

October 2, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: Ezra the Scribe

Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 8-9

The main character in our story today was a scribe, a student of scripture. So let us begin by reading a “scribal psalm” – probably written during the time period of our story. We read Psalm 119, verses 17-24:

- ¹⁷Deal bountifully with your servant,
so that I may live and observe your word.*
- ¹⁸Open my eyes, so that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.*
- ¹⁹I live as an alien in the land;
do not hide your commandments from me.*
- ²⁰My soul is consumed with longing
for your ordinances at all times.*
- ²¹You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones,
who wander from your commandments;*
- ²²take away from me their scorn and contempt,
for I have kept your decrees.*
- ²³Even though princes sit plotting against me,
your servant will meditate on your statutes.*
- ²⁴Your decrees are my delight,
they are my counsellors.*

Zerubbabel, direct descendant of King David, and Jeshua, direct descendant of Aaron, led the returned exiles to rebuild the temple. Maybe it wasn't as large or ornate as Solomon's temple had been, but it was the first step to restoring Jerusalem to its former glory. Spirits were high and many, noting Zerubbabel's ancestry, began talking about him as the Messiah promised by the prophets, whom the people believed would restore the independent kingdom of Israel. But, for one reason or another, that didn't happen. Zerubbabel and Jeshua died without achieving that goal. Throughout the long reigns of Persian emperors Darius the Great, and Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes I, Judea remained a backwater province of the Persian Empire, with appointed governors, not kings. Jerusalem grew larger in that time, though it was still nothing like the capital city it once had been. For one thing, real cities at that time had walls, and Jerusalem's former walls were just scattered stones. Still, the streets were passable, houses were being built, and every few years another caravan of former exiles arrived to begin their lives over in their ancestral land. One of these later groups, some eighty years after Zerubbabel's group, was led by a priest named Ezra. But he's not remembered as Ezra the Priest. He was Ezra the Scribe.

We've already seen that one of the ways that the Jewish faith changed during their years in exile was that they rediscovered the sacred books of their faith: the laws of Moses, the stories of their ancestors, the songs of their worship, the words of the prophets. In exile, the center of the Jewish faith became their scriptures, and I can't overstate how radical this change was. Today every religion has its holy books, but until the Babylonian exile, all religions were centered in their ritual. The Jews were the first to move from rite to writing, and the consequences of this shift were dramatic. It made faith accessible to everyone who could read; it made worship possible anywhere you could carry a scroll; and whether they liked it or not, it dramatically

reduced the necessity of priests. Instead of priests being at the center of the faith, for most Jewish believers, and especially those still scattered among the nations, the most important religious leader was the bookman, the scribe, or the teacher, the rabbi.

Ezra was a scribe, “skilled in the Law of Moses,” and he must have had some friends in high places, because he not only got a letter of appointment to Jerusalem from Emperor Artaxerxes, but he persuaded the emperor to give him money to deliver him for the support of the temple. Then Ezra made a tour of the Jewish settlements in the cities of the empire and collected still more offerings to take along. Finally, he gathered his traveling party around him. “We have been blessed,” said Ezra. “We have much treasure to take to the City of God. Let us pray now for safety from bandits while we travel.”

One man’s hand rose tentatively. “I say, Ezra, since a lot of the treasure is from the king, do you think you might ask him for some soldiers to go along with us to protect it?”

Ezra hesitated. “No, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I told the king we wouldn’t need any, because our God could protect us.”

“Oh. Right. Then, let’s pray.”

As a testimony to the power of prayer, the caravan arrived safely in Jerusalem and delivered their gold and silver to the high priest. But make no mistake: Ezra was not there just to bring offerings to the temple. He was first of all a scribe, and his goal was scribal. As Ezra chapter 7 puts it: *For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.* Ezra wasn’t there to make sure the rites of the temple were maintained; he was there to see that the Law of God was kept.

And he didn’t wait long to begin that work. Shortly after arriving, several officials came to him privately and said, “Welcome. Before you get started, you should know how things are here. Um, some of the Israelites in Jerusalem have married the people of the land. Non-Jews.”

“What?” exclaimed Ezra. Grabbing his Torah scroll, he searched quickly through the book that we now call Deuteronomy. “Listen to this! ‘When the Lord your God brings you into the land’ . . . yada yada yada . . . here it is! ‘Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods.’ There!”

“Yes, we thought there was something about that in there. It’s disgusting anyway. Foreigners! But what can we do?”

Ezra stared at them. “What do mean, *what can we do?* It must be stopped!”

“Sir,” one of them asked. “That law was written for the Israelites coming in to conquer the land almost a thousand years ago. The people of the land were different then. Surely —”

“The law does not change!” Ezra snapped. “God is eternal, and so his word!”

“And what about those who have already married? Some of them have children.”

“The law’s the law. They must send away the foreign wives and their half-blood children.”

“You mean break up the families?”

“I am here to make this nation holy,” Ezra said. “Sacrifices must be made. Summon the people!”

While the officials made the rounds, summoning all the Jews around Jerusalem to a special gathering before the temple, Ezra went off on his own and prostrated himself before God. “Oh, Lord God,” he wailed, “I am ashamed. I am ashamed. This people who has offended you so many times before, who played the harlot with other gods, who broke your laws, who defiled the temple, and did all these abominations for so many years has borne your just punishment, being sent into exile and having their cities destroyed. And now you have shown mercy to us and brought us back to the land, but we have sinned again, mingling the holy blood with the impure blood of foreigners! I am ashamed! But we will put an end to it! I vow it!”

The gathering at the temple was set for three days off, rain or shine, and on that morning, the officials sent messengers out beneath the gathering clouds to make sure everyone in the town and surrounding farms presented themselves. At the appointed hour, just as the crowd was at last assembled, the heavens opened up and it began to pour rain. Ezra stood with his officials, watching the people. “Look how they’re shaking,” Ezra said with satisfaction.

“Yes, sir. It’s a bad day.”

“They know they’ve done wrong.”

“Sir?”

“They are trembling from the conviction of their guilt!” Ezra declared.

“Um, sir –”

“Yes?”

“Nothing, sir.”

Ezra strode out before the people, himself apparently oblivious to the downpour, and began his speech, describing the people’s sin and quoting for them all the relevant scriptures from Deuteronomy. The people huddled together miserably while he pronounced their guilt. When at last he seemed to be winding down, a chosen spokesman called out, “Sir! This certainly sounds very bad! But it will take a long time to sort it all out. Can we appoint some people to come talk to you? Some other day?”

And so it was decided. Officials from the temple did a month-long survey, listing all the people who had married non-Israelites. That list of names is duly preserved for posterity in Ezra chapter 10, if anyone’s interested. It isn’t really a very long list, actually, which means either that intermarriage wasn’t as widespread as people had said, or that once people knew what the census was about they tailored their answers accordingly. But one thing is sure: in his zeal for the law Ezra successfully compelled many families to dissolve, so as to preserve God’s holiness.

After that defining incident, details about Ezra the Scribe are sketchy. He re-instituted some of the festivals of Israel described in the law, like the Feast of Booths, for instance, and there's a story in the Book of Nehemiah about another time that he summoned all the people to a great assembly and simply read the law to them, from start to finish. He began early in the morning and finished sometime in the early afternoon, so maybe six or seven hours. Oh, and apparently Ezra demanded that everyone stand while scripture was read. You could say that his skill with the law was greater than his skill with people. But maybe it was important to take a hard line during this time of rebuilding. Or maybe not. There's more story to come.

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Today I talked about the shift in emphasis from ritual to written scripture that the Jewish people pioneered. This was a good, healthy, and perhaps necessary move if we were to ever have a personal faith. But there were dangers in this shift as well. When a book takes the central position in one's faith, it is possible forego a real relationship with a living God in favor of fidelity to unchanging words on a page. The term "Fundamentalist" wasn't invented until the 19th century, but the fundamentalist approach to faith has been around at least since Ezra the Scribe. I cannot like him, but I know of no requirement that I find everyone in the Bible likeable. Neither can I dismiss him. He was a man of integrity who followed his own understanding of God with absolute, unswerving devotion. That at least stands as a challenge to me. Let us pray:

God, bless the hard-shelled Christians,
Not the ones who tack your name onto their own rigid political views,
Re-creating you in their own image,
But the ones who truly love you,
Who give their lives for you,
But whose faith is expressed in discipline before love,
Justice over compassion, consequences over forgiveness, purity before hospitality.
Thank you for the great saints of this persuasion: Augustine and Ignatius, Dominic and
Charles Hadley Spurgeon.
I don't get them, and I do not choose their path.
But they are yours as much as I am, and their devotion is no less real for being expressed
differently than mine.
So bless your hard-shelled saints. Bless us all. Amen.