

EZRA & NEHEMIAH

INTRODUCTION

[Following is the introduction to both Ezra and Nehemiah, for they are parts of one whole.]

3. Historical Setting. Aside from Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah are the only historical books of the postexilic period, and are of great importance for a reconstruction of the history of postexilic Jewry. However, they do not record the history of the people of God in unbroken sequence for the period covered by the two books, but only certain parts of it. There are large gaps for which little information is available.

Ezra records, first of all, the return of the Jews from exile under the guidance of Zerubbabel, the reorganization of the sacrificial service, and the beginning of the rebuilding of the Temple. All these events took place within about two years, early in the reign of Cyrus. During the next 13 years the work progressed slowly against opposition. Then appears an account of the resumption of the building of the Temple and its completion and dedication under Darius I. Of the next nearly 60 years Ezra leaves no record. Then, in 457 B.C., Ezra was sent back to Judea by King Artaxerxes, with far-reaching authority to reorganize the nation's administration according to Mosaic law. He tells of his return and some of his reforms, but again breaks the thread of continuity for more than ten years, when Nehemiah appears on the scene of action as governor, and reports his activities in the book which bears his name.

All the events described in Ezra and Nehemiah took place during the first half of the period of the Persian Empire, which lasted from 539 B.C., when Babylon fell to the victorious forces of Cyrus, until, with the death of Darius III in 331 B.C., the empire ceased to exist and was succeeded by that of Alexander the Great. The history of postexilic Jewry begins "in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia" (Ezra 1:1). The Persian Empire stretched from the desert wastes of Iran in the east to the coast of Asia Minor in the west, and from the Armenian highlands in the north to the border of Egypt in the south. Cyrus, its founder, was a prudent and humane monarch. In harmony with his policy of appeasing nations subjugated by Babylon, he resettled them in their old homes and restored their places of worship. In accord with this generous policy, the Jews were allowed to return to their old homeland and rebuild their Temple. For the most part, the kings of Persia attempted to rule their empire with equity and consideration. Their officials were admonished to practice honesty and to work in the interests of the peoples whom they governed. The monotheistic religion of Zoroaster, the state religion at least from Darius I on, stood on a much higher level than that of the polytheistic and idolatrous predecessors of the Persians, the people of Babylonia.

When Cyrus took Babylon he became acquainted with the aged Daniel, trusted counselor of the great Nebuchadnezzar of a former era, and learned to appreciate his advice. Through Daniel, Cyrus must have become acquainted with Isaiah's prophecies concerning him and his appointed role in behalf of God's people (Isa. 44:21 to 45:13), and granted their restoration (PK 557). The great work of pacifying his far-flung empire in its years of infancy required the king's full attention. He lost his life in a campaign against unruly eastern tribes after a reign of about nine years, counted from the fall of Babylon.

Returning to Judea, the Jews found hostile neighbors, and were continually harassed by the Samaritans, a people of mixed racial and religious origins. Because Cyrus was busy unifying his far-flung empire, these enemies succeeded in hindering the Jews and causing them untold trouble that slowed the work of rebuilding the Temple.

Cyrus' eldest son, Cambyses, reigned for less than eight years. His greatest achievement was the conquest of Egypt. That he was favorably disposed toward the Jews is known from a Jewish document found in Egypt, but we have no evidence that he actively assisted the Jews in rebuilding their Temple.

The short reign of the false Smerdis proved a great setback for the Jews. Under this king, described by Darius as a destroyer of temples, the work at Jerusalem was stopped. The stoppage may have been partly due to Samaritan enemies, for new foundations had to be laid as soon as stable conditions under the strong government of Darius I permitted resumption of the work. The era of Darius the Great was marked by prosperity and order. The Jews, like other nations, benefited from his wise and strong rule. Under the spiritual leadership of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they finished the Temple and dedicated it in the sixth regnal year of Darius, 515 B.C.

An era of unrest began, however, when late in his reign Darius decided to invade Greece. From that time on the empire experienced repeated reverses in Greece, Egypt, and elsewhere that disturbed the internal peace and stability of the empire. The next two kings, Xerxes and Artaxerxes I, were weaklings, opportunists, and unstable in character, and owed their throne to the strong hand of powerful counselors. Disastrous campaigns in Greece and rebellions in Egypt and other parts of the empire caused great unrest and led to vacillating domestic and foreign policies.

It was during a serious rebellion in Egypt (463–454 B.C.) that Ezra received major concessions for the Jews, whose good will Artaxerxes needed in this crucial period, since Judea lay athwart the highway to Egypt. Later, when the satrapy to which Judea belonged rebelled (after 450 B.C.), Artaxerxes apparently supported the supposedly loyal Samaritans under the erroneous assumption and fear that the Jews might join the rebellion. Accordingly Artaxerxes authorized the Samaritans to halt the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, which had been in progress for some time. When order in the satrapy was restored, Nehemiah, a trusted Jewish court official, succeeded in obtaining a royal appointment as governor of Judea, and completed the rebuilding of the city wall. This he did under continuing threats of violence.

He served as governor for two terms, and proved to be an able organizer and religious leader. He laid a comparatively solid political, social, and moral foundation that proved of great value in the turbulent times that followed.

4. Theme. Ezra and Nehemiah are historical source books which record the outworking of the divine plan in the restoration of the Jews, whereby they were afforded another opportunity to cooperate with the eternal purposes and prove their right to exist as a nation. This record shows, furthermore, how the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah were fulfilled, and provides invaluable source material by which other prophecies, those of Dan. 8 and 9, can securely be anchored to the facts of history.

Ezra and Nehemiah illustrate, by a series of instructive examples, how a few people can do great things for God when led by God-fearing, sincere, unselfish, but fearless and determined leaders. These books contain much that edifies and that strengthens faith in the unfailing leadership of God.

HOSEA

INTRODUCTION

4. Theme. The dominant theme of the book of Hosea is the love of God for His erring children. The experiences through which the prophet passed in his own family life, and the feelings of his own heart toward his faithless wife, gave him a glimpse into the boundless depths of the Father's love for His people.

In the light of this divine love the terrible wickedness of the northern kingdom appears even blacker, and Hosea in no way excuses the people for their conduct. The prophet also paints in darkest hues the dreadful retributions that will fall upon Israel if they persist in their evil ways. These warnings are not threats, but are statements of fact, showing that punishment inevitably follows sin. However, through all his writing Hosea depicts the yearning love of God for His wayward people. The book is filled with appeals to repentance and messages of hope to those who will turn again to their loving Father.

AMOS

INTRODUCTION

4. Theme. The chief purpose of Amos was to call the attention of God's people to their sins, and if possible to bring them to repentance. As the spirit of Paul was stirred at Athens when he saw how fully the city was given to idolatry, so Amos must have been stirred by the luxury and the sins he so vividly describes in detail. He rebuked the sins that sprang from material prosperity, the extravagances, the revelries, the debauchery of the rich, who were able to do this by oppressing the poor and by perverting judgment, through bribery and extortion. Amos gives more attention to the details and circumstances of iniquity than does Hosea. He is everywhere graphic, revealing transgression in the events of the daily life of the people. No evil practice seems to have escaped his notice. He counted it his duty to warn Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations of the divine judgments that were sure to come upon them if they persisted in iniquity. However, he closes his book with a glorious picture of the ultimate triumph of righteousness over iniquity.

JONAH

INTRODUCTION

4. Theme. The book of Jonah is the only one of the twelve so-called Minor Prophets that is strictly narrative in form. It is an account of Jonah's mission to the city of Nineveh to announce its speedy destruction because of its sins. The prophet entertains misgivings and perplexities as to his carrying out the charge of God to go to Nineveh. The very thought of journeying to this great metropolis, the difficulties and seeming impossibilities of the task, made him shrink from undertaking the divine commission and question its wisdom. Failing to rise to that strong faith that should have led him to realize that with the divine command came the divine power to accomplish it, Jonah sank into discouragement, dread, and despair (see PK 266). Knowing the loving-kindness and long-suffering of God. Jonah was also afraid that if he delivered the divine message and the heathen accepted it, the threatening doom he pronounced upon them would not come to pass. This would be a deep humiliation to him, as it thus turned out to be, and this he could not endure (ch. 4:1, 2). He at first disobeyed, but through a series of events was led to carry out the commission. The inhabitants of Nineveh repented, and for a time turned from their sins. Jonah was angry, but God justified His gracious dealings.

Among the lessons taught by Jonah's prophecy is the truth that God's grace brings salvation to all (Titus 2:11), that it was indeed not confined to the Jews, but was also to be revealed among the heathen. God has "also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). Like Peter (Acts 10), Jonah came to realize reluctantly that God was willing to receive those of every nation who turned to Him. By referring to "the men of Nineveh" who responded to Jonah's call to repentance, Jesus condemned the pharisaical and prideful Jews of His day (see Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32) and all others who, in their religious complacency and false sense of soul security, deceive themselves into thinking that they are the favored people of God, and thus assured of salvation.

Jesus used the experience of Jonah in the sea as an illustration of His death and resurrection (Matt. 12:39, 40). His reference to the book of Jonah establishes the veracity of the book.

Expositors of the book of Jonah have followed two main lines of interpretation: (1) the historical, and (2) the allegorical. The second method has been adopted by those who deny the possibility of the miraculous elements in the book. They term the book variously a legend, a myth, a parable, or an allegory. For one who believes in miracles the second method of interpretation is both unnecessary and pointless.

MICAH

INTRODUCTION

4. Theme. Two main themes predominate: (1) the condemnation of the sins of the people and the consequent chastisement in captivity, and (2) the deliverance of Israel and the glory and gladness of the Messianic kingdom. Throughout the book of Micah threatening and promise, judgment and mercy, alternate.

The prophecies of Micah and Isaiah have much in common. Inasmuch as the two prophets were contemporaries, and so had to deal with the same conditions and subjects, we can readily understand why their words and messages were so often similar.

Though in the opening words of his book Micah tells us what “he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem,” his prophecy deals more with Judah than with Israel. Though the ten tribes had cut themselves off from Judah and from Jerusalem, the center of the worship of the Lord, they were still God’s people, and God was seeking to restore their allegiance to Him.