

What About God's Chosen People?

Part IX



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Question #21 - *"Is it true that the Jews are God's chosen people? I have a Christian friend who says the Jews were not God's chosen people."*

We ended our last segment with the fact those Jews who had returned from the Babylonian captivity not only set up the altar in Jerusalem, but under great persecution eventually accomplished the rebuilding of the temple itself. We talked about how what they chose to do was done according to the Law of Moses, and if this law was something made up in Babylon it would not have been so despised by the world. We also discussed how if the Jews were not the chosen nation, then it made no sense for them to take up a law that caused them to become so persecuted. All this brings us to the next segment of the history where another wave of Jews return to the land under the direction of Ezra the priest.

As was mentioned earlier in this study, the story of Esther comes during this general time period we are discussing. As the Jews who had returned to the promised land accomplished and finally dedicated the new temple in Jerusalem, there arose an attempt to wipe the entire Jewish population from among, at the very least, the Medes and Persians Empire. The specific argument made to the king by the man who spearheaded the effort was, "...There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the

provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them." Esther 3:8 Again, this story shows us how ridiculous it would have been for those known as Jews to simply be a group of people who chose to take up an ancient law that was so hated by the world. It also emphasizes how much these laws were not derived from Babylonian precepts. The Law of Moses was specifically described as "diverse," not just from what the particular king at that time wanted, but diverse from all the other people in the empire. This is a potent statement, considering the diversity that had to have existed among all the empire. All this diversity aside, the Jews were singled out!

If we have or do take time to read the book of Esther, we know/find that Esther, being led of God and given grace by His hand, was successful in bringing a halt to her people being destroyed. The order was not simply rescinded, for that no doubt would have done little to stop many who hated the Jews, but the Jews were given permission to stand up and destroy those who hated them. However, even this, as anyone with historical knowledge knows, did not end the threat of people desiring to destroy the Jews; anti-Semitism continues to exist in every generation. That being said, we need to look at how close all these events took the Jews to the brink of disappearing as a unique people on the earth; and as we do, we see the miracle of the chosen nation's survival from both the external and internal pressures. The internal event that is significant to this point is in that many years after the first Jews had returned, a priest by the name of Ezra would lead another group of Jews back to the promised land.

Ezra fasted and prayed for this group's safe return to the land, as there were many along the way who no doubt would have tried to stop another group of Jews from reaching Jerusalem and Judah in general. Ezra also wanted to be sure God was granted the credit for their safe journey and he had not asked the king for protection to be sent with them. On top of being Jews, this group would also carry with them some valuable currency and supplies from the king and others, given to be used in Jerusalem to ensure the temple could continue in its service. Now, by God's hand, they did make it safely there; but the details of the journey are not as important to our discussion as what this group did and found when they got to the land. First, is the fact that when they arrived, just as at the first of the altar being set up, this group sacrificed at the temple as one of their first orders of business. The important note in this is that they started by offering twelve bullocks to show again the fact all twelve tribes were still represented in the people known as Jews. (Ezra 8:35)

However, the problem Ezra found was that in spite of all the persecution the Jews who had been back in the land had suffered at the hands of the surrounding people, this had not stopped the Jews from intermarrying with those people. This is another one of those moments where people look into the Word of God and see what they believe is an issue of God promoting discrimination, or even the general idea people should not intermix with races that are not their own. However, this is only a problem for the Jewish people, and its importance is emphasized in the very reasons a question such as the one this study is based on asks. If Israel, or those now known as Jews, do not seek to keep themselves of a more pure ethnic group, they will simply meld into the world and cease to be a distinct people who can not legitimately be denied as the chosen nation God established through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the time of Ezra, this was particularly true!

The chosen nation had already been dispersed throughout the world. Those God had left on the land as the Babylonians carried Judah away had abandoned it to go into Egypt. Only these Jews willing to return to Judah, and specifically Jerusalem, were going to ensure the distinction of the nation as a specific group, and/or, at the very least, maintain the fact Jews, being the chosen nation, had, and always will have, a direct connection to the land God had promised to give them. The fact the intermingling of people the Assyrians had brought about caused many to lose their true ethnic identity, means many people were already identifying themselves by simply taking on regional names of where they had come to live. This is even seen in the words of the book of Ezra telling the story of the dangers to the Jews intermarrying. After Ezra's group delivered the offerings they had brought from the empire and did their sacrificing at the temple, chief men, who had surveyed the Jews, came to Ezra to inform him of the problem that the Jews who had been on the land for some years now had not remained separated from the people who surrounded the Jews. The groups of surrounding people they intermingled with are specifically named, "...even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites." Ezra 9:1

Many of the people named, especially the Egyptians, no doubt maintained a distinction to some degree as an ethnic group as they had been before the Assyrian incursion; but considering what the records tell us about the Assyrians' actions of removing and displacing the people of this area, there is little doubt the men coming to Ezra are naming the various people mostly by the regions of surrounding land that those

people were now residence of, and not that they actually were still truly the Canaanites, and other people Israel had fought with in the centuries before the captivity. They called them by these names because they were not necessarily clear as to what blood had been introduced into the Jewish line, and also to be clear, they were not talking about a corruption the earlier returning Jews had brought with them by intermingling during their captivity in Babylon. What was really bad about this was even, if not especially, the priests and Jewish rulers had taken wives from the surrounding people.

Ezra knew that for all the Jewish people had survived in order to be a distinct people, this internal violation of God's commandment was going to be the true undoing of the chosen nation. Just as before the flood of Noah's day, when the people who served God started intermarrying those who chose not to serve God and destroyed the truth of there being a group of people separated to the purposes of God, the nation of Israel was representative of the fact this kind of separation is ultimately necessary. The need to fulfill this truth as an eternal fact is what heaven is for, and what Judgment Day will be about when the sheep are separated from the goats. (Matt. 25:31-46)

The Jews needed to remain Jews, not just in their actions but in their ethnic identity, and the Jews who had intermarried seriously jeopardized everything the Jews had survived the captivity to maintain. Thus, Ezra is greatly grieved by this news, the solution to which was very perplexing to contemplate, and he seeks God as to what should be done. The solution was, of course, a sacrifice for both the Jews as well as the strangers they had married, not to mention it would do nothing to improve relations between the Jews and the surrounding people. However, it would have to be made. All the Jews would be called to Jerusalem, and first they would be set straight on the fact the Law dictated what they had done was wrong, and mostly because of what the nation faced at that very time. The Jews could not afford to identify the wives who were not Jewish, nor the children they had with these wives, as Jews. What they would have to do is put them "away." This is disturbing to some readers, as many will interpret these verses in the same way they misinterpret the words of Jesus when He speaks about what we would call divorce and remarriage.

Today, we think of divorce as a separation where the union of marriage is severed, and both people are once again single and free to remarry as they were before the marriage was entered into. In many ways, one could say this is the definition of the word divorce, but this is

only an argument for never using this word in the English translation of the Bible. The point is the Biblical definition of divorce is not the severing of a marriage union. This is made clear in the verses that flatly state, "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Matthew 19:6 This comes out as the religious leaders were quizzing Jesus about the fact they saw the Law of Moses as contradicting this by allowing a bill of divorcement. Jesus points out it is only because of our human sinfulness God ever allowed what the Law states, but that was not God's original intent which those serving God should be striving to accomplish. Jesus did not argue that their assertion about no man putting a marriage "asunder" was wrong, just the way they looked at "divorce" was. This is why Jesus goes on to explain the ways people commit adultery in divorcing. I get into this because in Ezra's time the solution was not that these men would simply cast aside the wives they had already become one flesh with. Nor would their responsibility to be fathers to the children they had by these wives end.

Just as many of our laws today traditionally call for a male to pay money to a woman they divorce and child support for any children, this and more would still be the responsibility of the men who had taken wives of non-Jews. This is what made the entire situation so painful! God is about love and sticking to commitments one has made. God does not violate His righteous values, but men just make a mess of things probably in no greater way than when it comes to marriage! Thus, the bill of divorcement allowed in the Law was only because constant strife, conflict, violence, etc. are also not values of true righteousness. God never wants marriages to be split up, but because it does happen, God gave a guideline for divorce in the Law. However, here in Ezra's situation it was even more complex as men were being specifically asked to put away wives not even because they desired to or the marriages were bad domestic situations, but because it was necessary for the survival of the chosen nation's identity. That being true, the Law's true intent for how to handle divorce was even more applicable than ever.

Divorce according to the Law was the putting away of the wife, and following that in this situation meant these wives and their children were to be identified as non-Jews. This caused them to be separated from being considered part of the chosen nation, but this did not mean the men who had taken them were no longer responsible for their support and well being. Just how much separation was actually put between them is unclear, and certainly some women may have went back

to their father's house or to other relatives among the non-Jewish people. However, one way or another, the fact they were put away was a commitment that there would be no more physical relationships between these couples, because this obviously had the potential to bring about even more children who also could not be a part of the Jewish nation without growing up and making, according to the Law, their own personal commitment to join it. (Ex. 12:48) A fact that made it hard on the children was that the process would have included erasing the records of these marriages from any official record keeping of who was of whose family. To stop the infliction of further damage, the putting away would also have been the breaking of any marriage contracts, or what we might call prearranged marriages, that had been made but not yet consummated. All this would be of particular importance to the house of the priesthood and the kingly line of the house of David.

Before we move past this bitter situation, we should also consider that this was not just about ensuring there was no non-Jewish blood in the Jew's line. King David himself was a descendant of Ruth who was a Moabite, and the Jews had, in fact, already intermarried far more than they ever should have with the people of the land before the captivity took place. However, the problem at Ezra's time was not just about the size of the group, it also goes back to the fact about not truly knowing the bloodline of the people considered and even called by familiar names of the surrounding nations. One must consider, many people who lived around Israel before the Assyrians mixed up the population were, in truth, family, at the very least, from Abraham through Ishmael and even Jacob's son Esau, while others were descendants from Lot. These branch bloodlines that came from the family God brought to the land out of Mesopotamia no doubt did a lot of intermarrying with those considered Canaanites, Jebusites, etc., in the time before Israel came out of Egypt. Thus, while it was God's intent to keep Israel as distinct a bloodline as possible by having them remain a nation that married inside their own nation, and in spite of the fact God wanted Israel to totally drive out the populations living on the land they were to possess, God knew they would never completely do this. Because of this truth, God actually brought Israel out of Egypt to a land already surrounded and occupied by people with some of the same genetic markers. This advantage had all but been erased by Ezra's day.

The people living on the land post-Babylonian captivity were more about a total cross section of the human population. To intermarry with these, on top of there being so few Jews left to connect and represent

there still was a chosen nation living on the land of promise, called for some more extraordinary measures which would have never been taken in the past. This is all about our question, because if it had been true that the Jews were already some random cross section or intermarried mixed bloodline of people coming out of Babylon, not only would the story of calling specifically for Jews to come out of the empire to return to the promised land be false, but this story of putting away strange wives would not be necessary. I guess the point is, if you believe none of this is true and all of it is just made-up to make it seem those who call themselves Jewish are, in fact, the chosen nation, then there really is no reason to believe any of the narrative about there ever being a chosen nation. To be clear, there are those who believe exactly that; but as a counter, we swing back to the point of how extraordinary it is that the nation still exists!

One of the reasons some will only go back to the Babylonian captivity to say the Jews are not the true chosen nation of Israel, is because there is evidence that the events of the Jews being in Babylon is fact. People try to deny even this, but the records found by archaeology continues to grow a collection of evidence these people we know as Jews were involved with and in the empires of Assyria, Babylon, and the Medes and Persians. The truth that the Jews we know today do, in fact, date back to at least this time period we're discussing is in man's historical records, showing the Jews were already in place by the time of the empire that came after the Medes and Persians, which was the Greeks. This relates directly to that fact I've talked about before, which is, what we call the Old Testament and its narrative closes right about the time human history begins to be recorded well enough to see the picture of what happened, even specifically to the chosen nation. This can be no coincidence, as the Old Testament guarantees we have the ability to see that the people we know as the Jews today are, in fact, one and the same as the nation God established through Abraham. The Old Testament shows us the transition from Israel to the nation being known as just Jews. Combine this with archaeological findings, and it's hard to dismiss the narrative of there ever being a chosen nation. Thus, the idea of going back even to Babylon as the birth of the people we know as Jews is a pretty tough case to make!

Now, before the Old Testament closes, it also does clarify something else very important to our confidence the Jews are still God's chosen nation, in that God has not rejected them, and in that they are the true bloodline of ancient Israel. That fact is the story about

Nehemiah's activities. Ezra would do more than just deal with straightening out the intermarriage situation among the Jews. Ezra would go on to do the exact job a priest is suppose to do in opening the Word of God to the people in order to ensure people knew the Law for themselves. He would help the people do what is described in Ezekiel 44:23, teaching the people the difference between the ways of holiness and the world, and causing them - whether they liked it or not - to discern the difference between the unclean and the clean. Some thirteen years would pass from the time Ezra had arrived in the promised land to do the work God had sent him to do, before the story of Nehemiah would begin. While Ezra was doing what he could, there was more to be done. God would send a Jew named Nehemiah, who still lived and served in the imperial court, to help!

Now, Nehemiah was a man who had the complete trust of the king, for he had been appointed the king's cupbearer. The person with this position had the life of the king in his hand, as such a person could easily poison the king, a very effective and popular form of assassination. However, this also put Nehemiah in a position much as Daniel, Esther, and the like had in helping the chosen nation use the resources of the empire. As cupbearer, Nehemiah had contact with all those from all over the kingdom who brought news to the king of his empire. One day Nehemiah would have the opportunity to speak with a trusted man and his companions who had firsthand knowledge of the circumstances the Jews who had returned to the promised land were in. The response Nehemiah got to his inquiries was very heartbreaking to him, because he was informed of how the Jews were being afflicted and specifically the city of Jerusalem itself had not been rebuilt. While the temple was and had been an important element to the restoration of the nation, to restore Jerusalem as a city was also very important. It is also no coincidence that the Old Testament ends with a story that shows us how much the chosen nation is truly the ones with the ancient claim on this city. Jerusalem had not been a place of importance to the non-Jews who lived in the land. Jerusalem was not a place any of the returning Jews had to drive anyone out of in order to build the temple there. In fact, the argument Jerusalem as a city was nothing but trouble was even an excuse used as people wrote the king in attempting to stop the Jews from rebuilding just the temple. (Ezra 4:11-16) Only the Jews cared about Jerusalem!

As great as it was that just the temple was able to be rebuilt, God stirred up Nehemiah to take the next step in solidifying the chosen nation's re-establishment in the promised land. Nehemiah would be so heartbroken about

Jerusalem not being restored, he would go in before the king unable to hide his sadness. In some cases this would have meant death to one in such a position, but Nehemiah was so well trusted and cared about by the king, all the king wanted to do was know the reason Nehemiah was sad. While the king certainly did not want to give up having Nehemiah by his side and even asked that Nehemiah set a time to return, the king sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem, and appointed him governor so Nehemiah would have the authority to accomplish the task of restoring Jerusalem. Nehemiah would also be granted his request that he be given written notice from the king so those who would try to stop him from even reaching Jerusalem would be scared to act, and those in the region able to supply timber for the work would give him what he needed. We can't know for sure if Nehemiah was fully aware of what the first returning captives had faced in attempting to restore the temple, but he certainly seemed to be preparing for the fact he would face a fight all the way, and Nehemiah was determined to win that fight!

Nehemiah would go to Jerusalem with an escort by the king that ensured he made it safely and in a timely manner. Once there, Nehemiah was no fool who simply rushed in where angels fear to tread. We don't know Nehemiah's bloodline for sure, as in if he had any connection to David's house or the priesthood, but he certainly had the wisdom of a good leader! He would not ride into Jerusalem trumpeting about what he was going to accomplish and how the king had given him the permission and authority. Nehemiah would not tell his intent at all until he had literally surveyed and ascertained the truth about Jerusalem's condition for himself. He would even take a specific survey of the city walls during the night hours so as not to raise anyone's suspicions. He was not there to accuse the Jews, or even give the impression of accusing them of neglecting something they may have attempted but failed or been stopped in doing. Nehemiah was only interested in stirring up the people's hearts to do the work in spite of the possible inside and certain outside opposition. Thus, only once he was convinced the city, in particular its walls, had simply been left in ruins, he rose up and made the Jews aware of exactly why he had come and the authority he had been given by the king.

Nehemiah accomplished what he wanted to in encouraging and convincing the Jews the time had come for Jerusalem, as a city, to rise from the ashes! The people almost immediately began to build; and as expected, the opposition came. The Jews had obviously learned the lesson in building the temple, as the people did not worry about the grander they might have wanted the city to

have; but as God had told them of the temple, they seem to build with the understanding God would take pleasure in their willingness. As the non-Jews mocked them for the weakness of the walls (which were no doubt being built mostly with stone left from the original walls being broken down, a fact archaeology is showing to be true) the Jews continued. As the threats of the non-Jews mounted, Nehemiah cause the people to build and be in constant preparedness for war at the same time. Thus, every man built with his sword strapped to his side, watches were set to look for approaching trouble, and people's living quarters were located in more defensible places. This was not a convenient way to build, but in a sign God was truly with them, the people finished bringing the entire surrounding walls together in only fifty-two days. (Neh. 6:15) The historian Josephus disputes this, saying it took a bit over two years; but he may have been talking more about complete fortifications, not just the accomplishment of bringing the various pieces of the walls together in all places.

In any case, when one considers doing the work in the face of opposition and the limited materials available to the Jews, the accomplishment was nothing short of a miracle! Unlike the temple, there was no stoppage in the work; and after the city walls were restored, even before houses were built, certain Jews made commitments to live in the city. Overall, it was decided, just as the tithing amount of one's increase in the Law, a tenth of the Jews living in the land would live in Jerusalem at any given time. (Neh. 11:1-2) The number combined with the random selection of who would live there, beyond those who volunteered, ensured the city never lost meaning as the heart of the Jewish community. A new commitment was also made to the temple and God's Law. This commitment would, once again, show how much these returning Jews were the chosen nation, back in the land God had said would always belong to them, and the city where God chose to place His name!

Until next time, may we each continually choose to be the people God wants us to be!

