

EZRA'S RADICAL SOLUTION TO JUDEAN ASSIMILATION

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The Torah contains specific prohibitions of intermarriage between Israelites and Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Ex. 34:11-16), a list to which the Girgashites were added (Deut. 7:1). On these prohibitions, Deuteronomy is unequivocal: *You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods* (Deut. 7:3-4). This prohibition was enlarged to include a ban against Ammonites and Moabites, with a seemingly permanent prohibition on their descendants from ever being *admitted into the congregation of the Lord* (Deut. 23:4).¹ The exceptions to the rule against intermarriage appear to have been with Edomites (*for he is your kinsman*) and Egyptians (*for you were a stranger in his land*), who could be admitted to membership in Israelite society in the third generation (Deut. 23:8-9).

Besides these intermarriage prohibitions, Torah passages allude to moral impurity among foreigners (e.g., Lev. 18:24). However, there is no clearly stated prohibition against intermarriage based on moral defilement until Ezra 9:11-12. This suggests that such a prohibition only came about during the Second Temple period, perhaps in response to a greater acceptance of foreigners among Ezra's Priestly opponents.² Either way, from Ezra onward, Jewish communal leaders have viewed intermarriage with concern, disapproval, and even outright condemnation. The salient reason is the dilution of community, since the children of such unions could be raised without a sense of Jewish identity, a result that could ultimately lead to the disappearance of the Jewish people.

According to Jewish tradition, the concept of intermarriage applies to Jews who marry non-Jews. It does not apply to a spouse who has converted to Judaism, thereby adopting its traditions, beliefs and sense of community. A Jew who marries a proselyte is, according to Jewish law, not viewed as having married outside of the community. However, intermarriage is a different situation because of the potentially negative effect it could have for Jewish continuity. Yet intermarriage

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is certainly not a new challenge. It goes back to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when, upon their return to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile, they were compelled to address the stark reality of assimilation. Ezra, to whom the tradition of matrilineal descent is traced, enacted a directive requiring those who had intermarried to divorce their wives, who were then evicted, together with their children, from the land of Judah. A peculiar order, Ezra's edict occurred at a time when there was no established tradition of conversion and where the Judean community was in the process of being restored.³ Assimilation was therefore a genuine threat to Jewish communal survival. Still, by going beyond earlier Torah-based prohibitions against intermarriage, Ezra's measures appear extreme. This paper examines the circumstances of Ezra's unusual edict expelling the foreign wives of Judeans and their children in light of the era's underlying ethnic, religious, political, and purity concerns.

REJECTION OF INTERMARRIAGE ON ETHNIC GROUNDS

Following the end of Babylonian captivity and the relocation of a large portion of the Jewish community to Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE – decades after Persian leader Cyrus the Great allowed them, in 538 BCE, to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-5) – several specific actions were taken to re-establish their religious culture in Judah. The Temple was rebuilt (Ezra 6:15-22); Ezra returned from Babylonia as the legitimate authority to teach the laws and rules of Torah (Ezra 7:1-6); Ezra conducted public Torah readings to underscore its relevance and observance by the people (Neh. 8:1-12); and Sabbath observance was enforced (Neh. 10:32 and 13:15-22). As part of this systematic revitalization of Judean society, alongside these specific religious injunctions, the issue of intermarriage became a focus of great concern (e.g., Ezra 10:3 and Neh. 10:31). However, the prohibition was even more strict and detailed than outlined in the Torah. Why?

Upon Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem, he was dismayed by the news that many who had returned to Judah from exile before him, including those in positions of authority like priests and Levites (Ezra 9:1-2), had married foreign – either pagan or non-Hebrew – women. This news led Ezra to assume the traditional mourning rites:

When I heard this, I rent my garment and robe, I tore hair out of my head and beard, and I sat desolate (Ezra 9:3). In response to what he learned, and upon the recommendation of Shecaniah that the foreign women and their children be expelled from the land (Ezra 10:3), Ezra gathered together all the men in Jerusalem from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and declared: *'You have trespassed by bringing home foreign women, thus aggravating the guilt of Israel. So now, make confession to the Lord, God of your fathers, and do His will, and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women'* (Ezra 10:10-11).

The general prohibition against intermarriage was also enforced by Nehemiah, though without Ezra's demand for those already married to divorce and cast off their foreign wives. He was particularly dismayed at the inability of children of mixed marriages to speak the local vernacular, the Judean dialect. According to Nehemiah,

I saw that Jews had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women; a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean. I censured them, cursed them, flogged them, tore out their hair, and adjured them by God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters in marriage to their sons, or take any of their daughters for your sons or yourselves' (Neh. 13:23-25).

For Ezra and Nehemiah, there was no tolerance of assimilation or even acculturation. Neither was tenable. Assimilation was destructive to Jewish continuity, while acculturation would impose new cultural features on the Jews who returned to Judah, especially if differences in language – and presumably values and social norms – were to persist. Instead, Ezra and Nehemiah called for the reestablishment of the status quo, with a call for greater adherence to Torah laws. However, under Ezra and Nehemiah, there was now a much stricter rule against intermarriage that went well beyond earlier intermarriage prohibitions with specific groups mentioned in the Torah.

Whether because of ethnic purity concerns or from simple political pragmatism, the Persians appear to have been acutely aware, tolerant, and active supporters of ethnic divisions. The Book of Esther hints at Persian acceptance of ethnic divisions when describing the royal edict issued by King Ahasuerus in reference to Queen Vashti, after her refusal to come to see him when summoned, in order to influence all wives in Persian lands to *treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike*

(Est. 19-20). A specific verse states: *Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people* (Est. 1:22).

Ethnic diversity under the Persians is discussed by Kenneth Hoglund, who, relying on findings of various scholars, explains, "This requirement for group identity was more pressing when an imperial system was engaged in the use of deportation and resettlement as a means of political control over a subject region." Persia's Achaemenid Empire (c. 550 – 330 BCE) did occasionally practice "the wholesale deportation of communities as a means of administrative control."⁴ The Persians, like their Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian predecessors, did transfer dependent populations to other lands for their own benefit.⁵ The relocation of the Jews to Judea, to help redevelop the region, was perhaps one such example. Hence, the Tanakh among other sources appears to support Persian interest in having separate groups closely tied to specific parts of the Persian Empire, underscoring the presence and encouragement of ethnic boundaries among peoples inhabiting these lands.

Ezra and Nehemiah's broader prohibition against intermarriage with all foreigners appears to have been obeyed. As reported by Nehemiah, *When they heard the teaching [Torah], they separated all the alien admixture from Israel* (Neh. 13:3). Yet, according to Jewish tradition, Ezra's decision to expel from the land all foreign wives – and children born of their unions with Jewish husbands – represented a dramatic and decisive change, making the switch from patrilineal descent to matrilineal descent the "defining marker of Jewish identity."⁶ Until this point in time, biblical texts gave priority to patrilineal descent in matters of inheritance and descriptions of genealogy.⁷

EZRA'S RELIGIOUS EDICT: THE CHANGE FROM PATRILINEAL TO MATRILINEAL DESCENT

Harold Washington cites Ezra 9:12 (using similar language from Deut. 7:3) as a general prohibition against Judeans taking foreign husbands and foreign wives. He therefore speculates why only the wives and their children were banished in Ezra 9-10.⁸ This is an interesting question. It appears there was something significant about

the females and their offspring that compelled Ezra to banish them. Indeed, sending foreign wives away together with their children was very significant. The implication is that these children were not part of the community because their mothers were not part of the community, despite their Judean fathers' membership in the tribe. The overriding implication seems to be that, from this point on, the wife's membership status became vitally important for her children's acceptance in the community. Why was this so? Washington outlines several views underlying opposition to foreign marriages in Persian-era Judah. Firstly, the biblical text points to a religious concern to preserve distinctive Judean practices. Especially now, cultural survival was at stake for the newly immigrant minority Judean community, surrounded by other peoples and called "a remnant" in Ezra 9:8. The Judean leadership, moreover, would have been under political pressure from the Achaemenid authorities to maintain a clearly delineated ethnic identity; intermarriage might blur the boundaries and threaten the community's authorized status within the empire. Land tenure also was at stake, as foreign women and their children might eventually lay claim to land belonging to the Jerusalem temple community.⁸ Political pragmatism may have animated the strengthened prohibition against intermarriage, with Ezra's expulsion of foreign women appeasing Persia's demand for common ethnicity in Judah.

Washington's observation supports legitimate religious, cultural, and political concerns. He further contends that Ezra-Nehemiah's orders reflected the "conjunction of the feminine with the unclean (a conjunction exceeding that of Leviticus), and that this signifies an irreparable trauma at the core of Judean identity . . ." ¹⁰ In other words, Washington asserts that women – presumably just the foreign women – were specifically targeted because they were unclean from an ethno-cultural and religious point of view.¹¹ Whether this observation is true or not, it is an insufficient explanation. So dramatic were Ezra's edicts that they marked the effective switch from patrilineal to matrilineal descent as the means of defining Jewish identity.

There are reasonable arguments in favor of matrilineal descent. For instance, in an age where paternity tests were unavailable, it was easier to prove who the mother was than the father. As a result, if the mother was Jewish, so was the child. Another argument in favor of matrilineal descent is that mothers typically

spend more time with children and therefore have more influence over the development of their

children's cultural identity. Thus, foreign mothers might be suspected of either failing to raise children with traditional Judean beliefs and an outlook rooted in the Mosaic tradition, or of actively instilling their own ethnic traditions in their children in place of their husbands' ancestral beliefs and traditions.

Perhaps the switch was for yet another reason. In an age where women had fewer rights compared to males who, according to Jewish tradition, are the only ones who can issue a writ of divorce (*get*), the ability to coerce males into divorcing their non-Jewish wives would make them less likely to marry women from outside of the tribe. Not only would these males know that the status of their children would reflect the children's maternal ethno-religious status rather than their own, but that these males would lose status within their tribe since their children would be effectively barred from membership.

In other words, considering foreign females (and their children) as the only target of Ezra's expulsion order would not be correct, since the remaining Judean males were also affected by Ezra's edict. Although it would certainly have been traumatic for the women and their children to be banished, rather than primarily serving as a means of oppressing females, as Washington implies, the edict may also have been intended to compel males to behave differently in the future when choosing whom to marry. Intermarrying with non-Judean women – in light of matrilineal descent – would effectively mean that their children would not be present in the land to take care of them later or, if communal norms withdrew recognition of their progeny, to prevent transferring ownership of their possessions. This could have had a powerful effect on Judean males, especially those of higher status, who presumably had possessions and held positions of influence.

While there are various reasons that could account for the switch from patrilineal to matrilineal descent, Ezra's edict effectively made matrilineal descent the accepted norm for establishing Jewish status. In other words, by being prohibited from marrying foreign women, Judean men would therefore marry local Judean women whose children's identity would continue to be determined by their maternal line. Ever since Ezra, traditional rabbinical authorities have continued to define Jewish identity from the matrilineal line. This was a clever strategy on Ezra's part, since it encouraged more consistent ethnic national unity. Given Per-

sian dictates, this strategy appears to have been politically, if not only religiously, expedient.

THE POLITICS OF RELIGION

In order to appreciate why Ezra issued his decree, it is important to understand the political and sociological climate of the era. Although little is known about Babylonian Jewish life after the exile of 586 BCE, it is likely that the exiled Jews enjoyed stability and a certain measure of economic and political success. Later, many were understandably reluctant to return to their ancestral homeland, preferring instead the relative comforts of Babylonia where they could still retain their Jewish identity. Yet despite ethnic divisions in Persian society, Jews faced an existential danger there. As the Book of Esther makes clear, some degree of assimilation had occurred. "Aware of their difference, they attempted to blend quietly into the general population," notes Gordon Freeman, with the adoption of Babylonian names such as Mordecai (a derivation of Marduk) and Esther (derived from Astarte) demonstrating this social reality.¹² However, the Persian conquest of Babylonia during the sixth century BCE witnessed the rise of Jews to significant political positions. Nehemiah was close to the Persian emperor, and thus able to convince him that it was sound policy to establish a loyal colony in the western part of the Persian Empire.¹³

After Ezra led a group back to Judah in the fifth century BCE to re-establish Jewish life, he took drastic measures in response to assimilationist behavior, including that practiced by local leaders of the Judean population. "Remaining on the land must have provided some sense of cultural identity," suggests Freeman, but with so many of them having married foreign wives, Ezra was led to "make an ethnic distinction regarding personal identity."¹⁴ The forced reestablishment of Jewish life was achieved by compelling Judeans to divorce and banish their foreign wives and children. As Freeman observes, "a new definition of Jewish identity had to be articulated."¹⁵

In this politically charged environment, Jewish matrilineal descent in Judah would foster a sense of ethnic purity that would also please Persian leaders interested in ethnic divisions, as noted above. Besides this political reality, Ezra may well have believed that in order to accelerate a return to traditional religious observance, a strictly defined ethnic identity would be essential in Judah. This ethnic uniformity would help to create a culturally cohesive environment in which a

strong Torah-based tradition could be asserted and retained. Ezra's decision to banish non-Judean wives and their children appears to have reflected an overriding concern with ethnic

division as a form of ethnic purity. Common ethnicity as a way of cultivating strong social and religious identification was of paramount concern in Ezra's era, even though the underlying reasons may have been based not only on religious, but on political considerations as well.

ETHNIC PURITY AS A MEANS OF ACHIEVING CULTURAL COHESION

Saul Olyan argues that Ezra-Nehemiah's purity ideology was both distinct and innovative for its time. The ideology of purity evident in Ezra-Nehemiah, he argues, served as an important tool relied upon to transform the Judean community. It redefined who was a Judean while expelling from the community those who were not – foreign women who were married to Judean men, and their offspring. Yet, under patrilineal descent prior to Ezra, these same children would have maintained ethnic affiliation as Jews in the modern sense. This is confirmed by many Torah verses, from Genesis 46:20 (*To Joseph were born in the land of Egypt Manasseh and Ephraim*) and Exodus 2:21-22 (*he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. She bore a son whom he named Gershom*) to Ruth 4:17 (*and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying, 'A son is born to Naomi!' They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, father of David*) and I Chronicles 7:14 (*The sons of Manasseh . . .*).¹⁶

Ethnic purity concerns became a significant issue for both religious cohesion and political demands. After all, Jewish communities were now spread throughout the Near East, from Egypt to Babylonia, as well as the ancient Jewish homeland. As Freeman asserts, "Judaism was no longer geographically bound."¹⁷ How were Ezra's drastic measures justified? With a move toward uniform ethnicity in Judah satisfying Persian authorities, Ezra's focus on Torah study would help ensure a culturally and religiously unified Jewish community there and, presumably, elsewhere. Specifically, Freeman suggests that Ezra, as priest, scribe, and religious leader of the Persian colony of Judah, "reinterpreted the master story. The meaning of the Exodus had to be applied to changing circumstances." The Torah is now to serve as a book of instruction for all Israelites and "became the key to Jewish identity and survival. Now every Israelite could participate in redemption through his or her own observance and study of Torah. The Exile and

return forced a rereading of the ancient stories to emphasize individual responsibility and participation in God's covenant with Israel."¹⁸

While Ezra's and Nehemiah's efforts would help forge a new and reinvigorated Judean society, Ezra's concern with achieving a semblance of ethnic purity by

evicting foreign women still seems to have rested on shaky ethical and religious grounds, particularly in light of a more restricted set of Torah precedents. Hence, Olyan goes beyond Washington's assertions by detailing specific strategies used to legitimize the expulsions, each drawing innovatively on biblical textual precedents that often invoked notions of purity. First, Ezra and Nehemiah – as revealed in Ezra 9:10-12 and Nehemiah 13:1-3 – combined a number of diverse biblical texts – such as Leviticus 18:24-30, Deuteronomy 23:4-9, and Deuteronomy 7:1-6 – containing negative sentiments about foreigners and their behavior as well as intermarriage between Israelites and foreigners.¹⁹ Second, Olyan points out that passages such as Ezra 9:2 and 9:4 tie "the concept of illegitimate profanation of a holy item to intermarriages between Judeans and foreign women," whereby Israel is cast as a "holy seed" that is "illicitly desecralized through such marriages to aliens," which are themselves labeled as "sacrilege" in the biblical text.²⁰

Lastly, Olyan argues that Ezra and Nehemiah link individuals they classify as foreigners with pollution. He suggests that Ezra-Nehemiah rely on three reasons: (a) alleged acts associated with foreigners, such as idolatry among other offenses practiced by Judeans associated with them, threatened the land's purity and the continued existence of Israel (Ezra 9:1-2, 10-12, 14); (b) marriages between Judean males and alien women served to pollute the bloodline of Judean priests (Neh. 13:28-30); and (c) the male foreigner was described as an ongoing source of pollution in terms of ritual (Neh. 13:4-9).²¹

Although the term "pollution" is extreme, Olyan's points suggesting the degradation of the Judean bloodline may indeed have been among Ezra's concerns. As some biblical scholars maintain, the use of such highly charged language as the intermingling of the "holy seed" with "peoples of the land" could be a reference to Isaiah 6:13, suggesting that the exile from the land served to purify the holy seed, therefore making Judeans, or those of Jewish descent, inappropriate for marriage and procreation with other peoples.²² However, whether Ezra's concern was primarily because of his fear of an actual dilution of priestly status, or because of the resulting mixed ethnicity that was contrary to the wishes of the Per-

sian authorities, or simply because he wanted to appease the Persians who had allowed the Jews to return to Judah – that is hard to determine. While it could certainly have been each or a combination of these, given the overriding political circumstances, Ezra's concern over ethnic purity seems to have been chiefly connected with a desire to appease the Persians who had authorized the Return to Zion. After all, without Persian approval the exiles

in Babylonia would not have been allowed to return, the Second Temple could not have been built, and the religious cult would not have been restored in Jerusalem.

What overriding social process could simultaneously prevent the intermingling of holy seed, legitimize the prohibition of intermarriage, and gain popular acceptance of the forced divorce and banishment of foreign wives and children? Philip Esler notes the significance of the erection of boundaries. Indeed, just as rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem under the watchful eye of Nehemiah served to protect the Jews inside – *'Jerusalem lying in ruins and its gates destroyed by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and suffer no more disgrace'* (Neh. 2:17) – so did the building and maintenance of ethnic boundaries served to achieve group cohesion. Thus, even though there was no evidence to suggest that those who married foreign women had ceased worshipping the God of Israel or planned to do so, this held little consolation for Ezra. As Esler suggests: "The simple blurring of the boundary in breach of God's law is the problem, not the fact of any idolatrous behaviour in consequence. . . . Ezra's attitude reflects a concern that a symbolical boundary between Israel and other ethnic groups had been breached in a manner which threatened his people's very identity. The boundary must be reinstated and there is a straightforward if draconian means to achieve this end – divorce of foreign wives and child abandonment *en masse*."²³

Esler's observation is compelling. In an era when established religious conversions were not yet practiced, boundary maintenance could be more effectively achieved along ethnic lines. Thus, acceptance of the notion of ethnic boundaries seems to have been essential for Ezra's edict to take hold. Judean males must have possessed knowledge of their common history, their Temple, and how their ancestors acted within their society. Without this understanding, it is hard to imagine that Judeans would be willing to relinquish and throw out their foreign wives and children. They knew that they were somehow different from the other

peoples of the region. A collective ethno-religious memory helped foster a cohesive group identity.

CONCLUSION

Considering the political and religious climate of the time, Ezra chose to expand the intermarriage prohibition well beyond that dictated by the Torah. Ezra wished to preserve ethnic purity as a means of achieving both uniform religious values and core beliefs for religious reasons, while maintaining a uniform ethnic identity for political reasons. Yet Ezra employed measures of boundary building above and

beyond what would constitute present-day acceptable standards. While banishment achieved a more cohesive society in Judah, Ezra's drastic measures would not be tolerated by the majority today. Although assimilation is indeed a danger to a cohesive and vibrant Jewish identity, some degree of acculturation – except perhaps for ultra-Orthodox communities that remain separate from others – is inevitable. As later rabbis advocated, rather than the extreme edict of banishment, embracing sincere converts and encouraging Jewish literacy among Jews are more effective prescriptions for dealing with the contemporary threat of assimilation.

While ethnicity is no longer a guiding factor in the preservation of Jewish religious identity, this was not the case in Judah when Ezra led the Jewish people. Although the Book of Ruth is the standard bearer for the acceptance of sincere proselytes (after all, Ruth was the ancestor of King David), organized conversion to Judaism was not yet an established practice in Ezra's time.²⁴ Conversion processes would be formulated later on during the Roman period. As Jewish law developed under future rabbinical authorities, ethnic considerations, though always of tangential significance, would become subservient to a religious identity that transcends mere ethnicity. This is the more appropriate stance upon which contemporary Judaism rests. Through his drastic measures, however, Ezra achieved major communal cohesion, fostering the Jewish survival that proved crucial for centuries thereafter. From Ezra to today, different times call for different measures.

NOTES

1. Although Ruth was a Moabite, she was devoted to Naomi to whom she said *For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my*

God (Ruth 1:16). She married Boaz (Ruth 4:13), Naomi's kinsman (Ruth 3:2), with whom Ruth had a son, Obed, whose descendants included King David (Ruth 4:22). Despite her Moabite origins, Ruth is deemed a true and sincere proselyte in Rabbinic Judaism.

2. Jonathan Klawans, "Concepts of Purity in the Bible," pp. 2041-47, in A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2047.

3. Conversion to Judaism does not appear to have been a viable option in the time of Ezra. Processes for formal conversion to Judaism were not introduced until the early Roman period – a few centuries after the time of Ezra – when a body of Jewish legal works on conversion began to emerge. See G. Freeman, "Israelite Society in Transition," in *Etz Hayim Study Companion*, ed. J. Blumenthal and J. L. Liss (New York, NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005) p. 319. See also note 24.

4. See Kenneth Hoglund, *Achaemenid Imperial Administration in Syria-Palestine and the Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 237-8.

5. Hoglund, p. 238.

6. H. Najman, citing *Genesis Rabbah* 7.2 in her comment on Ezra 10:3, in Berlin and Brettler, *op. cit.*, p. 1685.

7. *Ibid.* Najman's comment on Ezra 10:3. It should be noted that the tradition of patrilineal descent remained unchanged for determining membership in the priesthood (i.e., descendants of the tribe of Levi who assisted the priests, descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses).

8. H. C. Washington, "Israel's Holy Seed and the Foreign Women," *Biblical Interpretation* 11:3-4 (2003), p. 431.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 429.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

12. Freeman, "Israelite Society in Transition," p. 319.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.

16. S. M. Olyan, "Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 35:1 (2004), p. 2 and note 3.

17. Freeman, p. 320.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Olyan, pp. 2-3.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Washington (*op. cit.*) also argues that the notion of holy seed and purity was a key concept underlying Ezra's expulsion order. In fairness, however, Ezra 9:2, which talks about the holy seed being intermingled with the peoples of the land, does not quote Ezra's words but rather what officers told him about what had been going on in Judah. Since Ezra does not disagree with their terminology and description, it would appear that he accepted their statements. His subsequent actions served to deal with the situation as quickly as possible.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

22. Najman's comment to Ezra 9:2 in *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1684.

23. P. F. Esler, "Ezra-Nehemiah as a Narrative of (Re-Invented) Israelite Identity," *Biblical Interpretation* 11:3-4 (2003), p. 421.

24. The Book of Esther suggests that a mass conversion may have occurred in response to Mordecai's letter, written and sealed under the authority of King Ahasuerus, permitting Jews throughout Persia's vast provinces and cities to use deadly force to defend themselves from any sort of attack (Esth. 8:7-14). While it indeed states, *And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them* (Esth. 8:17), it is difficult to know with any certainty if the

"people of the land" (i.e., non-Jews) actually converted and, if so, whether this was on sincere religious grounds or merely to identify with the Jews out of fear, which would not be reckoned a valid conversion in contemporary terms. According to the historian Cecil Roth, "persons who, without being Jews, follow in whole or in part the Jewish religion or claim to be Jews," are known as "Judaizers," a term applicable to "many of the terror-stricken population" described in Esther 8:17 (C. Roth, "Judaizers," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 11:520). See also note 3.