

Fear and foreigners

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The Old Testament book of Ezra tells of events when Jewish exiles in Babylon were permitted to return to Israel and begin rebuilding Jerusalem. Prophets had spoken of a day when exiles returned and Jerusalem became great again, surpassing the glory of David and Solomon. But it didn't work out quite that way. Jerusalem remained a shell of its former self, an insignificant, backwater town.

Naturally there were people who looked for something or someone to blame. Perhaps they weren't pure enough to please God, and some began to look with suspicion on those who had married "foreign wives." (In the companion book of Nehemiah, 13:1 cites Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and its ban on Moabites and Ammonites from the assembly of Yahweh.) Eventually Ezra orders the people, "Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." That likely would be a death sentence to many women and children, but God demands purity.

Interestingly, the Old Testament has another book that takes an entirely different point of view. The title character in the book of Ruth is a Moabite, and the great-grandmother of King David no less. If Ezra's rule had been enforced in her time, David might never have existed. The story of Ruth lifts up a Moabite woman as a paragon of virtue and faithfulness. She is a "foreign wife" like those Ezra banishes in the name of the purity God demands.

There is a good bit of worry and fear associated with foreigners in our day. Some are terrified of the threat posed by Syrian refugees, and quite a few governors have declared they want no refugees in their states. The issue is not religious purity, though some have proposed letting in only Christian refugees. But in both our day and Ezra's, the foreigner is viewed as a danger. And when people think they are in danger, they often act in ways they later regret. Whether Ezra later did so is unknown, but the book of Ruth and the teachings of Jesus certainly repudiate Ezra's actions.

In the New Testament epistle of 1 John, we find the famous line, "Whoever does not know love does not know God, for God is love." And just a few verses later it adds, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." My love certainly isn't perfect, and so I have my share of fears, but when my actions are driven primarily by such fears, it seems highly likely that I will be acting in ways contrary to those of the God who is love.

Like Ezra, I can always find a verse of scripture to justify my actions when I am afraid, but I'm pretty sure that means I'm reading my Bible incorrectly.

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