

1. Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel and Ezra (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: Jer. 25:11, 12; Dan. 9:1, 2; Ezra 4:1–7; Isa. 55:8, 9; Ezra 7:1–28, Ezra 1:2.

Quotes

- The Babylonian captivity did not bring the Jews to national repentance and so lead to national restoration. As the reading of Ezra will disclose, when Cyrus, King of Persia, gave permission to the captives to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, scarcely fifty thousand Jews availed themselves of the privilege, a considerable portion of whom were priests and Levites of the humbler and poorer class. *James M. Gray*
- The theme of the Book of Ezra is The Word of the Lord. There are ten direct references to God's Word in this little book: Ezra 1:1; 3:2; 6:14, 18; 7:6, 10, 14; 9:4; 10:3, 5. The place of the Word of God is seen in the total lives of these people: religious, social, business, and political. *J. Vernon McGee*
- The history of this book is the accomplishment of Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the return of the Jews out of Babylon. From its contents we especially learn, that every good work will meet with opposition from enemies, and be hurt by the misconduct of friends; but that God will make his cause to prevail, notwithstanding all obstacles and adversaries. The restoration of the Jews was an event of the highest consequence, tending to preserve religion in the world, and preparing the way for the appearance of the Great Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ. *Matthew Henry*
- In many ways, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was like our own. God's people had been in apostasy, which led to the Babylonian captivity. Some leaders had begun the work of restoring the people to God's service, but there were still many problems and the people continued to fall into sin. The task of Ezra and Nehemiah was to provide leadership to continue the restoration and to challenge the people to spiritual faithfulness. *David Pratte*

Questions

Why is it important to "make sense of history"? Why should we concern ourselves with these historical Biblical books? What do we learn about the character of God from the exile of the Jews in Babylon? How can we gain practical lessons for ourselves today from such history? How do we see the cosmic conflict working out in these Biblical accounts?

Bible summary

The exile in Babylon is to be limited to seventy years (Jer. 25:11, 12). Daniel understood from the prophecy of Jeremiah that the seventy years were ending (Dan. 9:1, 2). In Ezra 4:1–7 we see the enemies of the Jews frustrating the plans to rebuild by both subterfuge and direct opposition. God makes it clear he operates on a different level to human thinking (Isa. 55:8, 9). Ezra 7:1–28 records the permission to return granted by Artaxerxes. "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, who has given to me all the kingdoms of the earth, has given me the responsibility to build a Temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'" Ezra 1:2 FBV.

Comment

Personally, I love history. Looking back and seeing what happened and why, and trying to learn lessons, is something I see as very important. Yet not everybody sees history that way. This quarter we need to make sure history is truly relevant and has lessons for us today.

Though there are sections in Ezra and Nehemiah that are less that interesting (lists of names, temple equipment etc.) we need to understand the importance in the setting of people who had forgotten much of their past. In the same way as 1 and 2 Chronicles details land allotments so the returning exiles can rediscover their roots, we must see in Ezra-Nehemiah both a document of the time and one that contains timeless principles relating to our loving God.

The tragedy in this book (originally just one book, not two) is how few people of God took the opportunity to return. The majority chose to stay right where they were, content in their exile, having readjusted to their situation, and maybe also to the religion and culture of their captors. This says much to us today about how we too compromise our principles by adopting the values of respective cultures. The call to return, remember, came from God. Yet few responded, not willing to uproot themselves and trek across the desert back to the Promised Land. Many may have seen this as a definite disadvantage, thinking more about their comfort and prosperity than about following their God.

History is meant to be about learning lessons, though as the saying goes, the main lesson is that people don't learn from history! We tend to see the Babylonian exile as God's retributive punishment on a stubborn and rebellious people, but we must remember that this only came after a long period of appeals and more limited crises, and that this was an exile limited in time. God wanted his people to learn lessons about listening to him and trusting in him. He wasn't giving up on his people, he just had to get their attention. The shame of being conquered by a pagan nation, the loss of the land God had given them, the sense that they had been abandoned, was meant to bring them to their senses. They were supposed to come back to him, and he would bless them as they returned to the land he was giving them once again. His promise to go with them, to be with them in all they did, to help them rebuild should have given them courage to deal with whatever the opposition they faced. But their confidence was shaken, and God had to lead them along step-by-step.

The assurance for us today is that "there's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin," as the song goes. The story of Ezra-Nehemiah is God saying he hasn't given up on us. Whatever painful experience we have had to go through, God can bring us back. What a wonderful description of the loving character of God who wants nothing but the very best for us!

Ellen White comments

Ezra's faith that God would do a mighty work for His people, led him to tell Artaxerxes of his desire to return to Jerusalem to revive an interest in the study of God's word and to assist his brethren in restoring the holy city. As Ezra declared his perfect trust in the God of Israel as one abundantly able to protect and care for His people, the king was deeply impressed..... Thus again the children of the dispersion were given opportunity to return to the land with the possession of which were linked the promises to the house of Israel. . . . {CC 261.3}

About seventy years after the return of the first company of exiles under Zerubbabel and Joshua, Artaxerxes Longimanus came to the throne of Medo-Persia... His reign saw the return of a company of Jews under Ezra, the completion of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah and his associates, the reorganization of the temple services, and the great religious reformations instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah. During his long rule he often showed favor to God's people, and in his trusted and well-beloved Jewish friends, Ezra and Nehemiah, he recognized men of God's appointment, raised up for a special work. {PK 607.1}