judea in the time of Ezra. We believers in Jesus, like the people of ancient Israel, are to serve God in a turbulent, dangerous world. But our severest issue is *within*. And it's this: we have the Word of God, and we treasure it. But we don't live it as we should. So failure is always in the foreground. Transformed lives are the answer. And the repentance that's needed is too radical for most of us even to contemplate. Is the story of the Church a story of success? Or failure?

To be godly in this era—or in *any* era—means making sacrifices, suffering losses, and faithfully, obediently living the Word of God. Separation from the ungodly is essential to maintain our intimate relationship with a holy God. But we also need to, indeed, we *must* engage the ungodly in order to reveal God and so to seek their salvation. And the hope that motivates us today is the same as the great (unspoken) hope of those Jews in the time of Ezra: the future Messianic Kingdom when the exalted Jesus comes to rule. We must be prepared and ready for it.