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Putting away the foreign wives. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

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Transcript

Ezra chapter 10 of the sons of Nebo, Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadai, Joel and Benaiah. All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even born children. The book of Ezra ends with the crisis surrounding intermarriage.

The crisis is not merely about observance of some detail of Mosaic legislation. It is a crisis in which the people's entire status as a holy seed is seen to be in jeopardy. If intermarriage is normalized, the returnees are in considerable danger of assimilating and disappearing into the surrounding pagan people groups when they have been called to be a distinct people, the seed of a restored nation.

In chapter 9, Ezra, shocked by the discovery of the situation, mourned publicly and turned to the Lord in prayer. In chapter 10, Ezra and the other leaders act in response to the problem. In the previous chapter, the account was a first-person one, presumably taken directly from Ezra's personal memoirs.

In this chapter, there is a shift to third-person narrative. Likely, as Andrew Steinman argues, the narrator is here paraphrasing material from Ezra's memoirs, as he seemingly does elsewhere. Ezra leads by example, and the people follow.

Seeing Ezra's distraught response, the people join him in weeping bitterly over their sins. Speaking for the people, Shekinah addresses Ezra, seemingly treating him as the spokesperson and representative for the Lord. Shekinah's family were early returnees to Jerusalem, as we see in Ezra chapter 2, which perhaps is part of the explanation for the prominent role that he is playing among the people here.

He acknowledges that they have broken the covenant in taking wives from the pagan people of the lands, and proposes a covenant with the Lord to put away the foreign wives and their children from among the people, in keeping with Ezra's own counsel as the faithful teacher of the law. It is not entirely clear the extent to which the proposed policy is one which Ezra himself had outlined, or whether Shekinah is advancing a policy of his own, in line with but going beyond Ezra's own teaching. It seems more likely to me that Shekinah and the community that he represents are the ones taking the initiative at this point, perhaps even presenting a more radical policy than might otherwise have been demanded.

The sin of intermarriage is also mentioned in prophetic literature around this period, in Malachi chapter 2, verses 10-11 for instance. In considering the problem of intermarriage, one possible factor to weigh up is the possibility that men greatly outnumbered women among the returnees. If we look at the list of returnees in Ezra chapter 2 for instance, and compare the total numbers for the sons of various houses, and then the number of the whole assembly, there is a significant discrepancy.

Some have accounted for this discrepancy by arguing that, while the separate numbers for the various houses number only the men, the total number given also includes the women. If this were the case, then the women were greatly outnumbered in the company, by about two and a half to one. However, this is quite a speculative interpretation, and very far from certain.

In Malachi chapter 2, written around this period, the Jews are condemned, not merely for taking foreign wives, but for putting away Jewish wives in order to do so. This would weaken the argument for a significant dearth of women precipitating the situation. Another intriguing possibility that Steinman highlights is that Shekinah's own father might have been one of the guilty parties.

Shekinah is introduced to us as the son of one Jehiel of the sons of Elam. Later, in verse 26, we read that one of the parties guilty of taking a foreign wife was a Jehiel of the sons of Elam. Even more intriguing is the possibility that Shekinah himself was the child of such a union, one of the persons whose place among the people would be challenged by the proposed policy.

Steinman suggests that, if he were, Shekinah would be evidence that the putting away of the foreign wives and their children was not about radical ethnic purity, but about covenant faithfulness. Any child of a foreign wife who devoted himself to the Lord and became a full member of Israel would not be put away. The issue was religious syncretism and the loss of covenant distinctiveness, not a fixation on bloodlines.

When the same issue of intermarriage is mentioned in Nehemiah chapter 13, we see that the children of those who had intermarriage could barely even speak the language of Judah. Their mother tongue, their mother's tongues, were those of the surrounding pagan peoples. When they couldn't even speak the language of Judah, it seems clear that they weren't being trained in the way of the Lord.

Ezra, with the authority given to him by the Persian king Artaxerxes, enforced the policy that Shekinah had proposed, making all of the leading priests, Levites and the rest of the people take the oath to put away their foreign wives. Before sending out the proclamation concerning the covenant and its enforcement, Ezra fasted all night in one of the priestly chambers of the house of the Lord. Such an extraordinary fast evidenced how gravely Ezra took the situation.

The other examples of such fasts in scripture tend to occur at times of national crisis and imminent judgment, such as the fast of the city of Nineveh in response to the message of Jonah. Ezra throws the weight of his office behind the covenant. He makes an official proclamation, summoning all of the returned exiles to Jerusalem, where the covenant's stipulations will be put into effect.

As a leader, Ezra is someone who leads chiefly by example. He is also a teacher of the law, who instructs the people, so that, in cases like this, the people themselves wish to conform themselves to things that he has taught them. However, when the occasion demands, he isn't afraid to implement severe sanctions, in this instance the threat of banishment and forfeiture of property for those who do not submit to the covenant and its demands.

Nevertheless, the weight of his approach doesn't fall on coercive measures, and it seems as though the people conform largely voluntarily to his proclamation. The effectiveness of his leadership is manifested in the fact that, although he has coercive measures and ample authority at his disposal, his rule generally does not seem to work by the power of force. The Judahites and the Benjaminites assembled within three days.

It was around December, in the cold and rainy season. Standing in the court before the temple, feeling keenly both the bitterness of the weather and the weight of their guilt, the people were shivering and trembling. There, Ezra addressed the company, declaring to them their fault, exhorting them to amend their practice and to glorify and obey God, presenting the specific action in which submission to the Lord would be manifested, separation from the peoples of the land and the putting away of their foreign wives.

However, given the inclement weather and the extensive process of dissolving the unlawful unions, the people requested that the process be carried out over a greater period of time, by the elders and judges in various cities, rather than in a lengthy, centralized process. The people readily assent to the covenant, with only a small handful of dissenters. It is not obvious whether the dissenters object to the putting away of the foreign wives and their children, or whether their objection is merely to committing the process to the charge of local authorities.

The returnees enforced the policy, the policy being administered by the heads of father's houses, appointed by Ezra himself, over a period of three months. The completion of the process on the first day of the first month, exactly a year to the day after Ezra had started out from Babylonia, might perhaps remind us of other auspicious events that occurred on the first day of the first month of a new year, about one year after the start of a journey or process. In the story of the flood, for instance, the waters are dried from the ground by the first day of the first month of the new year.

Likewise, the tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first month of the new year. Perhaps more weight to these associations would be given by the recording of the fact that the tops of the mountains were first seen on the first day of the tenth month, the same day upon which the process of the elders' examination began. If a connection with the flood and the Exodus narratives were intended, it might raise some interesting possibilities.

For instance, it might invite us to consider parallels between the intermarriage that was part of the sin provoking the flood, the sons of God taking the daughters of men, and the sin of the returnees of Israel here. The chapter ends with a list of men who had married foreign women. The list is comparatively a fairly short one.

There are only approximately 110 men on it. Considering that nearly 30,000 men were among the numbered sons of various houses in chapter 2, and that depending on how we account for the discrepancy, the number of men might even have been nearer

50,000, 110 intermarrying men, only a fraction of a percent, hardly seems to be evidence of a widespread problem. This raises the question of whether the response is really proportionate to the problem, and whether these foreign women are functioning more as a lightning rod for all sorts of tensions and anxieties within the community that are being displaced onto them.

David Janssen has argued that this is an example of a witch hunt, in which a fragilised and insecure community arbitrarily targeted a particular marginal group within itself, delivering itself from supposed contamination and reasserting its distinctiveness through their ritual expulsion. In response to such theories, we ought to consider the list more carefully. There is the possibility that the list is representative, rather than comprehensive.

There are other examples of discrepancies between the number of items in lists in Ezra, and their given totals. Both chapters 1 and 2 have instances of notable discrepancies of this kind. Consequently, the possibility that the list isn't comprehensive should be considered.

Many scholars have argued for such a position. The claim that the list isn't comprehensive is strengthened by consideration of the length of time that it took to implement the oath, around 3 months, or 75 working days. This seems rather long if local officials only had to dissolve 110 marriages between them.

On the other hand, there is nothing about the list as presented within this chapter that would suggest that it is not a comprehensive one. H.G.M. Williamson, who pushes back against claims that the list is highly abbreviated, remarks on the structure of the list and its similarities to that of chapter 8. The list begins with cultic figures moving from the high priest family down. The laity, Williamson suggests, may be presented in 12 schematized family divisions, perhaps stressing the fact that this is all of Israel.

Some of the sons of the high priest, Jeshua himself, were guilty of such intermarriage. Perhaps the problem of intermarriage was especially pronounced for the elite class, for those who most set the religious and moral tenor of the people. The practice of intermarriage among them was mostly for political reasons, but it was a spiritual rot that threatened to spread throughout the entire body of the people, unless it was speedily arrested.

A question to consider. In 1 Corinthians 7, verses 12-16, the apostle Paul writes, Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.

In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. But how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? How might we relate this teaching to the practice of

Ezra and the Jews in these chapters? John chapter 1, verses 1-28 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness about him, and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side.

He has made him known. And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you? He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What then, are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? And he answered, No. So they said to him, Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us.

What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

These things took place in Bethany, across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. Each one of the gospels recalls Genesis and the story of creation at their very outset. However, whereas Matthew particularly recalls the later story of Abraham's family, John brings us back much further, to the very beginning of creation itself.

He retells the story of creation as one in which the figure of the word is active. For John, the one who comes in the incarnation, has been active in creation from the very beginning. His story doesn't begin with a star, it begins before any of the stars were in the heavens.

It does not begin in the womb of Mary, but in the bosom of the Father. Throughout his gospel, John draws his hearer's attention to the fact that the figure who is at the heart of

the story is one we already know. He already is an actor within the entire story recounted by the Old Testament, and now a figure that was once mysterious and shadowy has stepped into the spotlight of the center stage, entering the story in a new way.

The result is an invitation to re-read what we have read before, in a manner that both makes the familiar strange and illumines matters that were formerly mysterious. In particular, it is in the personal and incarnate entry of the word onto the stage of human history that the chief actor, the creator God himself, will make himself known. In addition to going back to the temporal beginning of all things, before the very dawn of creation, John also traces the story of Jesus back to the personal beginning of all things, the creator God himself.

The word is identified with God in his eternity, pre-existing all created things. In his order of being, he was with God, and in his very identity as God. His creative agency is also coterminous with God's own.

All things, without exception, are created through him. The theologian John Webster writes about the way that we speak of particular acts of God in relation to the triune persons, in a manner that focuses not upon dividing the act of God into separate parts performed by three distinct agents, but upon speaking of undivided acts of an undivided God, about the threefold unified agency of God being expressed through the differences of prepositions. He writes, economic differentiation is modal, not real, and reinforces the importance of prepositional, rather than substantive differentiation, from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

Modal differentiation does not deny personal agency, however. It simply specifies how the divine persons act. The several persons, Owen notes, are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power.

Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations, and this ariseth from the unity of the person in the same essence. Here the evangelist, the apostle John, seems to be upholding a similar point in speaking of all things being made through the word. The meaning of the word, or the logos, has long been a cause of animated scholarly discussion.

Scholars have contemplated the similarities between the biblical concept of the logos, particularly as it is expressed in the Johannine literature, and more philosophical and Hellenistic notions of the logos that had currency at the time, for instance in the works of Philo. Another of the questions that scholars, especially those searching within more immediately scriptural and less Hellenistic Jewish sources for John's understanding of the logos, have pondered is the proximity of the logos or word as a concept to the notion of the law or wisdom, especially as the latter is occasionally spoken of as a quasi-personal

agency in intertestamental literature. The word has life in himself, a point that Jesus makes himself in his teaching later in the gospel.

He is the Lord of life, life which is also a source of light to all. The creation in Genesis 1 began with the declaration, let there be light. In the opening chapter of his gospel, John connects Christ both with the creative word and with the light that it brings forth.

However, Christ is the true and the uncreated light, the light that has dawned in the fullness of time. The metaphor of Christ as the light that dawns in the world is one that we often encounter in the New Testament, whose authors draw upon Old Testament prophecy in speaking of the long-awaited breaking of the light of the eschatological day. As the word, Christ is the one through whom all was made.

As the uncreated light and the living one, Christ is the one in whom the entirety of creation derives its existence. It is likely that in the rest of this chapter, the evangelist will subtly allude to days of creation in succession, recalling the original creation in a way that hints at the advent of a new creation in Christ. Like the opening chapter of the book of Revelation, in addition to unveiling the glory of Christ, the opening chapter of John's gospel introduces us to a figure who acts as a witness, John.

The other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are commonly referred to as the synoptic gospels on account of the similarity of their narratives and their words. They stand in contrast to John, which is far more distinct in its content and style. Whereas the synoptic gospels all refer to John as the Baptist, in the gospel of John it is as a witness that John is introduced to us.

Relatedly, John's gospel does not give us an account of Jesus' baptism by John, even though it references some of the events that surround it. Rather, it focuses on the words and actions by which John bore witness to Jesus, and describes, in contrast to the other gospels, specific instances in which John directed some of his own followers to Jesus. Bearing witness will prove to be a very important theme throughout the book of John.

The witness born by John, the witness born by Jesus, the witness born by the disciples, the witness born by the Father to the Son, the witness born by the Spirit, the witness born by the book itself. Before we are told more about the witness of John, however, more is said about the one to whom he is bearing witness, in particular about Jesus as the true light. Throughout the gospel, presentations of Jesus as the true article, or as the truth, the archetype, or the prototype, the climax, or the ultimate instance of something, are repeated.

Jesus is the true light. He is the true bread from heaven. His advent will establish the true worshippers.

He is the true vine. As the true light of the world, all existence depends upon the word.

He is the living light that banishes all darkness, and perhaps represents the very dynamic principle of existence itself.

To exist is to have been brought into light. This light cannot be grasped by the darkness. It cannot be grasped in the sense of being captured and overcome.

But nor can it be grasped in the sense of being understood and comprehended. The evangelist here gives the heroes of the gospel an anticipation of what will happen in the story of the word. While he will be rejected by his own people, both as humanity more generally and as the sons of Abraham more particularly, the darkness will neither extinguish nor recognise the light.

Not only will it fail to overcome him, tragically in its blindness, it will also fail to perceive who he is. The antithesis between light and darkness is an important one in the Johannine literature, in the writings of John. However, we must recognise that the opposition between light and darkness is not a symmetrical one.

These are not equal and opposite forces. The light by its nature banishes the darkness on its advent. Those who receive the light, who receive the word, which is identified with the act of believing in his name, are authorised as sons of God, having that status conferred upon them by the word, who as the eternal son of God can grant others to participate by grace in what he possesses in the divine being.

These verses introduce the theme of rebirth, which is an important one within the gospel. The gospel of John witnesses to the word becoming flesh, tabernacling among us, temple imagery. The eternal word by which all things were made enters the plane of human existence as a man, thereby manifesting the father's glory as only the son can, making the father known.

The father-son union introduced here is arguably the revelatory heart of the gospel of John. The son is one with the father and reveals him. With his advent, all former revelation and grace of God is eclipsed by greater revelation and grace.

One of the things that is brought out most powerfully in this context is the contrast and the connection between the story of Moses and the law and the story of Jesus, between the grace that comes with the Mosaic order and the greater grace, the grace in place of grace, that comes with Christ. If we look back in the Old Testament in Exodus chapter 33, there is an encounter between Moses and God in which Moses asked to see God's glory. On that occasion he was granted to see something of God's glory.

But yet there is a deeper and a greater revelation of God's glory in Jesus Christ, who is the word made flesh. In Exodus chapter 33, God told Moses that a man could not see his face and live. In John chapter 1 verse 18, that statement is alluded to.

No one has seen God at any time. Yet here is one who has seen God, one who is God

himself. This is one who is in the bosom of the father.

Whereas Moses saw the back of God on Mount Sinai, here is one who makes known the face of God, one who is one with the father. Moses had a brief encounter with the back of God. Jesus Christ is the one in whom the father makes himself known.

Jesus is here described as full of grace and truth. In Exodus chapter 34 verse 6, when God declared his name to Moses, he declared that he abounds in love and faithfulness, perhaps terms related to these used here. Jesus Christ is a character that we have met in the Old Testament, in the great theophanies or divine manifestations of the past.

Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up the train of his robe filling the temple. That is Jesus Christ as we will see later in John. Jesus declared that Abraham rejoiced to see his day and he saw him and was glad as we see in John chapter 8. Jesus is the one that Moses saw on the mount.

Moses saw the back but in Jesus we can see the face. The Jews enquire of the witness John, asking who he is. He is performing remarkable symbolic actions, baptizing people in the wilderness in a context of fervent messianic expectations.

How does he see himself fitting into the picture? Is he the Christ, the awaited anointed one and heir of David? Is he Elijah? Here they refer to the figure foretold in Malachi chapter 4 verses 5 and 6. Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. Is he the prophet like Moses foretold in Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 18 and 19? I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers and I will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him and whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name. I myself will require it of him.

John denies that he is any of these figures. Rather he identifies himself by appealing to a prophecy of Isaiah. He is the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for and heralding the Lord's return to Zion in salvation and judgment to fulfill the greatly awaited promises.

By identifying himself as this figure John invokes the entire prophecy of Isaiah chapter 40 verses 1 to 11. Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places are plain and the

glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, cry, and I said, what shall I cry? All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion. Herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem.

Herald of good news, lift it up. Fear not, say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him.

Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. John's baptism is preparing the way for the action of one who is already, unbeknownst to the Jews, in their midst, waiting to be revealed. A person who is much greater than John himself ever could be.

So much greater, in fact, that John would not be worthy to lose his sandal strap. A question to consider. Elsewhere John the Baptist is identified with Elijah.

In Matthew chapter 11 verses 13 and 14 Jesus declares, For all the prophets and the Lord prophesied and told John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. In Luke chapter 1 verse 17, Zechariah is told by Gabriel, And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. However, in verse 21 of this chapter John denies that he is Elijah.

Do you have any thoughts on why he does so?