

Ch. 15 – Ezra

Priest and Scribe of Yahweh, Teaches the Law of Liberty (458 B.C.?)

Outline (Hebrew/Aramaic)

I. Return of the exiles and **reconstruction of the Temple, 1–6 (538-515 B.C)**

King Cyrus' decree (538), 1:1-4 (// 2 Chron. 36:22-31)

Zionists return to Jerusalem, 1:5-11

List of those who returned from Babylon, 2:1-70

Renewal of worship, 3:1-7

Zerubbabel and Jeshua begin reconstruction of the Temple, 3:8-13

Samaritan obstruction during Cyrus' reign, 4:1-5

Samaritan obstruction during the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes, 4:6-24 (4:8–6:18 in Aramaic)

→ *Haggai and → Zechariah finish the Temple reconstruction (520-515 B.C.), 5:1–6:18*

The repatriated celebrate the Passover, 6:19-22

II. **Ezra's mission, 7–10 (458 B.C.?)**

Ezra (with companions) arrives in Jerusalem, praises Yahweh, 7:1-10, 27-28

Artaxerxes' decree, 7:11-26

List of "heads of the *father's houses*" (not "families" as in NRSV, NIV and WBC), 8:1-14

The officials of the Temple, 8:15-36

Mixed marriages confessed; Ezra's prayer, 9:1-15

Expulsion (divorce) of foreign wives (with their children), 10:1-17

List of priests guilty of the mixed marriages, 10:18-44

[III. *Ezra's Ministry in → Nehemiah 8–10*

Ezra: *Public reading of the Law and the people's covenant, Nehemiah 8–10*

Ezra reads the Torah in public, 7:72b–8:12

Celebration of the Festival of Booths, 8:13-18

Ezra confesses Israel's sins, 9:1-37

The people make a covenant to fulfill the Law, 9–10:27

Other pledges of the people to God, 10:28-39.]

As in the case of the modern state of Israel (since 1948), in the post-exilic period a fundamental question arose: What is a Jew? — the question of *identity* (in relation to "the people of the land" — the inhabitants who did not return from the exile, including many pagans in mixed marriages). 1-2 Chronicles (→) ends with Cyrus's decree (538 B.C.) which permitted the return of the exiled Jews in Babylonia, and the book of Ezra-Nehemiah begins with this same decree (2 Chron. 36:22-31 // Ezra 1:1-4). Both the Deuteronomic History (Joshua-Judges-Samuel-Kings) and 1-2 Chronicles end their accounts with the fall of Jerusalem (→ 2 Kings 25 // 2 Chronicles 36). Ezra-Nehemiah, then, represents the only canonical source that continues relating the events following Cyrus's decree (538 B.C.) until 430 — a decisive century for the development of post-exilic Judaism (→ Haggai; Zechariah 1–8). The traditional conclusion, that Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., *before* Nehemiah (444), has recovered the support of the majority, despite certain difficulties. Some, however, postulate the date of 398 for Ezra (under Artaxerxes II), after Nehemiah, while others prefer to postulate both reformers as *contemporaries*, but with Ezra's arrival *after* Nehemiah (438 or 428).

Ron Stanley points out the characteristics and success of Nehemiah as leader, but concludes that Ezra was a failure.¹ Nonetheless, in the Jewish tradition Ezra is a great leader comparable to Moses.² We would suggest that Stanley's negative conclusions concerning Ezra result from his rejection of certain scientific conclusions of biblical

"higher criticism," since he still attributes a *Third* Isaiah oracle (56:4-5, concerning eunuchs) to the *First* Isaiah of the eighth century.³ According to the common dates for the Pentateuch, the Yahwist source is from the ninth century B.C., Deuteronomy from the seventh century and the Priestly source from the sixth and fifth centuries, and it has been common since Wellhausen (late 19th century) to suppose that Ezra (458 B.C.) played the decisive role in bringing together the four principal sources of the Pentateuch and proclaiming this "Law of Moses" to the Jewish nation, which explains his incomparable fame in later Judaism (Nehemiah 8). Consequently, we suggest that Ezra provided a more "academic" leadership but with a more long-lasting effect than the wall's construction under Nehemiah.⁴ Together Ezra and Nehemiah represent the two sides of Moses' leadership, the great liberator who also produced/inspired some literary traditions, preserved, thanks to Ezra, in our Pentateuch.

1. Poor and oppressed. Ezra does not refer explicitly to the poor. However, since originally it formed part of a single book with Nehemiah we should include Nehemiah's energetic defense of the poor and his solidarity with them (→ Nehemiah 5) as representative of the author of Ezra as well. Furthermore, since Ezra himself was a "scribe of the Law," with its abundant provisions for defense of the poor, and with his focus on the Exodus paradigm, Ezra probably was just as concerned with the poor as Nehemiah (→ the Pentateuch, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy). No consensus exists between the authorities concerning the precise content of the "Law of Moses" that Ezra taught: Perhaps only (the nucleus) of Deuteronomy? The priestly strata ("P")? All of the Pentateuch in its (almost) final form? Nonetheless, the defense of the poor and oppressed is a fundamental element in all the proposed alternatives. As in the case of → Second Isaiah, we may conclude that Ezra and Nehemiah were concerned not only for the poor class but also for all the exiled, who had lost everything and returned to Jerusalem as pioneers of a new society.

Like Nehemiah, the book of Ezra emphasizes the opposition of the enemies and oppressors; however, while Nehemiah is concerned primarily for the enemies outside of the community, Ezra focuses on the opposition *within* the community:

- 4:1-5 enemies (*tsar* I), under Cyrus
- 4:6-24 false accusations under Ahasuerus and the slanderous letter under Artaxerxes
- 5:1-6:12 vindication under Darius

The prosperity of the new post-exilic community would depend on many factors (peace, good harvests; → Malachi 1 concerning tithes), but the biblical texts of the Ezra and Nehemiah period focus especially on three:

- the construction of the Temple, Ezra 1-6 (→ Haggai; Zechariah 1-8);
- the repair of the wall, Nehemiah 1-7;
- obedience to the Law of Moses, Ezra 7-8; Nehemiah 8-10; (especially the prohibition of mixed marriages, Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13).

However, although we recognize the fundamental contributions of Ezra and Nehemiah to the formation of the new post-exilic Jewish society, from the viewpoint of the oppressed we cannot forget the great injustices and sufferings of the pagan women, cruelly cast out with their children. If Hugh Williams is correct, the outcast pagan women and their children came from the pagan elite ("the peoples of the land," 10:2, 11) who had taken advantage of the Jews' exile to take possession of their lands.⁵ In such a case these women, on returning to the homes of their parents, would improve their economic situation (cf. Hagar in → Genesis 16, 21). Nonetheless, we cannot cover up the cruelty and suffering of the mass divorces imposed by Ezra, especially in the case of the children (see below, **3. Sexual Minorities**).

2. Women. + = Israelite women; - = foreign women.

- 2.1 +The daughters of Barzillai, one married to a priest "Barzillai", 2:61 // Neh. 7:63
- 2.2 +The female slaves who returned to Judah, 2:65a // Neh. 7:67a
- 2.3 +The female singers who returned to Judah, 2:65b // Neh. 7:67b
- 2.4 -The foreign daughters, 9:2
- 2.5 +The daughters of Judah, 9:12a (see Neh. 10:30a)
- 2.6 -The foreign daughters, 9:12b (SEE Neh. 10:30b)
- 2.7 +The Israelite women in the assembly (*qahal*), 10:1 (see Neh. 8:2-3; 10:28-29; 12:43)
- 2.8 -Foreign wives (cast out/divorced), 10:2-3, 10-11, 14, 17-19, 44 (10 times; see Neh. 13:23-27)

In Ezra and Nehemiah the presence of women in each important event was explicitly recognized:

- the reconstruction of the Temple, 520-515 B.C.;
- the formation of the community under the Law of Moses, Ezra (458 B.C.); y
- the repair of the wall, Nehemiah (444 B.C.).

Of the 18 references to women in Ezra, all except that of 9:2 have parallels in Nehemiah. Five of the references are positive (+) and, as in Nehemiah, the 13 negative references (-) speak of the *foreign wives* (*nokrioth*; 9:2, 12b; 10:2-44) → Proverbs). Tamara Eskenazi points out that Ezra-Nehemiah articulates three themes that constituted an abandonment of the hierarchy, a major democratization and, consequently, more opportunities for women:

- the entire community, women included, were responsible for the post-exilic reconstruction;
- not only the Temple but all of Jerusalem became God's house;
- the written text (the Torah) became the authoritative vehicle for divine communication and the fountain of wisdom and direction.⁶

Eskenazi concludes that in the *pioneer stages* in the history of a people (Israel under the judges, → Judges, and again after the fall of Jerusalem; the exilic and post-exilic periods: Ezra-Nehemiah; → Second Isaiah), "the family became central."⁷ However, as she herself recognizes, Ezra (8:1, etc.) refers literally to the "heads of their *fathers*" or "the chief of their fathers" (KJV, not "*family heads*" as in NRSV and NIV, since — in spite of the modern idolatrous tendency of focusing on the "family" and "**family values**" — this modern concept of "family" does not occur in the Bible (see "house" in → Acts 16). Nevertheless, Eskenazi is correct in pointing out that the institution of the monarchy, with its male bureaucracy, imposed limits on **the role of women** and that they enjoyed **greater freedom** and importance in the pioneer situations under the judges and Ezra-Nehemiah. However, we should note that the importance of women under Ezra-Nehemiah refers solely to *Israelite* women, since the foreign divorced wives and their children suffered cruel marginalization.

The Law of Moses included *diversity* concerning **mixed marriages**. In ancient Israel marriage with pagans was accepted (Gen. 41:45; 48:5-6; Ex. 34:15-16; Num. 12:1; Judges 1:4; 2 Samuel 3:3; see NJB note Neh. 9:1; HCSB note 9:2; Ezra 9:1–10:44). Moses himself married an Ethiopian woman (black; → Num. 12:1) and God punished Miriam and Aaron for objecting to the marriage. With a religious but not blood/race basis, Deut. 7:1-4 prohibited mixed marriages with pagans. However, following a racist ideology (maintaining the purity of the blood of the "race"), Ezra 9:2 *misinterprets* Deut. 7:3, according to Hugh Williams, who concludes that Ezra 9–10 are descriptive and not automatically prescriptive for the Christian faith (cp. Ruth; Acts 17:26; Gal. 2:28; 1 Cor. 7; 1 Peter 3:1-7; see Romans 1:24-27).⁸

Recognizing the ideological limitations of Ezra 9–10, Hugh Williams points out elements of permanent value in these chapters:⁹

- Ezra's exemplary leadership: teaching, persuasion without coercion.

- Thanks to these circumstances, the community adopted an interpretation of the Scriptures unacceptable to us; on the other hand, "(Clines quote in Williams)."¹⁰
- Ezra's prayer and the people's response represent a paradigm of appropriate repentance.
- Although we reject the note of racist ideology, Ezra was correct in insisting in the necessity of maintaining the Jews as a different people with a special divine mission in the world (see the disciples as salt and light in Jesus' teaching, Mat. 5:13-16; Rom. 1:1-2).

We might further point out that if those who accept the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures recognize ideological limitations in Ezra 9:2 (racist, xenophobic), why not consider the possibility of a homophobic ideology in texts such as → Lev. 18:22; 20:13 (see under **3. Sexual Minorities**).

3. Sexual Minorities. Fundamentalists frequently have appeared in the streets and on television with signs that declare that Jesus and the Bible *always* condemn **divorce** as a sin. However, there is a diversity of teaching concerning divorce in all the texts of Jesus and the New Testament (→ Mark, Excursus concerning divorce). No text in the Bible says precisely the same as another. For example, by means of Ezra and Nehemiah, God *commands* the Israelite men to divorce their pagan wives (Ezra 9–10; cf. Neh. 10:28-30; 13:3, 23-30). Also, in the case of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, God commanded that Hagar be sent away with her son Ishmael (→ Gen. 21:12). However, God and God's angel "opted in favor of" the divorced woman and not for the legitimate wife (Sarah with Abraham; e.g., the first appearance in the Bible of an angel was to Hagar, Gen. 16:7, an illustration of God's option for the poor) — perhaps to point out a type of dialectic in the divine will (Gen. 16:7-15; 21:8-21; Galatians 5:30; see Ezra 9–10:44; see NJB note Neh. 9:1; HCSB note 9:2).

As we have noted above, in the case of Ezra-Nehemiah, Hugh Williams points out another factor: the divorced women probably came from the pagan elite class, "the peoples of the land" (10:2, 11), who had taken possession of the land during the exile.¹¹ Therefore, while → Malachi 2:10-16 (460 B.C.) *denounced* the Israelites for having divorced their Israelite wives in order to marry younger and richer pagan women, Ezra *ordered* them to divorce their pagan wives in such cases of mixed marriages. Thus, although the commands may appear logically contradictory ("do not divorce" / "must divorce"), a better understanding of the historical contexts clarifies the coherence. In addition to the threat of idolatry, both Malachi (on condemning divorce) and Ezra (on commanding divorce) sought to maintain the land in the hands of the Jews and their Jewish descendants — thus to avoid the lands passing into the hands of the elite pagans (cp. → 1 Cor. 7:12-16, where Paul counsels believers to not divorce unbelievers). For that reason when fundamentalists (be they Protestants or Catholics) declare that Jesus and the Bible *always* condemns divorce, they are only making it evident that fundamentalism represents a simplistic ideology which distorts and contradicts the diversity of teaching and wisdom in the biblical texts.

Furthermore, another diversity of teaching exists, since → Nehemiah (13:23-31) condemns the *leaders* of the community for having accepted mixed marriages (a *political* matter), while the text in Ezra (9–10) condemns the *priests and Levites* in particular for *diluting the Jewish identity*.¹² It is common to accuse Ezra of promoting a racist ideology, since the translations affirm that the priests are "(unknown quote – source?)" (9:2b).¹³ However, the Hebrew does not contain a word for "race" and this refers literally to mix *zera'* (seed/seed).¹⁴

Given the norm to reproduce in Gen. 1:28, marriage was the norm for the Israelite priests, perhaps even more so than in the case of laymen (see the laws concerning marriage and in regard to the daughters of priests: Lev. 21:7-8, 13-15; Ezek. 44:22); also see the elders of the church (→ 1 Tim. 3:2-5,12; Titus 1:6; cp. 1 Tim. 4:3 and the scandals that have resulted from the Vatican policy of prohibiting that Catholic priests marry). Therefore, it is notable that **Ezra**, like Nehemiah, does not appear with wife and children. Ezra probably did not remain single for being a eunuch (as → Nehemiah), since the book emphasizes his priestly genealogy (Ezra 7:1-10), but perhaps for being gay and/or divorced; regardless, as an unmarried man he represents a sexual minority. If we accept the traditional chronology, with Ezra (458 B.C.) preceding Nehemiah (444), the fact of being a pioneer can explain in part why Ezra did not have as much immediate success as Nehemiah.¹⁴ Since the Hebrew Bible has a regulation

for divorces (Deut. 24:1-4) and the Law never prohibited them, it is doubtful if all the priests divorced from their foreign wives (Ezekiel 10) should be classified as "sexual minorities" (→ Malachi).

¹ Ron Stanley 2006:274-76.

² Robert North 1992:726-28.

³ Stanley, 271.

⁴ Stanley 274.

⁵ Hugh Williams 1985:160.

⁶ Tamara Eskenazi 1998:123-24.

⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸ Hugh Williams 1985:161.

⁹ Ibid., 161-62.

¹⁰ David Clines, cited in Williams, 161.

¹¹ Williams, 160.

¹² D. L. Smith-Christopher 1994:243-65, esp. 257-58.

¹³ (???)

¹⁴ *Pace* Ron Stanley 2006:274-75.

Bibliography: Ezra - Nehemiah

Key: * = Ezra (458 B.C.) precedes Nehemiah (444)

- = Ezra (398) after Nehemiah (444)

+ = Nehemiah (444) + Ezra (438 or 428) contemporaries.

Note: The NJB (p. 510) and the HCSB (p. 647) Introductions incline to the traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem (458 B.C.).

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