

The Abrahamic Covenant as the Basis for Israel's Treatment of
Foreigners in the Postexilic Books
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There is great reluctance among modern pastors to preach from the postexilic books of the Old Testament. The primary reason is because of the perceived attitude of Israel towards foreigners in these books. The most common sermonized portrait of God in the modern age is that His attribute of love supersedes all other attributes. Of primary importance in this attribute of love is God's acceptance of foreigners in the Church. However, in the postexilic books we see Israel rejecting the offers of assistance by the surrounding nations in the building of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. We see the remnant divorcing their foreign wives and casting out the children that were produced as a result of these unions. We see Judah's governor offering imprecatory prayers against the governors of the surrounding nations. And, perhaps most significantly, we see the Jewish queen of Persia requesting an extra day in which to slaughter those who oppose the Jews. While these passages pose a much more difficult problem for those interpreters who see one people of God throughout human history, and especially for those who read the church back into the Old Testament, they nevertheless pose a significant problem for dispensationalists as well. How are we as dispensationalists to interpret the nation's, and, more importantly, God's treatment of foreigners in these books? Like many of the key questions of Scripture, I believe the answer is to be found in the initial covenant that concerns the nation of Israel, that is, the Abrahamic Covenant. There are four key statements in this covenant that serve as the basis of the nation's treatment of foreigners in the postexilic books. It is my hope that the following essay will provide some guidelines as to how to deal with the subject of foreigners in these books in one's teaching and preaching ministry.

"I Will Make You a Great Nation" (Gen. 12:2)¹

In the foundational covenant recorded in Genesis 12:1–3, the Lord promised Abraham that He would make of him a great nation. We know from the unfolding of progressive revelation that Israel is that specific nation. However, what exactly is meant by the adjective "great" in this passage? According to the following passages, the key attribute of the nation of Israel is to be that of holiness. Note Exodus 19:6, "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," and Deuteronomy 7:6, "You are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." Throughout Leviticus we see the Lord's exhortation, "Be holy, for I am holy." Israel could not become a great nation without first becoming a holy nation.

The first group of foreigners in the postexilic books that I would like to address is the foreign wives of the remnant and the offspring produced by these unions. In Ezra 9:1, the scribe was informed by the princes² that the remnant had "not separated themselves from the peoples of

¹ All Bible quotations are taken from the NASB.

² I.e., the family leaders of the Jewish remnant.

the lands.” In describing the peoples of the lands, the princes referred to Deuteronomy 7:1, a verse that identified seven nations that were to be destroyed by the Jews when they conquered the land of Israel. In this passage, Israel was specifically commanded to “make no covenant with them” (Deut. 7:2), including especially the covenant of marriage (Deut. 7:3). The Lord defends this prohibition by informing Israel that union with these foreign nations would lead the nation into idolatry, thus causing their own destruction (Deut. 7:4).

In Ezra 9:1, we have three nations added to the original seven, those of Ammon, Moab, and Egypt.³ The addition of these nations reveals that intermarriage with all ungodly foreigners was forbidden, not just intermarriage with those of the original seven nations. It is important to highlight the fact that these foreigners were ungodly; note the descriptive phrase used in this verse, “according to their abominations.” In other words, these foreigners were still practicing idolatry.⁴ The result of these ungodly unions was the pollution of the “holy race” (Ezra 9:2), an obvious allusion to the phrase “holy people” used throughout Deuteronomy in reference to the nation of Israel (cf. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 28:9).

When Ezra heard of the remnant’s intermarriage with foreigners he was understandably disheartened by the tragic news. He tore his garment, pulled out some of his hair, and collapsed on the ground in a public place so that the remnant could see his grief. At the time of the evening sacrifice, the scribe fell on his knees and stretched out his hands to the Lord in prayer. Ezra confessed the sins of his people and acknowledged that the Lord’s judgment of their ancestors was just. Now the great sins of the previous generations were being added to by the current generation.

Ezra admitted that the remnant had forsaken the commandments of the Lord that had been revealed through His prophets, specifically quoting from Deuteronomy 7. The plurality of the word “prophets” reveals that this topic was also a common theme in prophetic sermons (cf. e.g., Mal. 2:11). The prophets had collectively instructed the nation to refrain from intermarrying with foreigners. This command was given in hopes of maintaining the holiness of Israel. These foreigners were unclean; their abominations had filled the land from end to end (Ezra 9:11). Union with these foreigners would make the Jews unclean. Haggai, probably speaking on this very issue, explained to the remnant that if something clean is united with something unclean, then the unclean thing makes the clean thing unclean; the clean thing does not make the unclean thing clean (Hag. 2:11–14). The remnant’s intermarriage with foreigners had caused them to become unclean or unholy in the sight of God. They were no longer a “great nation.”

Even though the Lord had severely punished the Jews, He had not destroyed them. God had punished them less than their sins deserved (Ezra 9:13). The Lord had threatened to destroy Israel if they disobeyed His command to separate themselves from foreigners (Deut. 7:4). Ezra realized that the Lord had shown mercy to Israel. The Lord had left an “escaped remnant” (Ezra 9:13), a “peg in His holy place” (Ezra 9:8). However, Ezra also realized that the repetition of this

³ The Ammonites and Moabites may have been added to the original list based on Deuteronomy 23:3, “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord.”

⁴ We should assume that God accepted marriage to foreigners who had come to faith in Yahweh (e.g., Rahab, Ruth).

great sin would endanger the very life of the nation. God might completely destroy His people this time just as He had previously threatened (Ezra 9:14). The sins of the few became the responsibility of the whole, with the result that no one was able to “stand” (Ezra 9:15), i.e., be regarded as guiltless,⁵ before the Lord. A little leaven had leavened the whole lump (cf. 1 Cor. 5:6). It was now Ezra’s job to “clean out the old leaven” (1 Cor. 5:7) by taking steps to purify the remnant.

In Ezra 10, under the leadership of Ezra, the nation made a covenant to divorce their foreign wives. The term used in Ezra 10:3 (“put away”) is the same word as that used in Deuteronomy 24:2 (“leaves”) in the context of divorce. Those who refused to divorce their wives had their possessions confiscated and were excluded from the assembly of Israel. It is obvious in this passage that Ezra was following the law very carefully. He was a scribe “skilled in the Law of Moses” (7:6). Furthermore, he was writing (and acting) under the inspiration of the Spirit. Perhaps most importantly, he claimed that this separation was the very will of God (10:11). These marriages were viewed as sinful in the eyes of God. As Nehemiah wrote, “You have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women” (Neh. 13:27).

Since these verses reveal that it was God’s will for these divorces to take place, this passage must be reconciled with the words of Ezra’s contemporary, the prophet Malachi. In Malachi 2:16, the prophet condemned divorce, even emphasizing the fact that God hates divorce. However, this statement by Malachi must be understood in its context. The divorces that God hates are those in which His people “deal treacherously” (Mal. 2:16). From the context, it is clear that the individuals with whom the Jews have “deal[t] treacherously” are the wives of their “youth” (Mal. 2:14; see also 2:15). The phrase “your youth” indicates that these Jews had previously been married. The wives of their youth are not the wives with whom they are currently living. The wives of their youth were Jewish wives with whom the Jews had made a “covenant” while God served as a “witness,” thereby indicating that He approved of this relationship (2:14). In other words, these Jews had divorced their Jewish wives to marry foreign wives. Malachi called these second marriages “an abomination” and declared that those guilty have “profaned the sanctuary of the Lord” (Mal. 2:11). One can assume from the passage that the prophet called on his listeners to divorce their current foreign wives and return to the wives of their youth, that is, their Jewish wives. The reason given is because God hated that original divorce. Viewed in this way, the prophet Malachi was preaching the same message as that of Ezra, namely, that God hates intermarriage between His people and unbelieving foreigners.

Nehemiah likewise forbade the remnant’s intermarriage with foreigners. In Nehemiah 10:30, the governor led the nation in taking a solemn oath that they would not intermarry with foreigners. Unfortunately, the remnant proved to be unable to keep this covenant, for when Nehemiah returned from a trip to Susa, he found that the nation had once again fallen prey to temptation (13:23–28). Nehemiah was greatly distressed at the remnant’s disobedience. He “contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and

⁵ This word is a legal term, meaning “to be acquitted” (cf. Pss. 1:5; 130:3).

made them swear by God, ‘You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves’” (13:25), a quote of Deuteronomy 7:3. This spiritual failure had defiled the remnant and had left them in need of purification (13:29–30). Nehemiah, like Ezra, was greatly concerned with the holiness of the nation, a holiness that was not possible with the remnant’s intermarriage with ungodly foreigners.

“The One Who Curses You I Will Curse” (Gen. 12:3)

The second group of foreigners in the postexilic books is comprised of those foreigners who oppose the Jews. At their very first entrance into the narrative of Ezra, the reader is informed that the remnant was quick to build the altar of the temple because they were “terrified because of the peoples of the lands” (3:3). Just a few verses later, these foreigners are identified as the “enemies” of the Jews (4:1). As a result, their offer of assistance in the temple project should not be regarded as genuine. That is why the Jewish leaders reject their offer, declaring, “You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God” (4:3). The clear implication is that Yahweh was not the god of these foreigners, despite their claim to the contrary in the previous verse. When their offer is rejected by the Jewish leaders, these foreigners resort to a campaign designed to intimidate and frighten the remnant. They continually sent letters to the Persian monarchs filled with accusations against the Jews. Unfortunately, the efforts of the opposition group were successful and they were able to prevent the remnant from working on the temple for sixteen years.

In Nehemiah, the threat from those who oppose the Jews is much more significant. The book opens with Nehemiah questioning his brother Hanani concerning the remnant. Hanani’s response is that the remnant is in “great distress” (1:3). This distress was due to the oppression of the remnant’s foreign neighbors. In Nehemiah 2, the leaders of this opposition group are identified, namely, Sanballat the Samaritan, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab. Each of these individuals should be regarded as the governor of his respective region. Together, these three governors represented the nations surrounding the territory of Judah on all three sides—Samaria to the north, Ammon to the east, and Arabia to the south (the Mediterranean Sea borders Judah to the west). These governors were greatly displeased upon finding out that “someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel” (Neh. 2:10). Nehemiah later informed these governors that they had “no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:20). These three terms reveal that these foreigners had no civic, legal, or cultic relationship with the Jews.

When the leaders of the opposition group heard that the Jews were committed to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, they embarked on a series of attacks designed to dishearten the remnant. They began by mocking the Jews and accusing them of rebelling against King Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:19). They then offered a series of taunts, questioning the quality of the remnant’s work and their ability to finish the project (Neh. 4:1–3). They even threatened to attack the holy city (Neh. 4:7–8). They also hatched a plot to physically harm Nehemiah (6: 1–9). Failing in this attempt, they tried to spiritually discredit the governor by encouraging him to break the Mosaic Law (6:10–13). Even after the walls were rebuilt, Tobiah engaged in a letter-

writing campaign designed to frighten Nehemiah (6:17–19). Each of these tactics ultimately proved unsuccessful, as the remnant was able to complete the walls in only fifty-two days.

It is in light of this opposition, then, that the imprecatory prayers of Nehemiah's should be understood. In Nehemiah 4:4, the governor prayed, "Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity" (see also Neh. 6:14). Nehemiah, presumably thinking of the Lord's promise to curse those who curse the Jews, simply called on Yahweh to act according to what He had previously covenanted to do on behalf of Israel.

In Esther, the Lord's hatred for those who oppose His people is most telling of all the postexilic books. For in this book, those opposed to the Jews seek to purge them from the face of the earth and are instead the objects of annihilation. This attempt at ethnic cleansing was led by Haman, who is identified as an Agagite (Esth. 3:1). This designation is clearly designed to associate him with Agag, the Amalekite king hewn to pieces by Samuel when Saul disobeyed the Lord's command to exterminate the Amalekites.⁶ The Amalekites were cursed by God when they attacked the Israelites at Rephidim as they journeyed to Mount Sinai. Following Israel's victory, the Lord instructed Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Exod. 17:14). After building an altar to the Lord, Moses declared, "The Lord has sworn; the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod. 17:16). When the Lord chose Saul as the first king of Israel, He gave him clear instructions concerning the Amalekites, "Then Samuel said to Saul, 'The Lord sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"'" (1 Sam. 15:1–3).

The Amalekites were cursed by God and marked out for destruction because they had chosen to attack His people. In much the same way, those who chose to attack the Jews in the book of Esther were marked out for destruction. Haman, the "[foe and] enemy of the Jews" (Esth. 3:10; 8:1; see also 7:6) who "sought to destroy [kill, and annihilate] all the Jews" (Esth. 3:6; see also 7:4), was himself hanged along with his ten sons. Those foreigners who chose to attack the Jews were themselves "killed and destroyed" (Esth. 9:6). These foreigners are identified as "enemies of the Jews" (Esth. 9:1; see also 9:5, 16), "those who hated" the Jews (Esth. 9:1; see also 9:5, 16), and "those who sought their [the Jews'] harm" (Esth. 9:2), thus explaining the reason for their destruction. Evidently, some of these foreigners remained after the first day of slaughter, thus necessitating the queen's request for a second day in which to destroy those who hated the Jews.

While God is not named in the book of Esther, it is clear that He is acting on behalf of the Jewish people to preserve them and curse their enemies, just as He had covenanted. In Esther 4:14, Mordecai declares to Esther that "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews," even if she

⁶ Note that Mordecai is identified as a descendant of Kish in Esther 2:5.

chooses to remain silent before the king. Furthermore, in Esther 6:13, Zeresh, the wife of Haman, asserts, “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him.”

“I Will Bless Those Who Bless You” (Gen. 12:3)

The portrait of foreigners in the postexilic books is certainly not completely negative. In fact, the other two groups of foreigners in these books are portrayed in a positive way. The third group of foreigners is the Persian monarchs. The remnant’s treatment of the Persian kings serves as a sharp contrast to its treatment of other foreigners. The remnant offers sacrifices to God on behalf of the Persian kings and prays for their lives and those of their children (cf. Ezra 6:10).

Throughout the postexilic books, the Persian kings are portrayed as being benevolent towards the Jews. Shortly after his conquest of Babylon, in his very first year, the Persian King Cyrus made a decree allowing the Jews to return to Judah and build a temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem. As part of this decree, Cyrus ordered the neighbors⁷ of these Jews to support them with money, goods, and livestock, as well as providing a freewill offering to be sacrificed upon the successful completion of the altar. Furthermore, Cyrus ordered his treasurer to return the articles of the temple that had been taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. In Ezra 3:7, we are informed that Cyrus had even given permission for cedar logs to be brought to Jerusalem from Lebanon for the construction of the temple. Finally, in Ezra 6:4, we find that Cyrus ordered that the cost of the temple was to be paid from the royal treasury.

In Ezra 6, Darius makes a decree allowing the Jews to continue working on the temple, a project that had been stopped for sixteen years because of the remnant’s fear of the surrounding nations. This decree called for the cost of the temple to be paid from the royal treasury. It further provided for the needs of the sacrificial system, including livestock, food, and anointing oil. As noted earlier, Darius also requested that prayers be made in the temple on his own behalf as well as his children. Finally, the decree of Darius called for the execution of those who attempted to violate this edict.

In Ezra 7, Artaxerxes granted Ezra and the rest of the cultic personnel permission to return to Judah in order to teach the Mosaic Law throughout the province. As part of this decree, Artaxerxes provided Ezra with the funds needed for the sacrificial system. The king supported Ezra’s mission because he feared that Yahweh would send calamity if he refused to aid the scribe (“lest there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons;” Ezra 7:23). Artaxerxes also gave Ezra the authority to appoint judges and magistrates and to punish those who refused to obey the Mosaic Law, even by banishment or death. The king even offered to provide the pilgrims with an armed escort. Ezra refused this escort, explaining, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him” (Ezra 8:22), a statement that can be viewed as an application of Genesis 12:3.

⁷ The phrase “men of that place” in Ezra 1:4 is to be seen as a reference to those Jews who chose to remain in Babylon instead of returning to Judah.

In Nehemiah 2, Artaxerxes questioned Nehemiah regarding his sad countenance. The concern of the king betrayed his great affection for his cupbearer. When Nehemiah provided the explanation for his sad countenance, Artaxerxes allowed for Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls. He also provided letters granting him safe passage and the timber necessary for the rebuilding project. Although not directly stated in this passage, the king also appointed Nehemiah as governor of Judah (Neh. 5:14).

In the book of Esther, the Persian King Ahasuerus married the heroine and provided for the deliverance of the Jews. Mordecai and Esther work together to save the king's life in 2:21–23. And the final chapter of Esther details the great authority and strength of King Ahasuerus.

It is clear from Ezra 9:9 that God blessed the Persian kings in order that they might grant favor to the Jews, “Yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God [Cyrus], to restore its ruins [Darius], and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem [Artaxerxes].” In fact, in Ezra 6:14, we are told that the Jews were able to complete their building projects thanks to the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. Those who blessed the Jews were themselves blessed by God.

“In You All the Families of the Earth Shall Be Blessed” (Gen. 12:3)

The fourth and final group of foreigners is those foreigners who had chosen to live as Jews under the Mosaic Law. These foreigners were allowed to participate in the remnant community, as opposed to the foreigners of the first two groups. We are introduced to this group of foreigners in the roster of those who journeyed from Babylon to Jerusalem as recorded in the second chapter of Ezra.⁸ There is general consensus that the “sons of Solomon's servants” in Ezra 2:55–58 are the descendants of foreigners who were enslaved by Solomon. Furthermore, in Ezra 2:65 we find a group of servants who are separated from the general assembly of Israel. There can be little doubt that these servants are also foreigners. These foreigners would assuredly have been allowed to assist in the rebuilding of the temple. In fact, in Ezra 6:21, we see foreigners participating in the Passover that was celebrated five weeks after the completion of the temple. The phrase “those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land . . . to seek the Lord God of Israel” in this verse is a reference to those foreigners who had turned from the idolatry of their ancestors to serve the God of Israel. Exodus 12:48 allowed for foreigners to celebrate Passover, provided that they were circumcised and became “like a native of the land,” that is, one who followed the Mosaic Law.

The rest of the Law likewise allowed for the inclusion of godly foreigners within the assembly of Israel. Note the following verses: Leviticus 16:29 “And this shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you.”

⁸ See also Nehemiah 7.

Leviticus 24:22 “There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the Lord your God.”

Numbers 15:15–16 “As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the Lord. There is to be one law and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you.”

The Law also contains many passages that speak of God’s love for and acceptance of foreigners. Note the following examples:

Leviticus 19:34 “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Leviticus 23:22 “When you reap the harvest of your land, moreover, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor gather the gleanings of your harvest; you are to leave them for the needy and the alien. I am the Lord your God.”

Deuteronomy 10:18 “He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.”

There will even be foreigners in the future Messianic Kingdom. Note the following examples:

Isaiah 56:6-8 “‘Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath, and holds fast My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.’ The Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, ‘Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.’”

Zech. 14:16 “Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.”

As can be readily seen, those foreigners who chose to abide by the terms of the Mosaic Law were accepted into the assembly of Israel in the Old Testament. They were blessed by God along with His chosen people, the nation Israel, a vivid foreshadowing of the future Church and Messianic Kingdom.