

**Sermon for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost,
November 11, 2018**

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 27: Ezra 10:1–17, 44b; 1 Corinthians 14:1–12; John 15:9–17

Yesterday afternoon I watched a movie that came out in August, *Crazy Rich Asians*. It was just serious enough and funny enough for me really to enjoy it. It was about family and about the prejudices, immaturities, and sins that can pass from generation to generation. It's on the edge of not working, but once I relaxed, I enjoyed it a lot.

If you've seen it, or see it, it reminded me of the great Bogart and Bergman movie *Casablanca*—but in a contemporary setting with a lot of moneyed elegance. Without spoiling the movie, I can say it's about who can marry whom—and that's an issue in the Hebrew Scriptures that we have before us tonight.

We heard from Ezra, chapter 10, verses 1 through 11. I decided the lectionary was right in omitting verses 12 through 43—we didn't need to hear the long lists of priests, Levites, and others—“more than a hundred offenders”¹—who had married foreign women.

In our Bible this is the end of the book of Ezra. The book of Nehemiah is next. They were at one time one book, it seems, and now there is no clear way to put them back together.²

¹ “Ezra,” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 684 n.20–44.

² Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, 667–68.

There's also a final verse after all of those names, verse 44. I added it because it told the greater story: "On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter; and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women, and they put the women away with their children."³

Let me note that in what is considered the canonical Hebrew text, there's nothing there about sending the children away.⁴ The Hebrew text—as edited many centuries ago?—is this: "Some had wives with whom they had sons"⁵—or children. The Hebrew word can mean both. But for Christians, the sending away of wives and children are a part of the canonical text.

Confusing to me are the notes in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. On the one hand, they state, "the Pentateuch does not include a law that demands dissolving mixed marriages."⁶ But the notes try to explain away the words near the beginning of this passage, "let it be done according to the law."⁷ There are "new circumstances."⁸ And I think this is a real stretch, "The conclusion . . . focuses rather on establishing boundaries based on the Torah without resorting to military force

³ Ezra 10:44. All biblical citations are from *The New Oxford Annotation New Revised Standard Bible with the Apocrypha*, 4th ed. (2010), unless noted otherwise.

⁴ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, eds. K. Elliger, W. Rudolph et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1976/77), 1430.

⁵ NRSV, 684 n.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 682 n.

⁷ Ezra 10:3b.

⁸ NRSV, 682 n.

(with emotional casualties that are not reported)”⁹—what does that mean?

Digression. It’s not clear to me that the writer of the introductory notes, for Ezra it was Professor Tamara Cohn Eskenazi of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, a Reform Jewish seminary, is also the author of the annotations. To me, it seems that the authors/editors of the notes want to excuse, more than to explain, the text.

We know that the separation of mothers and children from fathers did not start in the time of Ezra. Among the saddest stories in the Hebrew Scriptures are the stories of Abraham’s concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael, Abraham’s only child until the birth of Isaac by his wife Sarah. In the end, God did not require Abraham to kill his son Isaac in sacrifice.¹⁰ But God did demand that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. And when Abraham did this, he sent them away with only bread and one skin of water.¹¹

When I searched the web to find out Ishmael’s age when Isaac was born—he was probably 16—I discovered a lot of stuff that’s made up to smooth over the realities of Abraham’s life. The Chabad—Lubavitch—website explains, “But Ishmael had not grown up as his father had hoped. He was inclined towards many things Abraham considered wicked. Ishmael even prayed to idols when he believed himself unobserved. Sarah observed him and realized that he would have a bad influence upon the young Isaac. She

⁹ Ibid., 684 n.

¹⁰ Genesis 22:1–19.

¹¹ Genesis 21:9–21.

therefore implored Abraham to send Ishmael away.”¹² It doesn’t say any of that in Genesis.

Another kind of problem would be what one might call “ideological” or “theological avoidance.” Just one example. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ and professor emeritus at a leading Presbyterian seminary, in his commentary on Genesis simply skips over Sarah’s lack of compassion for her husband’s son, a child who was fathered because she gave her servant Hagar to her husband for the purpose of bearing a child¹³—uncomfortable for us, but not unbiblical.

Abraham, you might recall, on two different occasions pretends that his half-sister Sarah is not his wife—once to cross the border of Egypt, once to enter an area called Gerar.¹⁴ One wonders how salvation history might have unfolded if the Hebrew Scriptures, not to mention the New Testament, didn’t dance around issues like putting away a mother and child or owning other human beings as slaves.

Here are words from the last few verses of the book of Ruth, the Moabite woman, that is, the foreign woman, who would marry the Hebrew man Boaz in his and her former mother-in-law Naomi’s home of Bethlehem: “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she

¹² https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/246646/jewish/Isaac-Ishmael.htm, (accessed 11 November 2018).

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 150–62.

¹⁴ Genesis 12:10–13:1; 20:1–18.

bore a son . . . They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”¹⁵

No foreign women, no Jesus?

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁵ Ruth 4:13, 17b, c. RSV