

a lesson:

ON THE BOOK OF EZRA

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1/28/2007 AD

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOKS OF EZRA & NEHEMIAH

EZRA, coupled with NEHEMIAH, are The Old Testament Books of the miraculous return of the remnant of The Jews to The Promised Land from their seventy years of Babylonian captivity. EZRA and NEHEMIAH, as Longman and Dillard thus observe, "...record the last events of The Old Testament period. They encompass the time from the immediate postexilic times [of The Jews in Babylon to] ... the decree of Cyrus [in] 539 BC..., [the ministry of Ezra] through the work of Nehemiah (end of the fifth Century BC)." ¹ These two Books therefore mark the close of The historical Old Testament canon.

II. ON THE UNITY OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

As to the unity of The Books, Howard reports that "...EZRA and NEHEMIAH were considered to be one Book... appear[ing] as one in all Hebrew manuscripts until the fifteenth century AD." ² It is believed that they were divided into two separate Books in the early Christian era, possibly first by "Origin (185-253 AD) [who] seems to have been the first to distinguish between the two [Books], and Jerome, in the fourth century [AD], divided them into two Books in his Latin translation, the Vulgate." ³ EZRA and NEHEMIAH therefore should be studied together as one Book.

Howard observes that EZRA may be divided into two parts: "The early chapters of EZRA present the glorious and happy return from Babylonian Exile and the excitement of the rebuilding of The Temple. Later, we read of another, equally happy return under Ezra, who held a commission from the Persian king to teach The Law." NEHEMIAH in contrast records "...Nehemiah[‘s] return a few years later with an administrative commission to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. [NEHEMIAH ends victoriously in that] the walls were rebuilt, The Law was read, and joyful celebrations were held." ⁴

The unity of The two Books is further appreciated when we realize that, as Wycliffe observes, "Ezra lived to the time of Nehemiah... [and] had plenty of time to finish his Book [or that portion which we now call EZRA] between April of 456 BC,

¹ 1, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, introductory comments, paragraph 2, page 179.

² 2, Howard, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Unity, paragraph 1, page 275.

³ 2, Howard, Ibid, paragraph 2, page 275.

⁴ 2, Howard, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, introductory comments, paragraph 1, page 273.

when the events of EZRA 10:17-44 took place, and the summer of 444 BC, when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem...”⁵ However, because of the amount of observations called for, we will consider EZRA and NEHEMIAH separately.

III ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

As to the authorship of these Books, Jewish tradition holds that Ezra himself was the author.⁶ And Dillard and Longman note that while “...Ezra speaks in the first person in EZRA 8-10,” this does not necessarily prove his authorship.⁷ Until recently, “...most scholars believed that EZRA-NEHEMIAH was written by the Chronicler,” the author of CHRONICLES.⁸ But although Bible scholars can not agree on the identity of the human author, there is evidence that the final redactor employed several major and minor sources. And the significant use of the first person in both Books suggests that we may attribute much of the text therein to Ezra and Nehemiah respectively. Dillard and Longman, citing Howard, offer this list: 1) Of major sources, there is a historical review (EZRA 1-6); Ezra’s Memoirs (EZRA 7-10 and NEHEMIAH 8-10); Nehemiah’s Memoirs (NEHEMIAH 1-7 and 11-13). 2) Of minor sources, there are numerous lists and letters employed throughout The Books.⁹

IV. ON THE DATING AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EZRA

Howard offers that traditional dating of EZRA and NEHEMIAH place the events of the two Books as between 538 BC to 433 BC.¹⁰ Howard states that, “...according to the internal Biblical data, Ezra’s ministry extended at least thirteen years, spanning the period 458-445 BC, whereas Nehemiah’s was later, extending at least twelve years, 445-433 BC.”¹¹ Within EZRA we may identify several major markers in time, of which we shall employ the following: 1) King Cyrus’ decree; 2) the rebuilding and rededication

⁵ 3, Wycliffe, EZRA, Introduction, Date and Authorship, paragraph 2, page 423.

⁶ 1, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Authorship, Composition and Date, page 180. The source of this Jewish tradition is reported as arising from “Baba’ Bathra 15a.

⁷ 1, Dillard and Longman, Ibid., page 180.

⁸ 1, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Connection With CHRONICLES, paragraph 1, page 181.

⁹ 1, Dillard and Longman, Sources, cites Howard (pages 278-279), list of “Major Sources” and “Minor Sources,” page 181.

¹⁰ 2, Howard, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Date of The Events, Traditional Dating, from paragraph 1 & 3, page 280.

¹¹ 2, Howard, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Date of The Events, paragraph 3, page 280.

of The Altar of The Temple in Jerusalem; 3) the completion of the rebuilding of The Temple itself; 4) the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem.

So after enduring 70 years of captivity in Babylonian exile, the Jewish people rejoiced with many other subjugated races and nations held in bondage by Babylon. EZRA opens with the first year of King Cyrus of Persia in 538 BC, who had just overthrown by military force the Babylonian regime. EZRA proper spans the rule of three sympathetic and actively supportive Persian Kings, all of whom by Divine Providence were used of The Almighty to fulfill His prophetic recreation of Israel in The Promised Land with a faithful remnant of The Jews: 1) King Cyrus (538-530 BC); 2) King Darius I (521-486 BC); 3) King Artaxerxes I (464-423 BC).¹²

V. ON THE CONTENT OF EZRA

As to the content of This Book, Matthew Henry divides EZRA into four sections: "I. Of the Jews' return out of their captivity, ch. i., ii.; II. Of the building of the temple, the opposition it met with, and yet the perfecting of it at last, ch. iii.-vi.; III. Of Ezra's coming to Jerusalem, ch. vii., viii.; IV. Of the good service he did there, in obliging those that had married strange wives to put them away, ch. ix., x."¹³ Scofield offers a twofold division of EZRA: "I. From the decree of Cyrus to the dedication of The restored temple, 1:1-6:22. II. The ministry of Ezra, 7:1-10:44."¹⁴

VI. ON THE REMARKABLE OPENING EVENTS OF EZRA

As Wilson observes, "When the people of Judah eventually were carried into captivity by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, the prophet Jeremiah wrote them... [in JEREMIAH 29], stating that after seventy years the people would return and settle again in their own Land [in Palestine]."¹⁵ EZRA-NEHEMIAH documents the literal fulfillment of this prophesy in the most stunning ways! EZRA 1:1-2 opens with the stunning statement that "...in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of The LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, The LORD stirred up the spirit of

¹² 3, Wycliffe, EZRA, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 1- 2, page 423.

¹³ 4, Matthew Henry, EZRA, Introduction

¹⁴ 5, Scofield, EZRA, introductory comments, paragraph 2, page 529.

¹⁵ 6, Wilson, The Exile in Babylon, paragraph 1, page 95.

Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD GOD of Heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.”¹⁶ So first we have this pagan king confessing to GOD and all the world that he realizes that The LORD is, and that all his earthly glory and power as King of Persia and Babylon is by the hand of GOD!

Second, we have this pagan king declaring that GOD had commanded him to see to it that The Temple of JEHOVAH in Jerusalem be rebuilt. This remarkable saga continues in EZRA 1:3-4, “Who is there among you of all his people? his GOD be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of The LORD GOD of Israel, (He is The GOD,) which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for The House of GOD that is in Jerusalem.”¹⁷

Third, note the remarkable confession of King Cyrus, that “The LORD GOD of Israel... He is The GOD! And fourth we have this same pagan king, not only releasing the Jews from their captivity, but directing them to fulfill GOD’s directive which he had received. And fifth we see this same pagan king mobilizing the resources of his empire to assist the Jews in this Divinely appointed mission!

To these events we must also note EZRA 1:7, “Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods!”¹⁸ Here is this pagan King Cyrus - struck by the Spirit of The Living GOD - piously undoing the sinful affront which King Nebuchadnezzar had done to the honour of The LORD 70 years prior when he had conquered Jerusalem as an instrument of Divine wrath!

VII. ON THREE LESSONS FROM EZRA 3:10-11

In EZRA 3:10-11, we read of the great rejoicing at the beginning of restoration of GOD’s House in Jerusalem by the people: “And when the builders laid the foundation of

¹⁶ 7, KJV, EZRA 1:1-2.

¹⁷ 7, KJV, EZRA 1:3-4.

¹⁸ 7, KJV, EZRA 1:7.

the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.”¹⁹ Here we may discern three distinct lessons: First, that we should ever give thanks to GOD. Second, that GOD’s mercy is ever faithful. Third, that The Church shall ever prevail.

VIII. THE FIRST LESSON - THAT WE SHOULD EVER GIVE THANKS TO GOD!

Matthew Henry here makes three observations. First, he observes, “How GOD was praised at the laying of the foundation of The Temple (v. 10, 11); the priests with the trumpets appointed by Moses, and the Levites with the cymbals appointed by David, made up a concert of music, not to please the ear, but to assist the singing of that everlasting hymn which will never be out of date, and to which our tongues should never be out of tune...”²⁰ That song should forever be on the lips of the redeemed of The Lord as in PSALM 136:1, “O give thanks unto The LORD; for He is good: for His mercy endureth for ever.”²¹

How and when does the faithful Christian man raise his voice in thanks unto The LORD for His never ending mercy at The Cross of CHRIST? Saint Clement of Alexandria answers, “We are commanded to reverence and to honor the same One, being persuaded that He is [The] Word [Incarnate]... We do not do this just on special days... [but] continually in our whole life, and in every way... For that reason, not [only] in a specified place, or selected Temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his whole life, the spiritual man honors GOD. He does this in every place – even if he is alone by himself. He does this wherever he has with him any of those brethren who have exercised the same faith!”²²

¹⁹ 7, KJV, EZRA 3:10-11.

²⁰ 4, Matthew Henry, EZRA 3:8-13, The Foundation of The Temple Laid - B.C. 535, IV.

²¹ 7, KJV, PSALM 136:1.

²² 8, Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs, entry for “Worship, Christian,,” under I. Principles of Worship, 2nd entry for Clement of Rome, page 699.

Our lives then are to be a continual giving of thanks to The Almighty wherever we may find ourselves and all the days of our lives that He gives us the breath of life! Ezra and the people rejoiced with gladness at the laying of the cornerstone for the rebuilding of The Temple of GOD. Are not we who are saved in CHRIST now The Temple of The Lord? For it is declared by Saint Paul in I CORINTHIANS 3:16, “Know ye not that ye are The Temple of GOD, and that The Spirit of GOD dwelleth in you?”²³

If our Old Testament brethren so rejoiced at the rebuilding and rededication of GOD’s physical Temple built by human hands with physical stones, should not we whose lives and souls are secured under The New Testament Covenant of CHRIST rejoice even more? For now The Presence of The LORD dwells not only among us His people, but within us His people! Now The Temple of GOD is rebuilt and rededicated by spiritual hands with spiritual stones!

IX. THE SECOND LESSON - THAT GOD’S MERCY IS EVER FAITHFUL!

Second, Matthew Henry offers this: “Let all the streams of mercy be traced up to the fountain. Whatever our condition is, how many soever our griefs and fears, let it be owned that God is good; and, whatever fails, that his mercy fails not. Let this be sung with application, as here;”²⁴ This is the generational covenant mercy of The LORD assured to via Moses in The Ten Commandments in EXODUS 20:5-6, “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to... [idols], nor serve them: for I the LORD thy GOD am a jealous GOD, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My Commandments!”²⁵ If we turn to The Father through His Son and earnestly repenting of our sins, though His chastisement may last up to three or four generations, His mercy is extended upon the faithful unto thousands of generations!

John Calvin observes that for the righteous “...that the rewards for virtues are stored up with Him, and that the man who obeys His Commandments does not do so in vain.” But for the wicked, Calvin adds, “Conversely, He proclaims that unrighteousness is not only hateful to Him, but will not escape punishment because He himself will

²³ 7, KJV, I CORINTHIANS 3:16.

²⁴ 4, Matthew Henry, EZRA 3:8-13, The Foundation of The Temple Laid - B.C. 535, IV.

²⁵ 7, KJV, EXODUS 20:5-6.

avenge contempt of his majesty.” Therefore, as Calvin says, “...to urge us on in every way, he promises both blessings in the present life and everlasting blessedness to those who obediently keep His Commandments. He threatens the transgressors no less with present calamities than with the punishment of eternal death... [For] Wherever GOD’s benevolence or wrath is mentioned, under the former is contained eternal life, under the latter eternal perdition!”²⁶

It is this great benevolent mercy of The Father which The Son bestows upon all those whom The Gospels record called out to Him for healing, restoration, peace and life. And according to their faith, CHRIST in His great love, bestowed Divine mercy upon them. So when the two blind men cried out to The Lord in MATTHEW 9:27, “...Thou Son of David, have mercy on us,” how did CHRIST respond?²⁷ In His great great mercy, He declared in MATTHEW 9:28, “...Believe ye that I am able to do this? They said unto him, Yea, Lord!”²⁸ For then The Messiah bestowed healing upon them, and as MATTHEW 9:30 records, “And their eyes were opened...!”²⁹ Shall not we who are saved by the mercy of The son of GOD not also call out, that we may also see and give thanks?

So also when two other blind men cried to The Lord as in MATTHEW 20:30, “...Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David,” again what was the end of the matter?³⁰ MATTHEW 20:34 tells us that “...JESUS had compassion on them, and touched their eyes: and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him!”³¹ Again The Almighty stretched forth His arm of mercy and healed these men who cried out to Him for deliverance and healing! Note here these healed sinners - by the mercy of CHRIST – in their faith received the healing of CHRIST, but also then “followed Him! Can we who are saved by the mercy of The Lord’s very Body and Blood do no less?

And when we find the a certain sinner woman heard that The Lord was at the house of a Pharisee, she came before Him in humble penitent sorrow for her sins. She anointed CHRIST’s head with her precious oil and wiped His feet with her tears with the

²⁶ 9, John Calvin’s Institutes, Book II, Chapter VIII, 4. Promises and Threats, page 370.

²⁷ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 9:27.

²⁸ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 9:28.

²⁹ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 9:30.

³⁰ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 20:30.

³¹ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 20:34.

glory of her womanhood, her very hair. Thus The Son of GOD bestowed His Divine mercy upon this woman with These Words as recorded in LUKE 7:48-50, "...Thy sins are forgiven... And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."³² So should our joy be for CHRIST's ever faithful mercy to us His saints!

X. THE THIRD LESSON, THAT THE CHURCH SHALL EVER PREVAIL!

Third, Matthew Henry notes that GOD is faithful in that, "not only [does] His mercy endures for ever, but it endures for ever towards Israel, Israel when captives in a strange land and strangers in their own land. However it be, yet 'God is good to Israel...' [even to such as are of a clean heart – PSALM 73:1³³], good to us. Let the reviving of The Church's interests, when they seemed dead, be ascribed to the continuance of GOD's mercy for ever, for therefore The Church continues."³⁴ For though the storms of the world, the flesh and the devil may rage against The Lord's Church and we His saints, yet The Church shall prevail!

So when Saint Peter confessed to JESUS CHRIST in MATTHEW 16:16, "...Thou art The CHRIST, The Son of The living GOD," we find that He Who gave Himself to redeem our lives and souls with His precious Body and Blood reveals the foundation of New Testament Israel, which is His Church!³⁵ For The Lord declares next in MATTHEW 16:18, "...That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!"³⁶ And who is The Church, but the communion of all those who earnestly confess and believe that JESUS CHRIST is Lord?

Saint Paul informs us plainly in I CORINTHIANS 12:27, "Now ye are The Body of CHRIST, and members in particular!"³⁷ We are the Saints of GOD in CHRIST, each of part of His Church. And though we His Body on earth are buffeted by the world, the flesh and the devil, even the very gates of hell shall not prevail against our place in The Saviour's Body, which is our salvation and eternal communion with Him in Heaven!

³² 7, KJV, LUKE 7:48-50.

³³ 7, KJV, PSALM 73:1.

³⁴ 4, Matthew Henry, EZRA 3:8-13, The Foundation of The Temple Laid - B.C. 535, IV.

³⁵ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 16:16.

³⁶ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 16:18.

³⁷ 7, KJV, I CORINTHIANS 12:

Saint Irenaeus echoes These Words when he declares, “The Church is the salt of the earth. It has been left behind within the confines of the earth, and it is subject to human suffering. And even though entire members are often taken away from it, the pillar of salt endures...”³⁸ Our Lord teaches us in The Sermon on The Mount that it is our faith as part of The Church on earth that shines as the light of true faith into this dark world. That light of faith, though evil may attempt to extinguish our testimony, can not overcome. For we read in MATTHEW 5:13-14, “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.”³⁹

XI. IN CONCLUSION

The return of The Jewish remnant to The Promised Land entered upon in EZRA from here is most remarkable, in that it is an exact fulfillment of the prophesy of Jeremiah, to whom it was revealed in JEREMIAH 29:10, “For thus saith The LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.”⁴⁰ This was GOD’s revelation of encouragement and promise of restoration to the newly captive Jewish remnant in Babylon which Jeremiah sent to them from Jerusalem as they entered that terrible and yet purifying bondage in that alien heathen land.

And so it is not surprising that The Book of EZRA 1:1 should open with the realization that GOD was bringing forth that which He had purposed for His people’s restoration in The Promised Land: “...that the word of The LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia...”⁴¹ Such is the great hand of Divine Providence in the fulfillment of His prophetic intentions throughout human history! In The Name of The Father, and of The Son, and of The Holy Spirit, AMEN!

³⁸ 8, Dictionary of Early Christian Belief, entry for “Church, The,” 6th entry for Irenaeus, page 146-147.

³⁹ 7, KJV, MATTHEW 5:13-14.27.

⁴⁰ 7, KJV, JEREMIAH 29:10.

⁴¹ 7, KJV, EZRA 1:1.

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