

Triennial Torah Study – 3rd Year 05/01/2013

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This week's Triennial Torah reading can be found at:

https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf

Num 35 Ezra 8-10 2 Cor 2-3

Cities for the Levites Numbers 35

Why are the Levites in a category all to themselves? The answer is that they are not to make their living off the land, but, rather, from their service to God and the rest of the nation. And this requires an element of faith—that God will inspire the other tribes to fulfill their responsibility in supplying the Levites' needs. Each of the tribes of Israel is to provide cities for the Levites' living quarters, as well as surrounding countryside for their animals. The Levites, of whom there were 23,000 males, are assigned to 48 cities, each about the size of a football stadium surrounded by around 750 acres of "common-land." That may sound large by today's standards, but the entire land area for all the Levites amounted to approximately 36,000 acres out of a total of more than five million acres for all Israel.

God instructs Moses to appoint six of the Levite cities to be cities of refuge. When someone is murdered, members of the victimized family may choose an "avenger of blood"—a single individual—from among themselves to execute the murderer. The city of refuge provides asylum for anyone who fears the dead person's relatives will seek revenge before there can be a fair trial—as well as for those cleared of murder in a trial and found guilty of accidental death, or manslaughter. The congregation is to judge between these two situations, whether the crime was strictly accidental or if it was murder (Numbers 35:24). If deemed murder, the offender is put to death. If manslaughter, the killer is delivered to one of the six cities of refuge, there to remain until the death of the high priest—at which time he may leave a free man. But if he leaves the city of refuge before that, the avenger of blood will be allowed to kill him and remain guiltless. It may sound harsh to us today to think that someone who killed another person by accident could himself be legally killed by the victim's relative. Yet in practical fact it demonstrates the high value God places on human life and that God holds everyone responsible for his or her actions. We all have a serious responsibility to be sure that our actions never harm or injure others, because under God's legal system a person's carelessness could bring a severe—and possibly fatal—penalty.

Furthermore, God made some concessions to human weakness in the legal system He gave to the Israelites—realizing that they were a carnally motivated people (compare Matthew 19:8). These, in fact, can serve to demonstrate God's wisdom. Consider the appointment of an avenger of blood. Human nature, God knew quite well, demanded revenge. Without rules governing the exacting of it in situations such as that just described, family or tribal warfare could have broken out like the Hatfields and McCoys of American history, with no end to the

bloodshed that defiles the land (Numbers 35:33). God said, “You must not defile the land where you are going to live, for I [will] live there myself. I am the Lord, who lives among the people of Israel” (verse 34, NLT).

Returning to the Promised Land (Ezra 8)

Chapter 8 gives more details about the journey of Ezra and the band of exiles who went with him to Jerusalem. “Verses 1-14 list those who accompanied Ezra from Mesopotamia, including the descendants of 15 individuals. The figures of the men listed total 1,496, in addition to the individuals named. There were also a considerable number of women and children (v. 21). An additional group of about 40 Levites (vv. 18-19) and of 220 ‘temple servants’ (v. 20) are also listed” (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verse 1). The distinction “last sons of Adonikam” in verse 13 may indicate that these were following other family members who had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel 80 years earlier (see 2:13).

The river of Ahava, the departure point, was probably a canal a short distance outside Babylon. “The canal that flows toward Ahava’ probably flowed into either the Euphrates or the Tigris (cf. the ‘River’ Kebar in Ezekiel 1:1, which was also a canal). [One scholar] suggests the modern Meem, classical Maschana or Scenae, on the right bank of the Tigris River, which was near the beginning of two caravan routes” (note on verse 15).

After camping there for three days, awaiting more arrivals, it was soon realized that there were no Levites (verse 15). A similar problem came up at the time of the first return. While more than 4,000 priests returned with Zerubbabel, only 341 Levites did, including singers and gatekeepers (2:36-42). Perhaps they reckoned the Levitical role as lacking in prestige as compared with the priestly office. And maybe, with settled lives in Babylon, they did not want to go embark on a life of service and hard work in a faraway, undeveloped land. Yet, as noted above, about 40 Levites did answer the recruiting efforts initiated by Ezra (verses 16-19).

In Ezra 8:21, Ezra proclaims a fast. There are some important principles here. The purpose of a fast is to “humble ourselves before our God”—not so that we can cajole Him into taking pity on us and answering our every wish, but so that we can realize our total dependence on Him and therefore be in a more appropriate frame of mind for receiving His blessings. As part of this mind frame, we will be more receptive to God’s will. That will help us “to seek from Him the right way for us.” When we face hard decisions about where to go or what to do or how to do what needs to be done, fasting is a way to help us see God’s direction. He can answer in a variety of ways—through circumstances, advice from others, direct inspiration or revelation through His Word, the Holy Bible, or even by direct intervention.

Ezra and those with him were in a serious predicament. Being waylaid by bandits and robbers was rather common in the ancient world. And yet Ezra had not asked the king for a military escort, as he felt it would have made his pious testimony to the king about the power and wrath of God seem phony (verse 22). Having fasted, however, Ezra says that God answered their prayers (verse 23). Whether this means that they received some confirmation of His protection is not clear. Perhaps they came across scriptural promises of protection during the fast. Perhaps God helped them to pick out a safer route. Then again, it may just refer to the fact that they made it to Judea without incident. Ezra does, however, specifically say that God

delivered them “from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road” (verse 31). But whether actual ambushes were attempted and thwarted is not clear. Perhaps God kept any potential robbers from even thinking to ambush the returning exiles. This is quite remarkable when one considers all the treasure the company was transporting. “The 650 talents of silver weighed nearly 25 tons. The one hundred talents of gold weighed over three tons. These figures do not include the numerous other valuable objects of exquisite artistry” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 24-30). These sums equate to millions of dollars in today’s money.

The exiles departed from Babylon and gathered outside the city at the Ahava Canal on the first day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (7:9). They remained there for 11 days, striking out on their long journey on the 12th day of the month (8:31). From that point it took them about three and a half months to reach Jerusalem, as they arrived on the first day of the fifth month (7:9). After resting for three days, the returned exiles deposited their treasure in the temple and then offered sacrifices (verses 32-35). Then, “the delivery of the royal orders to the regional governors (8:36) may have taken weeks or even months. Ezra did not just deliver the decree, he secured the support of the king’s satraps and governors” (note on 9:1).

We should realize that with this miniscule return of exiles, even added to those who had come in Zerubbabel’s day, the vast majority of the Jewish people remained in Babylonia or were scattered throughout the empire. More would come later with Nehemiah, but the vast majority of the Jews would still remain scattered. In historical fact, many more Jews have returned to the Holy Land over the past century than ever returned in ancient times. Yet even the modern return constitutes a minority of the world’s Jewish population. These small returns, while necessary to fulfill God’s scriptural prophecies, have not constituted the great return to the Promised Land prophesied in Scripture—in which all Judah and all Israel as well are to return with miraculous signs and wonders. This great event is yet future—to occur after Christ’s return. Nevertheless, we should view the small returns of ancient times as a tiny foretaste of what is to come—in the sense of a joyful reunion with God and true worship in His land after so long a time being gone.

The Problem of Intermarriage (Ezra 9)

After settling in and completing the business of securing the support of the regional governors (see 8:36-9:1), a shocking report is brought to Ezra. This was apparently about four and a half months after his and his company’s initial arrival on the first day of the fifth month (see 7:9), as the measures to deal with this issue are rather speedily announced on the 17th day of the ninth month (compare 10:8, 9).

Ezra is informed that the people, priests and Levites included, had entered into mixed marriages with the neighboring pagan peoples (9:1-2)—a direct violation of the law that God had given through Moses (see Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3). The law in this regard was intended to keep the covenant people distinct as a nation and to protect them and their children from being influenced into false religious concepts and practices.

While it is possible that some of the new arrivals could have been guilty, it seems unlikely that any of them would have entered into marriages with foreigners in just a few months’ time. More likely, the guilty were only of those Jews who already lived in the land when Ezra arrived.

In stating that the transgressors were “of those who had been carried away captive,” Ezra must have meant they were the descendants of those who returned with Zerubbabel. Certainly those who already had children by these illegal marriages had to have been in these marriages prior to Ezra’s arrival.

It is pointed out to Ezra that the leaders and rulers of the people led the way in this transgression (Ezra 9:2). Leaders always have an opportunity to serve as examples for others to emulate—whether for good or ill. When those in such responsible positions are corrupted, they often lead others astray.

Specific motivations behind what happened are not given. “Humanly speaking there may have been reasons for such intermarriages, such as a disparity between the number of returning men and available Jewish women” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verses 1-2). Yet it would have been far better to remain single, even if it meant living alone with no perpetuation of one’s family lineage, than to so flagrantly disobey God. The One who created marriage desires for people to experience its benefits, but only within the boundaries He has set. This is important for all of us to remember. Christians in the New Testament are instructed to not marry unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14; compare 1 Corinthians 7:39). This is for our own sake and that of any children we might produce—and that of the rest of the Church. Of course, many when they are first converted and become part of God’s Church are already married to a spouse who is not yet called of God—and in this case the apostle Paul instructs that the marriage be maintained if the unbeliever is willing to continue the marriage in fidelity and peace (see verses 12-16).

Ezra is utterly distraught at the news that has been brought to him, rending his garment in grief and even tearing out some of his own hair (Ezra 9:3)—a unique occurrence in Scripture, as shaving one’s hair is otherwise given as a symbol of shame. As others gather about him in dire concern, Ezra collapses into a fast of mourning, rising from it at the time of the evening sacrifice to pour out a confession of guilt to God. The next chapter reveals that he did this before the temple (see 10:1).

Verses 10-12 of chapter 9, while stated as if a single quotation from the law regarding the present sin, actually draw from many passages (see Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 11:8-9; 23:6; Proverbs 10:27; 13:22; 20:7; Isaiah 1:19).

Ezra ends his prayer with a declaration that God is righteous—and that the remnant of Israel is deserving of being wiped out (Ezra 9:13-15). Perhaps he was going to now ask that the people be led to repentance and for forgiveness but, as we will see in the next chapter, his prayer is cut short—for a good reason.

Covenant to Put Away Pagan Wives (Ezra 10)

As Ezra prayed and wept before the temple, a large assembly of the people gathered to join in his mourning and prayer to God. Just as corrupt leadership had led the people astray, so righteous leadership can lead others in the proper direction.

In verse 2 a certain Shechaniah remarkably observes that even though the people had grievously sinned, “yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.” That is a true and wonderful message. It characterized the whole history of the nation. And it remains true for all who will today or in the future be part of the Israel of God, His chosen people. Despite our past sins, God will still work with us and ultimately deliver us. Yet that is contingent on our making a change in our lives. People must repent. And in verse 3, Shechaniah suggests a covenant with God to do just that—in this case, ending their illegal marriages.

Shechaniah is referred to as the son of Jehiel of the sons of Elam. “Possibly his father is the same Jehiel mentioned in vv. 21 and 26 as he also was of the family of Elam.... Perhaps Shechaniah was grieved that his father had married a non-Jewish mother. Six members of the clan of Elam were involved in intermarriages (v. 26)” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verse 2).

Specifically, Shechaniah’s call is to put away their pagan wives and the children born to them. Shechaniah says, “Let it be done according to the law” (verse 3), evidently referring to the law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-2, where a man could divorce a wife if he found fault in her. In this case, the fault was evidently that the women were still pagans. Moreover, these marriages were illegal to start with. The sending away of the children with their mothers had a precedent in God telling Abraham to heed Sarah in sending Ishmael away with Hagar so that Ishmael and his lineage would not cause problems for the son of promise, Isaac, and his lineage (see Genesis 21:8-21).

Encouraged, Ezra has the leaders take an oath about putting away the foreign wives (Ezra 10:4-5). Yet he continues his fast (verse 6). In verses 7-8, a proclamation is issued demanding that all the Jews of Judea gather at Jerusalem within three days. “As the territory of Judah had been much reduced, the most distant inhabitants would not be more than fifty miles from Jerusalem. The borders were Bethel in the north, Beersheba in the south, Jericho in the east, and Ono in the west.... All could travel to Jerusalem ‘within three days’” (note on verse 8). Those who would not come would have their property confiscated and be expelled from the Jewish community. Emperor Artaxerxes had given Ezra the powers of confiscation and banishment along with other state powers—even capital punishment—in the decree he issued regarding the return (see 7:26).

Incidentally, some see “all Israel” in 10:5 and other such references to Israel as an indication that all 12 tribes of Israel had returned to the Promised Land. But verse 9 makes it clear that this referred only to “all the men of Judah and Benjamin” along with the Levites also mentioned in verse 5. These constituted the remnant of Israel—Israel, as mentioned earlier, being the name of the nation in covenant with God. While a small smattering of people descended from the northern tribes did live among the southern tribes, having been absorbed into Judah, the northern tribes, as tribes, remained scattered. They will not return to the Promised Land until the time of Christ’s return.

The 20th day of the ninth month (verse 9) would have been in December. So besides being rainy, it was also probably very cold—leaving the people shivering (on top of their trembling over the current situation). This created a problem in dealing with the matter at hand. The

people, while in agreement with Ezra's directive, recognized that it would take much more than a day or two to search out all the guilty and make sure all were sworn to putting away their pagan wives and children—and during this time the people who had traveled to Jerusalem couldn't reasonably be expected to live and sleep outside in the cold and rain. So they requested that the investigation be organized by their officials and carried out in rotations (verses 12-14).

The opposition of the four men in verse 15 lends credibility to the account. That is, rather than a general statement that "everyone agreed," we are specifically told of four who did not without any indication given as to why. It's like the reading of a vote tally. As to the objections of these four, it should be noted that it is not clear exactly what they were objecting to—whether to the rotational investigation proposed by the people or the putting away of wives and children. Whatever it was, their objections apparently had no effect. The investigations by Ezra and the leaders proceeded (verse 16).

Interestingly, we are told that it took a few months to "question" the men who had married pagan women (verse 17). It seems that for a mere blanket decree of putting away foreign wives, a simple identification of each woman's nationality would have sufficed and that this would not have taken so long. Perhaps there was a complicating factor. Some of these women may have converted to the Israelite religion, as with Ruth and Rahab. If so, the examination may have included determining if these women were indeed still pagan, and only those who still were would have to have been put away, along with their children who would have been adversely affected by their mothers.

Verses 18-44 list 113 men who had married pagan women. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* comments that this is "an exceptionally small number in a community of some 30,000 persons. It is probably a truncated list, including representative names and pointing to the involvement of all classes, as the schematic arrangement may indicate. For the most part members of the upper classes are named, which also seems to reflect the genuineness of the list since they alone were in a position to contract such marriages and stood to benefit most from them" (quoted in *Expositor's*, note on verse 44). On the other hand, it could have been a complete list—as the sins of a few could bring guilt on the whole nation (compare the sin of Achan in Joshua 7). Either way, it is worth noting that of the 113 listed, 17 are priests, 10 are Levites and 86 represent the rest of the nation. Thus, nearly 25 percent of those listed are religious leaders. What a sad state of affairs this was.

Presumably, all who were married to pagan wives gave their promise to put them away, though that is explicitly stated only about those listed first (see verses 18-19; compare verses 20-44). Yet whether or not all of them followed through on their promise is not even hinted at. It seems hard to believe that Ezra would have allowed this to continue on any kind of wide scale. But his hand may have been weakened over time. Indeed, around 25 years later Nehemiah would have to redress this problem once again.

We should not look at Ezra 10 as the conclusion of the book. For as mentioned in the Bible

Reading Program's introductory comments on this book, in the Hebrew canon Ezra and Nehemiah are reckoned together as one book. Yet before proceeding to Nehemiah 1, we will, after a supplementary reading, turn back a few chapters in the book of Ezra for the sake of following the apparent chronological order.

2 Corinthians 2

Reasons for the apostle not coming to Corinth. (1-4) Directions about restoring the repentant offender. (5-11) An account of his labours and success in spreading the gospel of Christ. (12-17)

The apostle desired to have a cheerful meeting with them; and he had written in confidence of their doing what was to their benefit and his comfort; and that therefore they would be glad to remove every cause of disquiet from him. We should always give pain unwillingly, even when duty requires that it must be given.

The apostle desires them to receive the person who had done wrong, again into their communion; for he was aware of his fault, and much afflicted under his punishment. Even sorrow for sin should not unfit for other duties, and drive to despair. Not only was there danger lest Satan should get advantage, by tempting the penitent to hard thoughts of God and religion, and so drive him to despair; but against the churches and the ministers of Christ, by bringing an evil report upon believers as unforgiving; thus making divisions, and hindering the success of the ministry. In this, as in other things, wisdom is to be used, that the ministry may not be blamed for indulging sin on the one hand, or for too great severity towards sinners on the other hand. Satan has many plans to deceive, and knows how to make a bad use of our mistakes.

A believer's triumphs are all in Christ. To him be the praise and glory of all, while the success of the gospel is a good reason for a believer's joy and rejoicing. In ancient triumphs, abundance of perfumes and sweet odors were used; so the name and salvation of Jesus, as ointment poured out, was a sweet savor diffused in every place. Unto some, the gospel is a savor of death unto death. They reject it to their ruin. Unto others, the gospel is a savor of life unto life: as it quickened them at first when they were dead in trespasses and sins, so it makes them more lively, and will end in eternal life. Observe the awful impressions this matter made upon the apostle, and should also make upon us. The work is great, and of ourselves we have no strength at all; all our sufficiency is of God. But what we do in religion, unless it is done in sincerity, as in the sight of God, is not of God, does not come from him, and will not reach to him. May we carefully watch ourselves in this matter; and seek the testimony of our consciences, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, that as of sincerity, so speak we in Christ and of Christ.

2 Corinthians 3

The preference of the gospel to the law given by Moses. (1-11) The preaching of the apostle was suitable to the excellency and evidence of the gospel, through the power of the Set Apart Spirit. (12-18)

Even the appearance of self-praise and courting human applause, is painful to the humble and spiritual mind. Nothing is more delightful to faithful ministers, or more to their praise, than the success of their ministry, as shown in the spirits and lives of those among whom they labor. The law of Christ was written in their hearts, and the love of Christ shed abroad there. Nor was it written in tables of stone, as the law of God given to Moses, but on the fleshy (not fleshly, as fleshliness denotes sensuality) tables of the heart, Ezekiel 36:26. Their hearts were humbled and softened to receive this impression, by the new-creating power of the Holy Spirit. He ascribes all the glory to God. And remember, as our whole dependence is upon the Lord, so the whole glory belongs to him alone.

The condition of those who enjoy and believe the gospel is happy, for the heart is set at liberty to run the ways of God's commandments. They have light, and with open face they behold the glory of the Lord. Believers should prize and improve these privileges. We should not rest contented without knowing the transforming power of the gospel, by the working of the Spirit, bringing us to seek to be like the temper and tendency of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and into union with Him. We behold Christ, as in the glass of his word; and as the reflection from a mirror causes the face to shine, the faces of believers shine also.