

NO, EZRA 6 DOES NOT JUSTIFY REPARATIONS

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In his article "[Reparations are Biblical](#)," Thabiti Anyabwile argues there is no biblical basis for objecting to the state making payments to the descendants of slaves to compensate them for wrongs the state did to their ancestors prior to 1865 by having a legal system that enabled slavery. As he sees it, "Reparations are simply the biblical principle of restitution taught throughout Scripture applied to the specific history of slavery and the descendants of slaves in America." If that is correct, if the current demand for reparations is indeed a proper application of the biblical principle of restitution, then they are biblically justified. The truth, however, is that reparations are not a proper application of restitution.

The glaring differences between the current demand for reparations and the biblical principle of restitution is that in the former persons who did no wrong are compelled to pay for wrongs done by others and to pay persons to whom the wrongs were not done. As Anyabwile summarizes the issue:

So, as best I understand the objections raised by some Christians, a "biblical case" for reparations would not only have to make claim to restitution (an agreed-upon principle) but also demonstrate the fairness or justness of having later generations at the coercion of the state transfer payment from a group of people who did not commit the injustice to another group of people who did not suffer the injustice.

According to Anyabwile, the narrative of Ezra 6:6-12 demonstrates that these objections to the current demand for reparations are groundless. In that text, the Persian King Darius decreed that the cost of rebuilding the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was to be paid from the tribute being collected from the region (the province Beyond the River). Anyabwile claims this payment from the Persian treasury was reparations for the wrong done to the Jews by the Babylonians, and therefore the narrative proves that God endorses a government taxing innocent (in the relevant sense) people to compensate a group of their contemporaries for wrongs perpetrated against their ancestors in prior generations. He thinks this "proves that reparations in the case of African American descendants of slaves in the United States is no injustice at all and therefore is quite biblical." This is misguided.

The funds supplied for the rebuilding of the temple were not reparations. The payments were for the labor and material involved in the construction not to compensate the Jews for a prior wrong done to them by the Babylonians. The idea that the Persians would feel any obligation to right a wrong perpetrated by the enemy they had defeated is frankly absurd. Rather, providing for the rebuilding of the temple was a political strategy designed to win the loyalty of returned exiles and a religious move to appease a foreign god and secure prayers to him for the life of the Persian king and his sons (6:10). That is why the holy vessels that had been taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar were returned. That was part of reestablishing the cult so the returnees would be grateful and the foreign god could be petitioned optimally on the Persians' behalf. Notice how the later King Artaxerxes and his counselors freely offered silver and gold to

the God of Israel and provided whatever was required for the operation of his temple (up to a set amount) "lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons" (Ezra 7:15, 23).

Since Darius's decree had nothing to do with reparations, the narrative stands only for the proposition that it is not immoral for a government to contribute to a divinely directed work on behalf of God's people. It says nothing about the justness of making an innocent group of citizens pay another group for wrongs done to that group's distant ancestors simply because the innocent group of citizens shares racial characteristics with those who were predominantly responsible for the wrongs. Taking from one group to pay for wrongs they personally had nothing to do with, as is contemplated in the current demand for reparations, is contrary to the principle of personal culpability expressed in Ezek. 18:4-22 (see also, Deut. 24:16; 2 Ki. 14:6; 2 Chron. 25:4).

Moreover, the return from exile was a momentous event in salvation history, a special work of God on behalf of his people. Even if God had sanctioned in that instance taking from innocent people to pay the Jews for wrongs done to them in prior generations, it would not mean one could extrapolate that into a justification for taking from innocent non-African Americans to give to descendants of slaves. The moral justification in the former case could be tied to God's identification with Israel and the function of the payments in that context, e.g., demonstrating for Israel and the world that they were his special people and that he cares for and is committed to them.

And even if God had sanctioned in that instance taking from innocent people to pay the Jews for wrongs done to them in prior generations, it would not justify African American Christians carrying a grievance against their non-African American brothers and sisters over injustices perpetrated long before any of them were born. Maintaining historical grievances based on racial, national, ethnic, or religious identity denies the unity of the Spirit in Christ. Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans had plenty of history, not to mention the historical grievances between other nations and ethnic groups in the first-century Mediterranean world, but they all abandoned those grievances to live in the oneness of Christ.

So no, Ezra 6 does not prove that reparations in the case of African American descendants of slaves would be just in principle. That would not be restitution in the biblical sense but the punishment of innocent parties for the sins of others contrary to the biblical principle of personal culpability.