



A Question of Purity Ezra 9

Ezra – returned and how he was going to do as commanded by Artaxerxes – to find out the state of the people. The arrival by Ezra was some 81 years after the initial return under Cyrus. The idea as commanded by Cyrus had been to re-establish the Jewish people in their homeland with permission to rebuild the temple together with the return of some of the temple stuff. It is generally thought that Cyrus had in mind to send the Jews back because he knew that they would spearhead the economic regeneration of a land wasted by Nebuchadnezzar. It was convenient. They do the economic reconstruction primarily at their expense and he spends as little money on them as possible. That gave them no chance economically or politically to re-establish the kingdom whilst keeping them sweet. Politicians don't change whatever the society, but God can use even the highest ranking emperor to work His purposes out.

Despite being in exile, the Jews had done well in Babylonia under the Babylonian Empire. As long as they didn't leave the province they had freedom to become involved in commerce and government. The synagogue system was established and they got used to worship without the temple. There were of course those like the writers of Psalm 137 and people like Zerubbabel who couldn't wait to return. But there were those who when freed by Cyrus, were quite happy to stay in Babylon. In fact Babylonian Judaism flourished in Babylon well into the Christian era and was a major centre of Jewish learning.

Under the Persian kings we know that Jews did very well, getting as they did into high government and establishing Jewish communities in major cities. They were influential and that got them into the court of kings like Artaxerxes. Here we see again how the purposes of God in regard to His people changes the history of peoples. We know from history that the Persian kings Darius and Artaxerxes were trying at that time to conquer Egypt and were having problems. They needed the support of the rich Jews in Babylonia and for the Jews in Judah to give them no problems, particularly as there was a Jewish community in Egypt too. Obvious support of them politically and religiously was the answer.

Some commentators identify Babylon in far too much of a Nebuchadnezzar context or in a negative prophetic context to realise that in this period Judaism flourished in Babylon in a way that it wasn't in Judah. It wasn't a fleshpot of decadence for religiously slack Jews as some think. It was a pious Jewish community where scriptures were studied and Jews fought to preserve their identity in a Gentile society. Many people of levitical and priestly descent just didn't want to go back to Judah. That included Ezra, until God called him. Compare that to today where there are more Jews in America than in Israel.

For the Jews under Ezra to leave Babylon was a move from civilization into chaos. Why should they leave a prosperous free society where they had been allowed to keep their identity and piously observe their religion, and go to Judah which was a mess? There was just no incentive to go to a relatively lawless country. Even Artaxerxes knew that, but he needed them to be there and to be in charge because they were loyal to him, so he resourced them well with more temple stuff that had been in the vaults in Persia as well as with loads of cash.

For Ezra and company however, the desire to re-establish authentic Judaism in Jerusalem must have been based on reports that things were not well in Jerusalem to have felt motivated to get permission from Artaxerxes in the first place. Don't forget that Babylonia was about 700-1000 miles from Jerusalem – not a huge distance even in those days. The journey took about a month. Trade and interchange between Babylon and Jerusalem – and pilgrimage too – would have been common.

So in Jerusalem there was a temple and high priest and altar, but their faith was not perhaps as pious as the Babylonian Jews and they lacked the people resources of priests and Levites to manage the temple worship and

teach in the towns. How do I know that? Because it was Ezra's duty to go and sort things out and as we noted in an earlier sermon, to report back to Artaxerxes. When he gets to Jerusalem and starts to gather information about the people in chapter 9 he finds it quite unlike the situation pertaining in Babylonia. Things were morally disastrous.

In fact he's shocked by what he finds. And what was that?

1 After all this had been done, some of the leaders of the people of Israel came and told me that the people, the priests, and the Levites had not kept themselves separate from the people in the neighbouring countries of Ammon, Moab, and Egypt or from the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Amorites. They were doing the same disgusting things that those people did. 2 Jewish men were marrying foreign women, and so God's holy people had become contaminated. The leaders and officials were the chief offenders.

Why should that have been the case? Well, this wasn't Babylon. They were surrounded by peoples hostile to them, trying to reconstruct in a land where they were not responsible for government or security. Unlike Babylonia where Jews had managed to live in harmony with the society, yet remain distinct, the leaders in Jerusalem had just dumped their principles and started to blend with the local gentile population.

Ezra is stricken with grief. *3 When I heard this, I tore my clothes in despair, tore my hair and my beard, and sat down crushed with grief. 4 I sat there grieving until the time for the evening sacrifice to be offered, and people began to gather round me — all those who were frightened because of what the God of Israel had said about the sins of those who had returned from exile.*

Why should he be so sad? Because they were committing exactly the same sin that had gotten them into exile in the first place. They had intermarried with Gentiles – people whose faith was not the same as theirs. In particular Ezra mentions the Canaanites because the people were expressly forbidden to intermarry with them in the Law. (Ex 34:11-16) Even the people who were supposed to teach the people and their religious leaders had succumbed. These guys led the way, they paved the path of sin. The people had followed their example.

You can see the issue for Ezra. In Babylon where there was no homeland and no temple, the Jews had kept themselves pure and distinctive whilst maintaining excellent relations with the gentile Persians. Why hadn't the Jews in Judah – their very homeland – not done the same? He hadn't realised how bad things were and was devastated to find out. He was more than a bit upset. *When I heard this, I tore my clothes in despair, tore my hair and my beard, and sat down crushed with grief. 4 I sat there grieving until the time for the evening sacrifice to be offered, and people began to gather round me*

How upset are we by sin, particularly amongst God's people? Do we say "everybody does it these days" or "it's their business", or do we cry out to God? *The godly reaction to sin is to recognize it from Scripture, to mourn over it, and to confess it without excuse to the God of mercy.* (Stephen Cole). As a leader it is even more so of a challenge for me. Ezra was so upset when he heard the report about the people and about some of the leaders that he was so filled with sadness and shame that it was a while before he came before God and made the prayer of confession at the end of the chapter.

What can we learn from this? How much do we mix with the world among us, and to what extent do we remain pure? *Until today, the Lord is pleased with those who put Him first, who 'keep his word' and 'do not deny His name' (Rev. 3: 8). He does not want a mixture of things that have nothing in common (2 Cor. 6:14-18), whether in marriage or otherwise (Michael Hardt)*

What is interesting about the Babylonian Jews was that they insisted on their community remaining pure, but they had no hesitation in being part of society where they were allowed to freely work and worship. They were active participants. And because they were God honoured them and the societies in which they were found. We saw God's purposes worked out even by pagan kings and governors.

There is a lesson for us here. Like the Jews of Babylon, we are strangers in a strange land. How do we interact with a lost world – a world we are called to bring a message of redemption to? People like Ezra was part of the wider community – he was accepted and trusted by the Persian government, but he took care to remain faithful to God's word and ways. He got the balance, but it's so easy to get the wrong balance and dump our principles rather than be faithful to God. We can best understand how to do this by examining the two bad extremes of this issue:

1. To be separate completely from the world and minimise our relationships with the wider community so we remain pure that way. Plenty of Christians have done just that down the centuries. But does it bring people to Christ? Often exclusivity brings an misinterpretation of God's word that creates the searching after a purity that separates them even from other people Christians.
2. To embrace the world regardless of the cost and ignore or accept sin as a moral norm – even to find some Biblical support for doing it. We call it toleration or liberalism. That said, I've even come across evangelicals doing exactly the same. But God never goes easy on sin and calls us to be a holy people.

The answer is in the middle of the two – to be part of the nations, but to be people who always remain faithful to God's word. In practice, what does that mean? *2 Cor 6:14 Do not try to work together as equals with unbelievers, for it cannot be done. How can right and wrong be partners? How can light and darkness live together? 15 How can Christ and the Devil agree? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16 How can God's temple come to terms with pagan idols? For we are the temple of the living God! As God himself has said: "I will make my home with my people and live among them; I will be their God, and they shall be my people." 17 And so the Lord says, "You must leave them and separate yourselves from them. Have nothing to do with what is unclean, and I will accept you. 18 I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."*

Paul was a man who circulated in Greek society. He did business with Gentiles, bought stuff, took passages on ships, mixed with the masses, spoke with them. So separating yourself doesn't mean that.

What did it mean? It's about yoking with them. The TEV uses some interesting words in verse 14 *Do not try to work together as equals with unbelievers, for it cannot be done. How can right and wrong be partners? How can light and darkness live together?* . The NIV puts it like this: *14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?* (NIV) Animals which were yoked together were joined together. Every move had to be done together whether or not either individual wanted it. There is a difference between working with or being a friend to someone and taking on their values and morality – yoking with them.

Therefore marrying someone who does not share your faith means that you aren't just legally yoked, but that you become yoked physically, emotionally, personally and spiritually to that person. You've committed yourself to their values. The stronger animal always controls the weak. In practice, usually the unbeliever pulls the believer down in an unevenly yoked situation, rarely the believer pulling the unbeliever up.

It doesn't only apply to marriage. Any friendship or business relationship that places one in a situation where one becomes tied to them in a way that compromises morality is an unequal yoke and can be spiritually damaging. For the Corinthians it was maintaining friendships by eating at pagan temples, or using civil law to sort out personal problems, or bringing values from outside into the church and making them the norm in church. We still do all those sorts of things even if the context is different.

How can we avoid this and tread a balanced path? By knowing God's word, understanding that word, know how to apply it effectively and not be influenced by the world's values. It depends on how strongly the line is drawn beyond which we won't pass. The fact that we have to have a series on the 10 commandments shows how much we blur the lines that are actually very clear. After all there are only just 10 commandments. That's all. That's enough to give us clear personal moral lines but I think all of us have been challenged in the last few weeks as to how we quite easily break and bend them, or just smudge the line.

That being the case, when God identifies them in our lives and in our church, we must repent, we must change, we must discern God's word and follow it. But how do we deal with sin when God brings it under the spotlight of His word. Next week: we shall consider how Ezra confronted the issue of sin and how it was dealt with.