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## ETHNICITY AND THE EXPULSION OF WOMEN IN EZRA 9-10

A covenant perspective for Africa<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The expulsion of women in Ezra 9-10 has been viewed in a variety of ways by different biblical scholars. This author discusses ethnicity as one of the motivating factors for the expulsion of these women on the part of Ezra and his associates. Apparently, the text appeals to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as the basis for this outrageous expulsion. But a close reading of the covenants reveals that the decision to expel the women was informed by an ethnic consciousness. This produced an exclusive understanding of the two covenants. The paper therefore suggests an inclusive interpretation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants for ethnic harmony in Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

The expulsion of women in Ezra 9-10 has been viewed in a variety of ways by different biblical scholars. Some have viewed it as attempts to preserve the identity and culture of the returned Jewish exiles (Smith-Christopher 1994:123; Dyck 1996:100; Williamson 1985:160). Others have argued that intermarriage in Ezra's perspective was directly associated with the subject of disobedience to Yahweh's ordinance (Hoglund 1992:35). In other words, Ezra wanted the *golah* community to retain its religious purity (Anderson 1966:165). Yet, some other scholars were with the opinion that intermarriage in Ezra 9 and 10 threatened the economic stability of the Province of Yehud by threatening its land base and, therefore, it necessitated the reform of rules regarding intermarriage (cf. Dyck 1996:102; Farisani 2004:40).

In view of these varied perspectives, I will endeavour to show that Ezra and his associates were influenced partly by their ethnic<sup>3</sup> consciousness in expelling the supposed foreign women. In other words, Ezra and his associates used an exclusivist understanding of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants to expel them. I will also argue that an inclusive

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3 Ethnicity is used here as defined by Hunter (1990:253) as "a primary bonding, an identification and context of belonging, shared by groups with common language, behaviours, histories, lifestyles, values and norms".

understanding and interpretation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants ought to have informed Ezra's intermarriage reforms and, derivatively, that if Africans adopt this inclusive covenant perspective suggested in this article, it will be one step towards promoting ethnic harmony/integration on this continent.

### AN EVALUATION OF EZRA'S INTERMARRIAGE REFORMS (EZR. 9-10)

When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he was met by ethnic integration between the returned exiles and the people of the land. Ezra and his associates saw this as a serious religious breach of the covenant committed by the alleged "holy race" (cf. Ezr. 9:1-2).<sup>4</sup> Ezra spent a lot of time on handling the problem (cf. Ezr. 9:3-10:44), which is described as follows:

- The people of Israel (*golah* community) have joined the "peoples of the land" in their abominations; and
- That they have also mingled their "holy seed" with that of the "peoples of the land" by intermarrying with them (cf. Ezr. 9:1-2)

Ezra 9:1-2 refers to three groups of people in relation to the alleged intermarriage problem:

- The first is the *golah* community (Israel);
- The second group is the "peoples of the land" (supposedly non-Israelites); and
- The third group is the Canaanites, Hitittes, Perezites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.

Those who are labelled "the peoples of the land" (i.e. the second group, cf. Ezra 9:1-2) differ from the third group, the Canaanite tribes (Breneman 1993:148). However, the problem here is that the practices of the peoples of the land are alleged to have been similar to that of the third group, namely the Canaanites, Hitittes, Perezites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites (cf. Breneman 1993:148). Therefore, the *golah* community that intermarried with the peoples of the land were assumed to have adopted the lifestyle of the Canaanite ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the returned exiles were considered a separate ethnic entity. Now, instead of marrying those in their own ethnic circle, they intermarried with those who were considered to belong to a different ethnic group, and this is what Ezra and his associates deemed sinful.

However, a close reading and examination of Ezra 9 and 10 reveals that the peoples of the land were those Jews who did not go into exile and, as a consequence, were excluded from the *golah* community (Klein 1999:733). It may also be that the "peoples of the land" were those who were partly of Jewish descent, the Moabites and Edomites. The Canaanite tribes mentioned in Ezra 9 had ceased to exist during the reforms of Ezra (Clines 1984:119; Blenkinsopp 1989:175). If this view is to be followed, the basis for the accusation made against the *golah* community concerning intermarriage with the peoples of the land turns out to be self-defeating.

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<sup>4</sup> Ezr. 9:2 reads: "They have mortgaged the holy seed with the people of the land."

It must be admitted that the prohibition of intermarriage with heathen nations is alluded to in Deuteronomy 7:1-6. However, the reason given for the prohibition of intermarriage in this post-exilic situation may be questioned, since the Law did not prohibit intermarriage between Israelites and Edomites or Egyptians (Clines 1984:119; cf. Dt. 23:7). My argument in this article is that it was on the grounds of an ethnic consciousness on the part of Ezra and his associates, that the Deuteronomic law (cf. Dt. 7:3-4) was reinterpreted and reapplied to this new situation to support their exclusivist religious and social reforms (Clines 1984:119).

The view that the peoples of the land were Jews who had remained in the land during the exile finds support from the research conducted by Eskenazi and Judd (1994:266-285), on the sociological and theological classification of the strange women in Ezra 9-10. They suggest that these women, classified as strangers, were not really strangers as the editor(s) author(s) might have presupposed. The women might have been Judahites or Israelites, who had gone into neither the Assyrian or the Babylonian exiles (cf. Grabbe 2000:15). Thus, it might have happened that the early Jewish returnees saw these women as legitimate marriage partners. This position is also supported by the fact that Ezra 9:1-2 does not recognise these women as Ammonites or Canaanites, because they were not. Rather, Ezra and his associates – supposedly having been influenced by their ethnic consciousness – redefined the identity of true Israelites during the early post-exilic period. As a consequence of this redefinition, these women were considered or labelled as foreigners by Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Grabbe 1998:138).

When Ezra heard about the charge against the returning exiles (Ezr. 9:1-2), he burst into tears, torn his clothes, pulled out his hair, and sat down for the whole day (Ezr. 9:3). In Ezra's view, intermarriage between the returned exiles and other peoples of the land constituted a serious breach of Yahweh's covenant with his prophets. The tone of Ezra's speech suggests that the commands referred to here were thought to have come from the Mosaic covenant (i.e. the product of the Abrahamic covenant).

One solution to the intermarriage problem, therefore, was to renew the covenant between Yahweh and the *golah* community. During such a ceremony, every person who was married a foreign woman would have been compelled to divorce and leave her as well as her children. This would constitute a permanent separation from those whom Ezra deemed as belonging to a different ethnic circle. Most people accepted the proposal and divorced their so-called "foreign women" (Ezr. 10:10-15). However, a handful were not satisfied with the proposal (cf. Keil & Deltzsch 1975:131). It is argued that the four people mentioned in Ezra 10:15 took an even more rigid and exclusivist approach than the divorce proposal (Klein 1999:742-743; Williamson 1985:156-157). A contrary view (Keil & Delitzsch 1975:131) is that these four people actually opposed the divorce proposal because they were more sympathetic towards the women than the majority of the returnees who had accepted the divorce proposal.

The fact that the stance of the four men is not explained in this passage may suggest that they were opposed to the decision to divorce the alleged foreign women (cf. Allen 2003:80). It is most likely that the decision of the whole community prevailed over the view of the

four men. Thus, the divorce process was carried out at the insistence of the majority. Those who were opposed to the intermarriage reforms were ignored or silenced (cf. Ezr. 10:15; see Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256) and the process of divorce took its toll upon the foreign women and their children (cf. Ezr. 10:18-44).

If Deuteronomy 7:3 formed the basis for Ezra's intermarriage reforms, it seems to me as if the author(s) editor(s) of the Book of Ezra reinterpreted this passage in a peculiar way, in order to support Ezra's exclusivist social reforms (cf. Blenkinsopp 1989:200-201). It is evident from the context of Deuteronomy 7:3 that the eradication of idolatry was the real focus of the prohibition. Nowhere in the Pentateuch do we find an explicit rejection of intermarriage without the worship of foreign gods as the main reason for it (cf. also Breneman 1993:149; Williamson 1985:130-131).

A further question remains – namely, how Ezra would interpret other biblical passages that clearly refer to cases of intermarriage between the Israelites and other people or foreigners? Ezra referred to the law of Moses as the basis on which the divorce proceedings were conducted. But Moses himself had married an African woman from Ethiopia (cf. 12:1-3). It can therefore be argued that Ezra, being influenced by his ethnic consciousness, reinterpreted the passage from Deuteronomy or a related law to support his intermarriage reforms.

It is obvious that Ezra's decision concerning intermarriage was unacceptable to some other people as well (cf. Ezr. 10:155). This passage hints at opposition, but fails to tell what really happened to those who opposed Ezra's divorce programme. Were they expelled from Israel together with their families, or were they allowed to remain among the supposed "holy race" (seed)? It is not known, but in all probability appears that they were sidelined and did not remain in the mainstream of affairs in that new community.

## AN INCLUSIVE UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC AND MOSAIC COVENANTS

Before this inclusive viewpoint is discussed, the studies undertaken by Eskenazi and Judd (1994:285) have a bearing on the issue once more. These latter scholars (1994:285) had already indicated from their sociological studies that these women were unjustly excluded from the *golah* community by the reforms of Ezra. There are three important points that should be noted in Eskenazi and Judd's research findings:

- First, it can hardly be proven from the text of Ezra 9-10 that these women who were expelled from the *golah* community were foreigners like Ammonites or Canaanites, as Ezra's reforms appeared to have presupposed.
- Second, these women were not members of the returned exiles; rather, they were in the land during and after the exile. Thus, part of the reason they were identified as 'peoples of the land' was that they had remained in the land during the exile.
- Third, the fact that Ezra and his associates attempted to redefine the concept of 'Yahweh's people' exclusively as the *golah* community, inevitably rendered these women as 'non-Yahweh's people'; therefore, they were foreigners in their own land and unfit to intermarry with the *golah* community.

I suspect that Ezra's concept of holiness (cf. Ezra 9:2) concerning the *golah* community, is irreconcilable with other passages such as Deuteronomy 9:4-6. Neither pre-exilic Israel, nor the *golah* community possessed the land, because of their righteousness or holiness. According to the above-mentioned Deuteronomic passage, it was as a result of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD was going to drive the Canaanites out of the land. But, in the Ezra 9:2 incident, the women who were divorced from their partners were not reported to have been wicked as described by the Deuteronomic law. Nothing specific is said about these women, except that they were not members of the redefined Israelite (*golah*) community. The narrative leaves the reader(s) guessing even as to the situation concerning the families that had been separated. What was the fate of the babies and women that were left without a male supporter and vice versa? How will such children deal with the reality of being separated from their families (cf. Klein 1999:746)? No answers are given to these questions, and the Book of Ezra ends on this sad note.

In view of the above, I propose that an inclusive understanding and interpretation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants should have been the wisdom that ought to have informed Ezra's intermarriage reforms. It is obvious from the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants that all other nations, races and people could associate and intermarry with Yahweh's people (Israel) through appropriate covenant means. These covenant processes can be summarised as follows:

- Yahweh promised to be the God of the Patriarchs, as well as the God of Israel (cf. Gn. 17:7-8).
- Yahweh tells Abraham that he will become the father of a multitude of nations, pointing to a fact that other nations are inseparably linked with Abraham as their father (cf. Gn. 17:5).
- The circumcision of Ishmael and all male servants in the house of Abraham points to the inclusion of outsiders in the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gn. 17:10-14).
- The blessing of other nations via Abraham and his descendants also suggest that foreigners are inevitably linked with Abrahamic descendants (cf. Gn. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).
- The provision of food for foreigners and aliens living among Israelites drives home the message the Israel and other ethnic groups are cared for by the same Yahweh since all are Yahweh's people (cf. Ex. 23:10-11; Lv. 19:9-10; 23:22; 25:1-7; Dt. 14:28-29; 24:19-21; 26:12-15).
- Participation of other ethnic groups in the keeping of the Sabbath shows the importance of the Sabbath rest day both for Israel and other nations (cf. Ex. 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt. 5:12-15).
- The inclusion of aliens and other nations in the celebration of the Passover, feasts of Weeks and Tabernacles, indicates the inclusion of other ethnic groups in the religious life of Israel (cf. Ex. 12:17-20, 48-49; Nm. 9:14; Dt. 16:10-14).
- Equality of both the Israelites and the aliens before the law of Yahweh fly in the face of Ezra and his intermarriage reforms (cf. Ex. 12:49; Lv. 24:22; Nm. 9:14; 15:13-16, 29-30).

- Instances abound in the Bible where intermarriage between Israelites and other ethnic groups occur (cf. Tamar, Gn. 38:6-30; Ruth, Rt. 1:16-17; 4:13-22; Joseph and Asenath Gn. 41:45; Solomon and his many foreign wives, 1 Kgs. 11:1; Ahab and Jezebel, 1 Kgs. 16:31; Abraham and Keturah, Gn. 25:1; Moses and his Ethiopian woman, Nm. 12:1; and Bathsheba, 2 Sm. 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25).
- Other ethnic groups could also offer sacrifices to Yahweh, because these ethnic groups are also provided for by Yahweh (cf. Lv. 22:17-20, 25; Nm. 15:13-16).
- Cities of refuge were opened for non-Israelites who unintentionally commit murder (cf. Nm. 35:14-15).

The above series of biblical stories concerning the inclusive dimension of both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants should have been incorporated into Ezra's intermarriage reforms. It is unfortunate that the reforms ignored this and, instead, adopted an exclusivist perspective of the covenants as its basis. This was a one-sided understanding of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants concerning other ethnic groups. The wisdom that ought to have guided Ezra and his associates, is that all nations, races, people and ethnic groups could associate with Yahweh's people through appropriate covenant means. This suggests that the decision to divorce the supposed foreign women was informed partly by an ethnic consciousness on the part of Ezra and his associates. This also goes to show that biblical texts need to be handled with care in order to, sometimes, strike a much needed balance in a conflict situation.

### AN INCLUSIVE COVENANT PERSPECTIVE FOR HARMONY IN AFRICA

Gottwald defines the term covenant (*berit*) as:

A formal, solemn, and binding agreement between parties in which there are obligations to do certain acts, or to refrain from doing them, and there are promises or threats of consequences that will follow on fulfilment or breach of the obligations (Gottwald 1987:202).

According to Gottwald, the above definition does not necessarily capture the full meaning of this Hebrew term *berit*. In view of this limitation, he immediately suggests certain terms that appeared to have captured some aspects of this word. These terms include descriptions such as agreement, arrangement, compact, contract, commitment, treaty, alliance, obligation, bond, and relationship (1987:202; cf. Human 1983:142).

The concept and practice of covenant transactions began as early as the art of writing itself (Mendenhall & Herion 1992:1180). Accordingly, many treaties from Ebla – dating from the Early Bronze Age (about 3500 BC) to the Iron Age (about 1000 BC) – were recorded and have been preserved till today (cf. Baltzer 1971:9-10)

During the second millennium BC, there were two broad types of treaties concluded in the Hittite Empire. These were the “international” and the “domestic” treaties (Barre 1992:654). The former were more common and were subdivided into two main categories. These included so-called “parity” and “suzerain-vassal” treaties (cf. Bruce 1980:328; Pfeiffer 1966:175).

Parity treaties sought to establish non-aggression between the parties (sometimes of equal strength) and to guarantee the stability of the respective ruling dynasties. Suzerain-vassal treaties served to consolidate the hegemony of the suzerain; the vassal's interests were clearly subordinate (Barre 1992:654).

The idea of covenant carried with it a fundamental concept of "relationship" between individuals, kings and their subjects, etc., within the Ancient Near Eastern Hittite treaty culture. A relationship could take different forms, such as parity or suzerain-vassal treaty forms, as observed from above.

I would therefore argue that, through the institution of a covenant, Yahweh had established a relationship between himself and Abraham and his descendants, but also with other nations (cf. Gn. 15:1-21; 17:1-27; Ex. 20:1-26; Dt. 5:1-6, 25; Bright 2000:149). This relationship was not a casual or an informal one, and concerned the ultimate issues of life and death (cf. Gn. 17:14; Dt. 5:33: 6:2, 15, 24, Robertson 1980:8). Therefore, the concept "relationship" becomes one of the foremost theological, religious and socio-cultural centerpieces on which Yahweh established his covenant with Abraham, his descendants, and other nations. This is where the value of both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants provides a platform for ethnic harmony in Africa.

There exist hundreds, if not thousands of different ethnic groups or nationalities on the African continent. Each ethnic language, group, or affiliation possesses certain unique cultural, social and religious characteristics or qualities. Despite these variations, by God's design, we all inhabit the same continent. We, therefore, cannot live on this continent and pretend as if no one or no other group is living beside our ethnic group. We have to develop a certain platform on which we as a people can co-exist on the continent in peace and harmony. The Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenant values may serve as such examples, which Africans can adopt in order to live in harmony with one another despite their different ethnic, cultural, religious, and social affiliations. The covenant values that we, as Africans, should embrace include:

The recognition that we have a common origin and hopefully a shared destiny by virtue of the fact that we all are God's creatures and therefore people who have been linked to him. Abraham and other nations were made to understand that Yahweh's covenant with them was a platform upon which all of them could live under one roof. Abraham became the father of nations and all nations were to find shelter under his fatherhood. No one was to be discriminated against due to certain perceived differences. African people therefore are part and parcel of these nations, where Abraham is figuratively their father by virtue of the above covenant promise.

God provides and cares for all, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations. In the biblical covenants, God promised to provide blessings to all nations (Gn. 12:3). This indicates that Yahweh was and still wishes to do, if we so understand ourselves as being part of and living under one covenant in Africa today.

Ethnic differentiation is not a sin or a crime, but rather an unavoidable given to all of us at birth. In a covenant relationship, Africans should not use this to punish, kill, or destroy

one another. Our ethnic diversity is a gift from God that therefore must be respected by all. Africans must adopt mutual respect for one another as people who share the same origin.

Intermarriage is possible between people of different ethnic groups living under one covenant. Intermarriage between people of different nationalities is already happening on this continent. It will be a very sad day indeed if we Africans should turn around and start killing one another when we know that we have intermarried with one another's ethnic groups.

Dialogue is a necessary approach to dealing with differences, especially where ethnicity is part of the social variable. People living in a covenant relationship cannot avoid peaceful dialogue in handling issues that create tension between them. As a people who have a shared origin, it is imperative to adopt a principle of dialogue on contentious matters for the sake of peace and harmony in Africa.

## CONCLUSION

In the face of different interpretations of and of motives suggested for the account of the expulsion of the so-called "foreign women" in Ezra 9-10, it was argued that an ethnic consciousness might have been one of the foremost motives. A close reading of the text showed that its apparent appeals to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as the bases for the expulsion, reveals rather the existence of an exclusivist understanding of the covenants. However, elsewhere in the biblical text, these covenants are of an inclusivist nature and as such open up possibilities for ethnic harmony in Africa.

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## KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

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