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# Ezra & Nehemiah

by Mark Glanville

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## *Ezra-Nehemiah: Exclusivism as Skilled Survival*

(Excerpt from “Kinship with Refugees”, by Mark Glanville and Luke Glanville, forthcoming, IVP, 2019)

The books of Ezra-Nehemiah demonstrate an exclusivity that is troubling to many Western Eurocentric readers. Ezra stipulates that foreign wives and their children be sent away (Ezra 10:3).

For communities that exist under threat of cultural extinction strategies of cultural preservation may also be crucial. To illustrate, Pat Dodson, an eminent Australian Aboriginal leader, explains that traditional Aboriginal marriage law was a means by which Aboriginal culture was maintained.[1] For Australian Aboriginal people, preserving traditional marriage customs was a means of cultural preservation, and the erosion of these customs (often by way of the church) meant cultural destruction.[2]

The need for strategies of preservation in times of dire communal stress is visible in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah.[3] These books tell the story of some reforms within the post-exilic community. In the years surrounding 586BCE, the Babylonian empire forced thousands into exile. The population was decimated to 10% of its pre-conquest levels, precipitating a long

struggle for religious and cultural survival.[4] The Persians, who came to power in 538BCE, had a policy of re-establishing people groups in their native land. Ezra returned to the land, bringing with him the book of law with the goal of reforming the community under torah.

As for Nehemiah, his efforts to rebuild the wall and ensure the integrity of the community met with stern resistance from Sanballat, the ruler of the much more powerful province of Samaria to the North, and Tobiah, the Ammonite ruler (Neh 4). There was also conflict between returnees and the people who had remained in the land after the Babylonian conquest (Ezra 9:1, 4; Neh 10:30-31). Intermarriage had consolidated the shared power between Sanballat, Tobiah, and the Jerusalem clergy.[5] It is possible that the strange stipulation in Deuteronomy: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh” (Deut 23:3), originally addressed Nehemiah’s conflict with Sanballat (a Moabite) and Tobiah (an Ammonite).[6]

It seems that Ezra was concerned with intermarriage between returnee Jews and the Jews that remained in the land. Those who remained had polluted true worship. [7] (Ezra 9:2) Ezra insists that those who men who have

intermarried must separate from their “foreign wives” (Ezra 10:11), citing Deuteronomy’s warning that intermarriage will lead to a dilution of the faithfulness of the community (Ezra 9:12). This practice of restricting marriage to the in-group is known as “endogamy.” While endogamy may seem strange and even offensive to Western-Eurocentric readers, endogamy is very common within communal societies today.[8] It is likely that Ezra did not have the authority to enforce his decrees. The command to send away wives and children is probably a forceful literary device, calling for purity.[9]

Yet, what are we to make of Ezra’s actions? Whether exclusion is ethical or not, depends on the relative power of the group in question. The example of first nations communities today shows that an ethic of inclusivism isn’t to be absolutized, that is, pursued without taking heed of where power imbalances lie. Throughout history, more powerful groups have tended used their power to set up relationships according to their own interest, whether by insisting upon welcome or by closing their doors. We have seen that God makes a covenant commitment with vulnerable groups and with vulnerable individuals. Biblical ethics always tilts in favour of vulnerability, whether people-on-the-move or vulnerable cultures who are seeking to preserve their home. Reflecting upon the realities that first nation communities face, Mark G. Brett states that a nation or people group can justify focusing upon the “recovery of self,” “when a communal identity has been pushed to the edge of its very life.”[10]

In discerning our responsibility to welcome, Western nations must face up honestly to the power that they hold. In our identity as Christians, we may feel small, as though the church is being increasingly marginalised in

Western culture. Yet, as members of our nation, we are actually quite powerful, in the world. It is not Western culture, but diasporic cultures, that are pushed to the very edge of life.

Returning to the ethics of ancient Israel, not everything that key characters in the Old Testament do is to be applaud or imitated, and this is probably the case with Ezra and Nehemiah. The voices of the various books in the Old Testament cannon speak in concert, mutually informing one another. While Ezra stipulated thoroughgoing endogamy, the book of Leviticus permits intermarriage with foreigners for all Israelites excepting the priesthood (Lev 21:14; Leviticus relates to the book of Ezra in its concern for purity.) This contrast with Leviticus highlights the importance of context for Ezra’s approach, a context of extreme communal stress. Another point of comparison is Ezekiel’s vision of the post-exilic community, which provides that foreigners will be incorporated as natives within Israel, and also allotted land-inheritance among the tribes (Eze 47:22).[11]

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[1] Marriage laws ensured that every person had kindred in whom they could find support (A[Australian]BC, *Encounter*: “Pat Dodson: Vatican II or Mission Control?”

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/encounter/pat-dodson-vatican-ii-or-mission-control/3537942>

[2] Australian Aboriginal leaders have expressed the need for Christian churches to actively encourage Aboriginal Christians to recover their cultural traditions, including traditions surrounding funeral practices. Patrick L. Dodson, Jacinta K. Elston and Brian F. McCoy, “Leaving Culture at the Door,” *Pacifica* 19 (2006): 249–64.

[3] See further, David. L. Smith-Christopher, “Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation and Inclusion of the ‘Foreigner’ in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett; Biblical Interpretation Series 19; (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 117–44, 119.

[4] Avraham Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ABS 18 (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 270.

[5] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 365.

[6] Many scholars, but not all, date Deut 23:1-8 to the post-exilic period, as a later addition to Deuteronomy (see, for example, Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* [New York: T & T Clark, 2007], 171).

[7] See David. L. Smith-Christopher, “The Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13: A Study of the Sociology of the Post-exilic Judean Community,” in T. C. Eskenazi and K. H. Richards, eds., *Second Temple Studies 2: Temple and Community in the Persian Period*, JSOTSup. 175 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 243-65, at 257. See further, Ez 4:1; 3:3; 4:4; 9:1-2, 11; 10:2, 11; Neh 10:29, 31.

[8] On endogamy, see Smith-Christopher, “Mixed,” 246-53. Religious concerns overlapped with the preservation of property among the remnant, for intermarriage granted wives certain property rights in some circumstances (see further, Samuel L. Adams, *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014], 26.)

[9] See further Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 179.

[10] Brett, *Political Trauma*, 161.

[11] Brett provides an excellent discussion of Leviticus and Ezekiel 47:22 (*Political*, 106-09).