

## Becoming the Oppressor

I'm returning this week to the Book of Ezra in part two of a two-part series that I began a few weeks ago. As I said then, I believe that because we have the Bible in its current form, it behooves us to grapple with all of its contents, even when they don't seem particularly attractive to us. As I also said, I'm pretty sure that the lesson brought by some passages in our Scriptures is, "Don't do it like this." I think that's the case in the passage from Ezra 4 that we explored together at the beginning of the month, in which we heard the story of the returnees from the Babylonian Exile snubbing their cousins who'd remained in the Promised Land, burning the bridge between the two groups. And I think that today's selection is also meant to be a negative example, although, strangely, some Jews and Christians appear to have let Ezra's cold-heartedness set the tone for their own practice. I said in that other sermon on Ezra that my approach has been influenced by years of listening to the wisdom of our brother, Charlie Scalise. Here's something else I've learned from Charlie: if it was enough of a problem among God's people to be mentioned in the Scriptures, chances are good it's STILL a problem among God's people. Also, I want to quote again from Paul Redditt, author of the commentary on Ezra I've used most: "When Ezra and Nehemiah do not measure up, I say so not angrily but sadly and wistfully. I too do not measure up. Whomever God loves and saves thereby is saved by God's grace, and God does not need my permission to save anyone, though God does call on me to spread the gospel of God's love."

Before I get to the heart of the matter, I'll take a couple of minutes to refresh your memories on some salient points in the background of Ezra and to make an introduction to our protagonist. You may remember that when the Assyrian Empire destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE, that they carried off many of the inhabitants, especially the rich and ruling classes, replacing them with conquered peoples from other parts of their empire. Contrary to popular notions of Biblical history, however, they almost certainly left behind a remnant group of poor farmers. These folks continued the worship of Yahweh, spread that worship among the newcomers with whom they intermarried, and basically hunkered down to survival tasks. Likewise, when the Babylonians in their turn conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah, burning the city of Jerusalem and its Temple in 597 BCE, they carried off to Babylon the cream of the crop of Judean society, leaving the poor farmers to tend their crops, ruled from the former capital of Israel, then the Assyrian and then the Babylonian administrative center, Samaria.

When the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, the whole of West Asia from what we now know as Turkey to what we know as Afghanistan and including Egypt in the south became the Persian Empire in roughly 539 BCE. The Persians under Emperor Cyrus the Great had a different pacification policy from either the Assyrians or the Babylonians. They were quite willing to allow local leadership in both politics and religion to remain in place as long as the overlordship of the Persians was acknowledged, and taxes were paid. As a result, the Jewish exiles in Babylon were offered the treasures from the Temple of Solomon and the opportunity to go home.

We tend to think of the Return from Exile as one event but even the Biblical witness of the Book of Ezra shows that this was not the case. There were at least two initial waves of return: the first immediately after Cyrus' edict allowing the return in 539, led by a man named Sheshbazzar, and a second in approximately 520, led by the Davidic prince Zerubbabel. The rebuilding of the Temple and some of the walls of Jerusalem happened on the watch of Zerubbabel, as did the

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snubbing of the farmers who wished to assist and the division between the Judeans and the so-called “Samaritans,” all good descendants of Jacob Israel.

The Book of Ezra then skips ahead nearly 60 years to 458, when a Jewish priest named Ezra is commissioned by the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes I to lead yet another wave of returnees to Jerusalem. And so, rather remarkably, the title character of our book doesn't make an appearance until chapter seven of a ten-chapter book. Who was Ezra? Here's that introduction I promised. There's really not much about him in the Biblical record. There is the story of his leading returnees in chapters 7 & 8 of Ezra, and the story which we'll examine in a minute in chapters 9 & 10. He reappears in the Book of Nehemiah, in chapters 8 & 9, where he reads the book of the Law to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and calls on them to return to observance. That's it. But a substantial amount of extra-Biblical teaching has grown up around Ezra. Rabbinic tradition says that Ezra was zealous for Torah, for teaching it to all and for insisting on strict observance. One rabbinic saying is “If Moses had not anticipated Ezra, Ezra would have received the Torah.” According to Paul Redditt, “He was also credited with dividing Torah into sections to be read Sabbath by Sabbath so that it was read in its entirety annually and with ordering its copying in the Hebrew square script (the kind of script used in writing Hebrew today).”

On its surface, today's story is pretty simple... and pretty ugly. Ezra is so focused on the genetic purity of what he considers to be the “true Israel” that he orders a sort of ethnic cleansing. Any man among the returnees from Babylon who has taken a wife from among “the people of the land” must send that wife away, along with any children she has borne him. Presumably, these women and their children could return to the woman's family. But remember that we are talking about some 80 years-worth of returnees and their families. Some of the suddenly divorced women will be elderly and their families long gone. Those women, hopefully, have grown sons who will care for them, but those sons, too, have been disinherited. Their rights to use of the land is terminated. The younger divorcees with small children must hope that their families will take them back but if there is no family to return to, they are in a desperate plight. The cruelty of Ezra's edict is staggering, especially coming from a priest of Yahweh, the Deliverer of the Children of Israel, whose Law calls again and again for kindness to widows, orphans, and strangers.

There is also a layer of horror beneath the obvious. Remember, the phrase “the people of the land” actually refers to the long-separated cousins of the returnees, likewise descendants of the sons of Jacob. They had been the poor farmers of Israel and Judah prior to the predations of the Assyrians and Babylonians, who had carried away the rich and powerful. Now the descendants of those princes of Judah who'd been taken to Babylon have returned and they expect to rule in Judah again, now with the backing of the Persians. If we would go carefully through the Book of Ezra, we would find that in each wave of return, the leaders are careful to give credit to the Persian emperor and to show their fealty to him. They have been politically powerful before and they are determined to be politically powerful again.

This is covered up to a certain extent by Ezran propaganda. The priest is careful to lay the blame on intermarriage of the returnees among “the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.” But if we read the

books of Joshua and of Kings, it rapidly becomes clear that “the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites... and the Amorites” had been absorbed into Israel centuries before and no longer existed as separate peoples. A sizeable portion of the house of Judah was descended from Rahab, Jericho’s legendary “hooker with a heart of gold.” And all of the house of David was descended from Ruth, the Moabite, and her liaison with Boaz. Ezra may couch his cruelty in terms of holiness, but it is pure power politics, first and last. The families of the rich and powerful will not share leadership with descendants of insignificant farmers.

When we put the books of Ezra and Nehemiah into their context with the rest of the Bible, we are offered a stark choice in how to interpret the will of God for God’s people in this situation. Does the God of Israel demand an ethnic purity or is love of neighbor, and even of the enemy, primary? Scholars believe that these two opposing points of view were vying for the loyalty of God’s people at just about the time of Ezra’s return. For example, last month I pointed out the contrast between the curses on Assyria, probably delivered long after the fact, in the Book of Nahum, and the story of Nineveh’s repentance, probably a fable, in the Book of Jonah. We might likewise contrast the attitude of Ezra with that of the authors of the second and third parts of Isaiah, in which the universality of God’s salvation is predicted. “Isaiah 56:6-8 specifically says that in the new temple ‘foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.’” Those of you who participated in the “Soup, Salad, and Soul” study of the Deuterocanonical books may remember that this struggle between an exclusive vision of Judaism and an inclusive vision of neighborly love continued throughout the Intertestamental Period.

We can also see the continuation of the desire to divide the world into the “ins” and the “outs” in the opponents to the ministry of Jesus and of Paul. While Jesus preached the desire of God for humans to love one another and extended his healing and feeding ministries both to the outcast Samaritans and to the Gentiles of the Decapolis and of Syro-Phoenicia, his opponents, the Pharisees, continued to focus on ritual purity and on the exclusion of all except the “true Israel.” When Paul extended the ministry of the Early Church to the Gentiles without the burden of Torah, his opponents, the “Judaizers,” insisted that salvation was tied to circumcision and diet. All too often, as is likely the case with Ezra, these excluding stipulations came not from a desire to please God but from a desire to protect political power. The excluders never learned that God’s love is not like pie – sharing doesn’t mean less for anybody.

And, sadly, so it has gone in the history of the Church. One of the books that I’m reading for pleasure right now is a history of Christianities in Asia, edited by Peter Phan. The opening chapter, on Christianities in South Asia, has reminded me that Christians have been present in India since the days of the Apostle Thomas and that those “Thomas Christians” had managed to be a steady, growing presence for God and for good around the city of Goa until the arrival of the Portuguese Catholic mission to that city in the middle of the Sixteenth Century. But the Catholics objected to the Syrian Orthodoxy of the Thomas community and, as Portuguese military and trade power increased, made it a point to declare the Thomas community heretical and work for their destruction. In Europe, bloody wars were fought at around that same time

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between Catholics and Protestants of various kinds and among the Protestant communities. The repercussions of those quasi-religious and all-too political battles continued into our lifetimes with the “Troubles” in Ireland.

Closer to home, we were taught when we were young to celebrate the “Pilgrim Fathers,” Puritan Separatists from the Church of England who fled to North America to have freedom in worship and belief. But we should also remember that those pilgrims, once established, took a very dim view of the freedom of others to worship and believe as they chose. In our tradition, we particularly remember Roger Williams, ejected from Massachusetts in the dead of winter into “the howling wilderness.” But we Baptists, who claim spiritual descent from Williams, have done no better. In Baptist gatherings throughout the United States, controversy still rages about who is “in” and who is “out,” as churches are “disfellowshipped” over different understandings of gender equity and human sexuality, just as they were in the 50s and 60s over Desegregation.

What perverse spirit continues to be so endemic in the human race that causes us to choose up sides and to attempt to bludgeon each other into submission? Why, after experiencing oppression, do we so often become oppressors ourselves? The Dissenters who came to Massachusetts rather than being jailed or worse in England, cracked down on dissent among their own community, then declared war on the Indigenous tribes who had originally welcomed them. That sin was exacerbated, as the European presence in the Americas grew, by the introduction in 1619 of the slave trade with Africa and the subsequent development of the doctrine of race to excuse the obvious iniquity of that profit-making move. The concept that “they’re not really human, so it doesn’t count,” continues to haunt the world to this day. Or why, after the horrors of the Shoah, did the modern state of Israel begin to use tactics such as ghettoization and enforced poverty against the Palestinians? Why do we human beings seem to learn the wrong things, the fallen strategies, the sinful tactics, and not the love of God?

I realize that some may feel that I’ve wandered pretty far afield from Ezra and the sad tale of the abandoned wives and children. But I see all of this as part and parcel of the same tragic failing in humankind: we are prone to using God and our faithfulness to our concept of God as license to do whatever we think we need to do to benefit ourselves. But I think there is also good news hidden in this sorrowful episode. Despite the chilling cruelty of the Judeans and of the priest of Yahweh, God did not turn away from those called “the Chosen People.” Certainly, they paid the consequences of their vile actions. The Children of Israel suffered under the dominance of the Syrian Greeks who succeeded the Persians, and of the Romans, brought in to prop up a briefly independent Judah but who then took over and finally destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple. They suffered in their Diaspora and continue to be under threat having returned yet again to *Eretz Yisrael* and to be hated wherever else they live in the world. But God has not given up on them! The Jews continue to be a witness to the world of the faithfulness of God.

And so, too, God has not given up on us, the often-straying followers of Christ known as Americans and as Baptists. From the descendants of Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba, from the descendants of those men who ejected their wives and children into the “howling wilderness,” from the womb of Mary who was in danger of being stoned by the “good people” of Nazareth, came Jesus the Christ who has promised us salvation now and forever. And although our bad deeds have consequences, it is not from fear but from love that we turn to follow Our Savior.

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But as we are in the process of being saved, of continually reforming our lives, it is now incumbent upon us, my sisters and my brothers, to extend God's love to all those we encounter, whether they are among the "ins" or the "outs," whether they are of our "tribe" or another. As we repent from the wrong that we have done to others, and almost assuredly will do to others, let us pledge anew to be instruments of God's peace, faithful followers of Jesus, and conduits of the love from the Holy Spirit that can truly change our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.