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Ezra's Prayer about Intermarriage

Ezra 9: 1-15

Ezra's prayer about intermarriage DIG: How extensive was the problem of intermarriage? What five parties are guilty (9:1-2; see 10:18-43 for the names)? How long is Ezra on the scene before being brought in for damage control (compare 10:9 and 7:9)? Ezra wanted to establish a holy nation with pure marriages. What are the pros and cons of this (see Deuteronomy 7:1-5; Malachi 2:10-16; Second Corinthians 6:14 against Genesis 41:45; Numbers 12:1)? What is the emotional tone in Ezra's response? The gist of his logic? The dramatic high-point (or low-point)? Why is he so heart-broken? What five themes do you see in this classic prayer (see verses 6, 8, 10, 13, 15)? What does this prayer tell you about which is greater - guilt or grace? Slavish habits or new life? God's anger or mercy? What hope for the remnant do you see (9:14)?

REFLECT: What effect do you suppose this prayer had on the audience? On later readers? On God? On you? Explain? Some 25 years later, Nehemiah dealt with the same problem of intermarriage with foreigners, but "pulled more hair" than Ezra (see Nehemiah 13:23-29). If confronted with similarly offensive sin, would you respond? Do you have a problem with people marrying a non-believer? How common is that among your friends? With what results? What else could compromise a struggling community of faith as much as mixed marriages in ancient Isra'el?

During the ministry of Ezra (to see link click [Bf](#) - The Second Return).

Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs

(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: [The Ezra Memoirs](#)).



The problem of mixed marriages is a tricky subject, even in our times. It is not just the issue of a believer marrying an unbeliever, producing what Paul called an **unequally yoked marriage (Second Corinthians 6:14)**. No believer should intentionally walk into such a relationship if they know what's good for them. The inability to share together what is most important and dear - a love for **Jesus Christ** and the gospel - will, at best, doom the relationship into something that is always less than what the believer's heart desires, no matter how "ideal" the partner may otherwise seem. Chemistry and charisma cannot make up for the lack of spiritual communion. But it wasn't merely the issue of a believer intentionally marrying an unbeliever that is in view here - it is a racial issue. **The Jews** were forbidden to marry non-believers, and this was evidently something that **the Israelites** who lived in **Jerusalem** were flouting. This is a politically sensitive issue, then as it is now.¹⁶²

But no sooner had the festival of **Sukkot** been celebrated, **Ezra** was confronted with an unexpected problem: many of **the Jewish men** had married **Gentile wives**. **Jewish leaders approached Ezra with** some tragic news. **The people of Isra'el, the cohanim and the Levites:** As was the case during the Assyrian deportation of the northern kingdom of **Isra'el** and the Babylonian deportation of the southern kingdom of **Judah**, not only had **the people** fallen into **sin**, but the nation's **spiritual leadership** had led the way.

They have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands who practice detestable things just like the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites (Ezra 9:1): YHVH had commanded **His people** to keep **themselves holy**, and set apart from **the people of Canaan** when **they** arrived in **the Promised Land**. In fact, **He** had even ordered **them** to make war against all of **the pagan nations** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah**, [to see link click Ae - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh](#)), destroying **their** altars and religious sites dedicated to idols. If **the Israelites** failed to do this, **Ha'Shem** warned that **they** would wind up becoming just like **their** pagan neighbors - **intermarrying** and adopting **their** idolatrous ways (**Exodus 34:10-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-6**). Unfortunately,

the Israelites did not obey **the LORD's** commands in this regard, and **He** sent **them** into exile.

For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves (Acts 9:2a): Later, **Nehemiah's** time, the same thing happened. **Malachi** added that some of these **people** had even divorced **their Jewish wives** in order to marry non-believers (see **Cq - Malachi: The Pollution of the Priesthood**). **And for their sons and have mingled the holy seed with the peoples of the lands (Acts 9:2b):** This is a powerful expression that can help us understand why **God** doesn't want **His** people to intermarry with unbelievers. **ADONAI** had chosen **Abraham** and **his descendants** to be the race into which **He** would bring **Yeshua, the Messiah, His holy** and sinless **Son**. As such, **YHVH** wanted Abraham's descendants to be set apart as **a holy people**, distinct from the nations around **them**, rather than imitating them. This same principle applies to believers today, for the Church is **the Bride of Christ** (see the commentary on **Revelation Ft - Come, I Will Show You the Bride, the Wife of the Lamb**). **The LORD** still demands that **His Bride** keep **Herself** apart from the world.

The situation in **Jerusalem** was dire. The problem was not confined to the fringes of the population. **Indeed, the hand of the leaders and the officials have been at the forefront in this unfaithful act (Ezra 9:2b)**. This must have seemed incomprehensible to **Ezra**. It was bad enough that **the Jews** had fallen back into **their** former **sins**, but it was inconceivable and inexcusable that the nation's spiritual leaders were actually leading the way.¹⁶³

Ezra's immediate response was to fall before **ADONAI** in deep mourning. Yet, As **God's** chosen leader, **he** identified **himself** with **the people**. **When Ezra heard this report, he tore his garment and his robe, a sign of grief repeatedly mentioned in the Bible, and pulled out some of the hair from his head and from his beard, a manifestation of sorrow. Then he sat down devastated (Ezra 9:3).**

Everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Isra'el gathered themselves around me because of the unfaithful act of the exiles. There were still some in Judah, including **Ezra**, who took **his** words seriously. **They sat** there with **Ezra until the evening offering**, during which there was a time of public **prayer**. Then **Ezra rose up from his self-abasement with his garment and robe torn, then he bowed down on his knees, spread out his hands to ADONAI his God (Ezra 9:4-6a).**

Then **Ezra prayed** so everyone could hear: **O my God, I am ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God! For our iniquities are higher than our heads,**

drowning us, as it were, and our guilt has reached to the heavens, a metaphor referring to the magnitude of their guilt which rises like a colossal tower to the skies. From the days of our fathers when the Torah was first given, to this day our guilt has been great. Because of our iniquities we, as a people, our kings and our cohanim have been subjected to the sword, to captivity, to plunder and to humiliation at the hand of the kings of the lands, as it is today (Ezra 9:6b-7). He recognized that sin is like leaven: a little bit of it can infect the entire nation. But he was also demonstrating the important element of spiritual leadership by identifying himself with the people who were in sin, remembering that he, too, was a sinner.

But now for a brief moment ADONAI our God has shown us favor in leaving us a remnant and giving us as a symbolic peg in His holy place. That is, the remnant of God's people in Judah had been firmly fixed in ADONAI's Holy City as a peg is firmly fixed in a wall.¹⁶⁴ Thus our God has enlightened our eyes and has given us a little relief in our bondage (Ezra 9:8). The English translation fails to express the deep despair of the original. A little grace had been granted by God to His people; a small remnant had found its weary way back to its home and had driven a single peg into its soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery. How graphically Ezra epitomizes the Jewish experience in these few words.

Though we are slaves, subject to the rule of a Persian king, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has extended lovingkindness (see the commentary on Ruth Af - The Concept of Chesed) to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, reviving us in order to restore the House of our God, to raise up its ruins, and to give us a spiritual wall (Hebrew: *gader*) of protection (see Psalm 80:12) around Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 9:9). The term *gader* refers to a vineyard wall rather than a city wall, suggesting that figure of Isra'el as God's vineyard (see the commentary on Isaiah Az - The Vineyard of the LORD is the House of Isra'el), which He had appointed the Persians to protect.

So now, our God, what should we say after this? For we have forsaken Your mitzvot that You commanded through Your servants the prophets saying: The land that you are entering to possess is a land defiled by the impurities of the peoples of the lands. Through their abominations, they have filled it from one end to the other with their uncleanness. Therefore, do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek their shalom or their welfare, so that you may be strong, eat the good things of the Land and leave it as an inheritance for your children forever (Ezra 9:10-12). If God's people refuse to separate themselves

from **the world (First John)**, then **those** who still fear **God's Word** will separate **themselves** from **them**.

Paul had warned **the Corinthians** in equally strong terms: **Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What harmony does Messiah have with Belial? Or what part does a believer have in common with an unbeliever (Second Corinthians 6:14-15)?**

Then **Ezra** pleaded for **God's** mercy: **After everything that has happened to us because of our evil deeds and our great guilt - for You, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and given us a remnant such as this - shall we once again break Your mitzvot and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable actions as these? Would You not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? ADONAI, God of Isra'el, You are righteous, for we are left this day as a remnant. Behold, here we are before You in our guilt; because of it no one can stand before You (Ezra 9:13-15). For all Israelites, innocent as well as guilty, are bound up together in that responsibility for the nation's guilt.**

The prayer ends with a clear recognition that **Ha'Shem** had every reason to wash **His** hand of the **Jerusalem** community, as **He** had once threatened to do with an earlier generation (see the commentary on **Exodus Gs - Now Leave Me Alone So That My Anger May Burn Against Your People**). This was a real possibility. There were other **Israelites** scattered abroad, through whom the promises of **YHVH** could be fulfilled. **Ezra** had not even the heart to plead, as **Moshe** had, that **the LORD's** name would suffer in such a case. **His** prayer was naked confession, without excuses, without the pressure of so much as a request.¹⁶⁵

The problem of mixed marriages is one that dominates the ministries of both **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** (see **Cr - Nehemiah's Final Reforms: Nehemiah's handling of mixed marriages**). The issue is not so much marriage to **Gentiles**, but marriage to non-believers. A **Moabite** such as **Ruth**, for example, of one of the races mentioned by **Ezra** above, could marry an **Israelite** such as **Bo'az** (see the commentary on **Ruth Az - Scene Four: Bo'az Marries Ruth**), because in the goodness of **ADONAI**, **she** had been wonderfully converted! These marriages of which **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** (and **the Torah**) spoke were essentially marriages outside the faith of **Isra'el**. They brought with them the threat of idolatry as one or the other partner maintained his or her false religion within the marriage. If the practice continued, **Isra'el** would no longer be a distinct people through whose line the redemptive

promises of a **Messiah** would come. **She** would no longer be **the wife of ADONAI (Isaiah 54:6)**, recipient of the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David, and through who **all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3)**.

So important was this issue in the earlier periods of **Jewish** history that **YHVH** had sent a plague that killed **twenty-four thousand Israelites**. Only after the priest **Phinehas** had killed **an Israelite man** who was engaged in **sexual immorality with a Midianite woman** did it become clear that the rest of **the Israelites** were to be spared (**Numbers 25:1-13**). After **the Israelites'** conquest of **the Land**, **Joshua** had urged compliance with this rule, threatening that if **they** engaged in intermarriage with **the Canaanites**, **know for certain that ADONAI your God will no longer drive these nations out from before you. Instead, they will become a snare and a trap for you, a scourge in your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which ADONAI your God has given you (Joshua 23:13)**.

The issue is one of worldliness and includes a warning against conforming to the world. The congregations of **God** are **the Body of Messiah**, called under the leadership of **Yeshua**, its head, to permeate and purify society and reflect **His** values. The Church, made up of **Jews** and **Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14)** is therefore meant to transform culture. But the Adversary's empire, the pagan, secular ideologies of the world, strikes back and the conflict continues. The call, then, to be a distinct, separate people, **a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession**, involves our actions, small and great, that reveal our holy status (**First Peter 2:9**).

To a large degree, **the Jews in the Land** had compromised **themselves**. **They** had gotten in bed with the world. As **Ezra** prayed, some of **them** realized that **they** had sinned. **They** had broken the expressed commandments of **Ha'Shem**. They had ceased being a distinct and holy people and had instead become like the world around **them**. Having **the Temple, the Torah** and the promises that **God made to them** made no difference in the way **they** lived. How did **the Israelites** react when confronted with **their sin**? That is what we will discover next.¹⁶⁶