

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

Ralph W. Klein, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III, Ezra, Nehemiah*. Leander E. Keck senior editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999),

Ralph W. Klein is the author of the Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, is Dean and Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of Old Testament, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

General Historical Outline. After Cyrus and the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E., the king issued a decree that commanded the Jews, who had been exiled in 597 and 586, to return home and rebuild the Temple....Darius I reaffirmed the decree of Cyrus and ordered the rebuilding of the Temple to continue. The Temple was dedicated in 516 B.C.E....About fifty-eight years later, Artaxerxes I (465–424) sent Ezra, the priest and scribe of the law of the God of heaven, to Jerusalem. Within his first year Ezra led the people in a public confession of sin because of their intermarriage with foreigners and saw the creation of a commission that carried out the removal of the foreign wives and their children.

In 445 B.C.E. Artaxerxes I sent Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The order of the canonical texts suggests that Ezra came before Nehemiah.

Ralph W. Klein, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III, Ezra, Nehemiah*. Leander E. Keck senior editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 666.

Nehemiah also corrected abuses in the making of loans and the charging of interest and generously provided for others at his table without drawing on the taxes enjoyed by former governors (Neh 5:14-19).

Before Nehemiah could carry out the repopulation of Jerusalem, Ezra reappeared and read the law to the people, who resolved to study it and then celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. In a public ceremony, the people separated themselves from foreigners and confessed their sins and those of their parents. Next they entered a firm agreement to amend a number of activities with regard to mixed marriages.

Ralph W. Klein, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III, Ezra, Nehemiah*. Leander E. Keck senior editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 666.

According to Klein, NRSV and NEB interpret “these peoples of the land” in Ezra 10:3 as foreigners-namely, the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land. “The people of Israel and the priests and Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land whose abhorrent practices are like those of the Canaanites.” The “peoples of the land,” therefore, are those who are not considered to be full members of the community, perhaps referring to those who had not been in exile and those who had not been fully accepted into the Golah community for other reasons. The behavior of these non-members of the community was like that of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land; the accusation of “abominations” (cf. vv.11,14) may suggest that they worshiped other gods (cf. Neh. 13:26-27), practiced sexual immorality, or followed a detestable diet. The list of nations resembles nine other lists of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land (Gen. 15:19-20; Ex.

3:8, 17; 33:2; 34:11; Deut. 7:1; 20:17; Judg. 3:5; Neh. 9:8). The list in v. 1 shared with all the others the names of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebustites, and the Amorites.

Ralph W. Klein, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III, Ezra, Nehemiah*. Leander E. Keck senior editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 732-733.

While issues of religious identity and the danger of apostasy were the explicit cause of the divorces in Ezra 9-10, scholars suspect that there may have been other, more covert reasons for this controversy. Kenneth Hognlund notes that political factors may have played a role in the criticism of foreign marriages. If the purpose of the Persian's sending Ezra and Nehemiah was to enhance their control over Yehud and neighboring territories, then it was crucial to define who was part of the assembly of the exiles and who was not. Right of access to the land was not based on past land allotment systems, but the exiles were allowed to dwell in their homeland at the dispensation of the Persian Empire. If a province like Yehud was in a perilous condition, it would become important to know who could function in it and who could not, and the empire would take action to control issues of assimilation. Intermarriage under these circumstances might threaten the future of the Persian-authorized community in Yehud. The exiles might lose their land if they did not maintain themselves as a distinct community.

Ralph W. Klein, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III, Ezra, Nehemiah*. Leander E. Keck senior editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 746-747.

Harold C. Washington argues that women in post-exilic were able to own property and even pass it on to heirs (e.g., the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27 and the rights of women at Elephantine). Exogamous marriages could threaten encroachment on the land holdings of the congregation, since "foreign women and their children might claim land belonging to the temple collective. There was an interconnection of genealogical lineage, land tenure, and membership in the cult: Legal right to the land accrued to those who access to the cult, and having the appropriate genealogy assured one's right to membership in the cult. Judeans outside the temple community were classed together with the traditional enemies of Israel.

Regardless the reason, the policy to send foreign women and children who married to the Jews is making them homeless with their children. When they are sent back to their own countries without husbands and fathers, without anyone to support them, they will be thrown into devastating homelessness.

Ralph W. Klein, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III, Ezra, Nehemiah*. Leander E. Keck senior editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 747.