

a lesson:

ON THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

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I. ON THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF NEHEMIAH

Continuing on from EZRA into NEHEMIAH, we find that the first wave of returning remnant of The Jews experienced difficulties, false accusations and even violent opposition to their rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and gates. NEHEMIAH 1:3 records what was reported to Nehemiah, "...The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire."¹

But GOD had well placed next Nehemiah for His purposes. Nehemiah was in fact an intimate at the royal Persian court as the trusted cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I. This particular King was himself the son of the Persian King Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who in fact had married the Jewish Esther to be his new queen.²

Wycliffe notes further that "...the Feast of Purim (ESTHER 9:20-32) was instituted on March 8, 473 BC, only eight years before Artaxerxes I became king." And it was in this same year that Ezra led his expedition to Jerusalem with the full blessings and authority of this same King Artaxerxes I.³ Such are the precisely astounding workings of GOD's Providence for His purposes!

II. ON THE PURPOSE OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

As to the purpose of The Books, Howard observes that "...Because of the trauma of the [Babylonian] Exile – during which there was no Temple nor sacrifices, and the very existence of GOD's people was in question – the unity and purity of GOD's people is of major concern in these Books [of EZRA and NEHEMIAH]." Therefore these two Books were written to show and assure the remnant of GOD's people "that GOD was still faithful and gracious to His people..."⁴

The message of EZRA-NEHEMIAH is that, in spite of The Covenant Nation's fall to foreign pagan Gentile oppressors because of their idolatry and apostasy, The LORD in His great mercy both preserved the exiles in Babylon, then – as He had

¹ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 1:3.

² 2, Wycliffe, NEHEMIAH, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 1, page 435.

³ 2, Wycliffe, NEHEMIAH, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 2, page 435.

⁴ 3, Howard, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Purpose, page 274.

promised through the prophet Jeremiah – brought a faithful remnant of The Jews back to The Promised Land and recreated them there under His loving Providence!

III. ON THE CONTENT OF NEHEMIAH

Matthew Henry offers this division of the contents of NEHEMIAH: “I. Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem and the commission he obtained from the king to go thither, ch. i., ii. II. His building the wall of Jerusalem notwithstanding the opposition he met with, ch. iii., iv. III. His redressing the grievances of the people, ch. v. IV. His finishing the wall, ch. vi. V. The account he took of the people, ch. vii. VI. The religious solemnities of reading the law, fasting, and praying, and renewing their covenants, to which he called the people (ch. viii.-x.). VII. The care he took for the replenishing of the holy city and the settling of the holy tribe, ch. xi., xii. VIII. His zeal in reforming various abuses, ch. xiii.”⁵ For NEHEMIAH, Scofield offers eight divisions: “I. The journey to Jerusalem [of Nehemiah], 1:1-2,20. II. The building of the wall, 3:1-6,19. III. The census, 7:1-73. IV. The revival, 8:1-11,36. V. The census of the Priests and Levites, 12:1-26. VI. Dedication of the wall, 12:27-43. VII. Restoration of The Temple worship, 12:44-47. VIII. The legal order restored, 13:1-31.”⁶

Dillard and Longman quotes Eskenazi as providing an outline of EZRA-NEHEMIAH as one unit which they feel does great justice to “the story like of The Book,” and offers a synchronization of events between EZRA and NEHEMIAH: “I. The goal initiated: Cyrus’s decree to build the House of GOD (EZRA 1;1-4). II. The community builds The House of GOD (EZRA 1:5-NEHEMIAH 7:22): A. Introduction: the people prepare to return to The Land (EZRA 1:1-4); B. The community returns and rebuilds Altar and Temple in the midst of opposition (EZRA 1:7-6:22); C. Ezra and the people of GOD return to The Land to build a community in the midst of conflict surrounding intermarriage (EZRA 7:1-10:44); D. Nehemiah returns to The Land in order to rebuild the city wall in spite of opposition (NEHEMIAH 1:1-7:5); E. Closure: the list of returnees (NEHEMIAH 7:6-7:72, which reiterates EZRA 2 and binds the whole

⁵ 4, Matthew Henry, NEHEMIAH, introduction.

⁶ 5, Scofield, NEHEMIAH, introductory comments, paragraph 1, page 541.

together). III. The goal reached: “the community celebrates the completion of The House of GOD according to Torah” (NEHEMIAH 7:73-13:31).”⁷

IV. ON THE DATING OF NEHEMIAH

Scofield offers that “Fourteen years after the return of Ezra to Jerusalem, Nehemiah led up a company (BC 444) and restored the walls and the civil authority.”⁸ In NEHEMIAH we might identify several key markers: 1) Nehemiah’s arrival in Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the walls of the city; 2) the public reading and explanation of The Book of The Law of Moses to the people; 3) Nehemiah’s visit back to Babylon and return to Jerusalem.

A first major marker is Nehemiah’s arrival in Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the walls of the city. In NEHEMIAH 1:2 it is reported to Nehemiah that the Jews in Jerusalem were “...in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.”⁹ NEHEMIAH 2:1 records that “...in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king...,” Nehemiah put his distress for Jerusalem before the Persian king and was soon sent off by royal decree to survey the state of affairs there.¹⁰

NEHEMIAH 7:1-2 records that at last, “...it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors... [of Jerusalem].”¹¹ NEHEMIAH 5:14 records Nehemiah’s service as royally appointed Governor of Judah: “Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years...”¹² Therefore Dillard and Longman conclude “...that is reasonable to place Nehemiah’s work during the reign of Artaxerxes I. Thus the description of his work begins in 445 BC. His first term of office [as royally appointed governor of Judah] was twelve years (NEHEMIAH 5:14).”¹³

⁷ 6, Dillard and Longman, Structure, paragraph 2 and outline, page 185.

⁸ 5, Scofield, NEHEMIAH, introductory comments, page 541.

⁹ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 1:2.

¹⁰ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 2:1.

¹¹ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 7:1-2.

¹² 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 5:14.

¹³ 6, Dillard and Longman, The Dates of The Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah, paragraph 1, page 182.

A second major marker is the public reading and explanation of The Book of The Law of Moses to the people in NEHEMIAH 8:1-9 by "...Nehemiah..., and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites."¹⁴ Verse 2 states, "And Ezra the priest brought The Law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month."¹⁵ Howard states that "Ezra's public reading of The Law was... undoubtedly the same year that Nehemiah arrived [in Jerusalem.]"¹⁶ Indeed, from EZRA-NEHEMIAH we may deduce that it was Ezra's purpose to preach and teach The Torah to the restored remnant in Jerusalem, while it was Nehemiah's purpose to assure that those returnees to the city could listen, learn and worship The LORD in peace and security. Scofield places this event in about 445 BC.¹⁷

A third major marker is Nehemiah's visit back to Babylon and return to Jerusalem. As NEHEMIAH 13:6-7 records Nehemiah speaking in the first person, "But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king: And I came to Jerusalem..."¹⁸ Howard dates this event to 433 BC.¹⁹ Scofield concurs with a date of 434 BC.²⁰

V. A PRESCRIPTION FOR REVIVAL IN NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

The crowning event in EZRA-NEHEMIAH is not per say the rebuilding of The Altar, nor of the reconstruction of The Temple, nor even of the renovation of the city walls and gates themselves. Rather, it is the rededication and reconsecration of the people of GOD themselves back to GOD and to His Ways. The pinnacle is then to be found in NEHEMIAH 8:1-9 with the public reading and explanation of The Book of The Law of Moses to the gathered community. From this text we may readily discern at least eleven distinct principles.

¹⁴ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 8:9.

¹⁵ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 8:2.

¹⁶ 3, Howard, Date of The Events, paragraph 3, page 280.

¹⁷ 5, Scofield, NEHEMIAH 8, date give in margin, page 549.

¹⁸ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 13:6-7.

¹⁹ 3, Howard, Date of The Events, Postexilic Chronology [table], page 281.

²⁰ 5, Scofield, NEHEMIAH 13, date given in margin, page 556.

VI. NEHEMIAH 8:1-3 THE PEOPLE HUNGERED TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD!

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3 records, “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding... And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.”²¹

First, there must be a desire to repent: Here the people of GOD desired to return to Their Master, and gathered themselves before Ezra the man of GOD for the purpose of beseeching him to read The Word of The LORD. Second, there must be public reading of GOD’s Word: Here Ezra the Priest of JEHOVAH took with him before the people The written Word of GOD for the purpose of reading from it to the congregation. Third, The Word of GOD must be declared until the hearts of the hungry are filled: Here Ezra read from The Book of The Law of GOD for hours, no doubt until he could not physically read any more. Fourth, there must be no distractions of the world: Here the faithful men and women, convicted of the spiritual drought in their souls by GOD’s grace, listened attentively.

The soul that is conscious of its own frail unworthiness before The Throne of The Creator is a soul that hungers for The Word of GOD. So our Lord declares in MATTHEW 5:6, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled!”²² When the souls of a man - even an entire family, more so a community, and beyond that a nation - hunger to hear The Holy Scriptures, there rests the basis for the Divine healing of The Almighty to descend upon them from above! So Matthew Henry observes, “The persons that met were all the people, who were not compelled to come, but voluntarily gathered themselves together by common agreement, as one man: not only men came, but women and children, even as many as were capable of understanding what they heard... [All the people here] are therefore concerned to

²¹ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 8:1-3.

²² 1, KJV, MATTHEW 5:6.

acquaint themselves with The Word of GOD and attend on the means of knowledge and grace...”²³

VII. NEHEMIAH 8:4-6 THE PRIEST AND PEOPLE BLESSED THE LORD!

NEHEMIAH 8:4-6 further records, “And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood... [6 men] on his right hand; and on his left hand... [7 men]. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”²⁴

This is the beginning of spiritual revival of the souls of men and of communities that have previously drifted afar from JEHOVAH into sin. For we are called to worship Him in humility and in truth. Thus the Catechism of The Catholic Church declares, “...To adore GOD is to acknowledge Him as GOD, as The Creator and Savior, The Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love...”²⁵ This is the first duty of men, as JESUS reminds us in MATTHEW 22:37-38, “...Thou shalt love The Lord thy GOD with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and Great Commandment.”²⁶

Fifth, provisions must be made for ongoing Scripture reading and preaching: Note here that provisions were made for prolonged reading and expounding of GOD’s Word to the willing and desirous people of GOD. Sixth, we must not try to carry on such preaching as one man: Note next that many upright men of Israel stood with Ezra the Priest, both to lend their authority and no doubt their assistance. Seventh, there must be reverence for GOD and His Word: Here also we see that the Word of GOD was presented to the congregation from an elevated position, reminding men that The Creator is above them, but condescends to send His grace upon them.

²³ 4, Matthew Henry, NEHEMIAH, Chap. VIII, 1-8, The Explanation of The Law, III.

²⁴ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 8:4-6.

²⁵ 7, Catechism of The Catholic Church, Adoration, # 2096, page 564.

²⁶ 1, KJV, MATTHEW 22:37-38.

And also note that all the people stood up in reverence when Ezra the Priest opened The Book of GOD. Eighth, there must be praising of GOD's glory: Here Ezra spoke out praise to GOD's glory, and the people joined him in doing so with their choruses of "Amen, Amen" and lifted their hands to He Who sits upon His Throne in Heaven. Ninth, worship given up to The Almighty must be humble and proper: Note that all the people bowed their heads with their faces to the ground, worshipping in humility He Who is All Knowing, All Powerful and All Present.

The same Catechism of The Catholic Church also declares, "...To adore GOD is to praise and exalt Him and to humble oneself, as Mary did in The Magnificat, confessing with gratitude that he has done great things and holy is His Name."²⁷ For the heart that acknowledges Who GOD is, and its own sinful state as a result, is a heart that seeks repentance and forgiveness before the face of The LORD. Therefore are we also to lift up our hands and bow down our faces in worship of The King of The Universe! So Mary magnified The LORD as in LUKE 1:46-50, "...My soul doth magnify The Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in GOD my Saviour... For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His Name. And His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation!"²⁸

VIII. NEHEMIAH 8:7-9 TEARS OF SORROW INTO SHOUTS OF JOY!

NEHEMIAH 8:7-9 then tells us, "Also... [13 men], and the Levites, caused the people to understand The Law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in The Book in The Law of GOD distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. And Nehemiah..., and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard The Words of The Law."²⁹

Tenth, there must be explanation along with reading and preaching of GOD's Word: Note that the leaders provided various learned men and Levites to stand among the people and explain the meaning of GOD's Word in a clear and understandable manner and tongue. Eleventh, there must be both repentance and then joy: Note that the

²⁷ 7, Catechism of The Catholic Church, Adoration, # 2097, page 564.

²⁸ 1, KJV, LUKE 1:46-50.

²⁹ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 8:7-9.

people, upon hearing and understanding the Word of The LORD which convicted them of their sins, wept before The King of The Universe in sorrowful penitence for their offenses to He Who created all things and caused His Law to be given to men. But note also that, after the repentance, Ezra and the leaders called the people to put away their tears and rejoice before GOD. For The Almighty and all the Hosts of Heaven rejoice when the sinner repents, turns from his sins, and lives!

Why did the people then weep as GOD's Law was read, perhaps translated and explained to them? Because The Word of GOD convicts men of their sins. For thus we read in HEBRES 4:12, "For The Word of GOD is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart!"³⁰ So Wycliffe observes here, "The clear exposition of GOD's Word... powerfully convicted the people of sin and brought forth tears of repentance." But since this day was not The Hebrew Day of Atonement "...which GOD had specifically set aside for weeping and sorrow..." Ezra told the people to rejoice in GOD's Word and His great mercy. For the people, having wept before The Almighty in earnest sorrow for their sins, now found that "...their true strength was to be found in the joy of The LORD!"³¹

IX. ON THE FLOW OF EVENTS IN THE UNIFIED WORK OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

How shall we attempt to all these wondrous things together from EZRA and NEHEMIAH, that we might come away from These Books with a fuller sense of how GOD works His recreative deliverance of His Old Testament Church in The Promised Land? Here we may profitably again resort to Dillard and Long in their summary of Eskanazi's analysis of EZRA-NEHEMIAH. Eskanazi has identified for us three distinct changes in This Book as The Old Testament canon comes to a close: 1) the shift from individual leaders to the community; 2) the expansion of the holiness of The LORD's Presence; 3) the shift from oral Law to written Law.

³⁰ 1, KJV, HEBRES 4:12.

³¹ 2, Wycliffe, NEHEMIAH 8:9, PAGE 441.

X. ON THE SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL LEADERS TO THE COMMUNITY

First, there is the shift from individual leaders to the community of the faithful: The Old Testament traces the Hand of GOD through human history via individual men and women who minister to those around them as His instruments. So we think of men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon. But in EZRA-NEHEMIAH we find Ezra and Nehemiah being “absorbed... into the community.” It is not Ezra and Nehemiah who accomplish the rebuilding of The Altar, The temple, the city itself and her walls and gates. Rather, it is the community of the faithful. And it is significant to note that This Book records at the end, not a turning of Ezra and Nehemiah back to the Lord – for they were already GOD’s servants - but “it is the people who turn to The Lord in corporate allegiance at the end!”³²

The prophet Joel records for us in JOEL 2:32, “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on The Name of The LORD shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as The LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom The LORD shall call.”³³ So Saint Luke writes in ACTS 2:21 of the fulfillment these words in The Lord JESUS CHRIST, “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on The Name of The Lord shall be saved!”³⁴ GOD’s prophetic purpose is seen in the progressive sanctification of first individuals, their families, then The Chosen Nation and now unto men through The Church over all the world!

XI. ON THE EXPANSION OF THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLINESS OF THE LORD

Second, there is the expansion of the holiness of The LORD, sanctifying to Himself ever greater reaches of His Presence among His people. Dillard and Longman observe from Eskanazi’s thesis that the holiness of The Almighty is “no longer restricted to special [holy] places:” Perhaps this is why EZRA-NEHEMIAH does not end with the rebuilding and rededication of The Temple of The Almighty. As Dillard and Longman point out from a study of Eskanazi’s analysis, the work of the community “...continues, and more of Jerusalem is [re]built. When the walls are finished, they too are consecrated... indicating that they were considered a part of a rebuilt “Holy City.” So

³² 6, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Theological Message, paragraph 2, page 186.

³³ 1, KJV, JOEL 2:32.

³⁴ 1, KJV, ACTS 2:21.

here we have a picture of the spreading of GOD's holiness over all the places where His people dwell and serve Him!³⁵

Saint Paul foresees this march of The Almighty's ever expanding holiness over all parts of His creation that has been tainted with the fruits of The Fall, made right again by the wondrous work of our Lord JESUS CHRIST in COLOSSIANS 1:19-20, "For it pleased The Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through The Blood of His Cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven."³⁶ GOD's prophetic purpose is seen also of the spreading of the sanctifying Presence of His holiness with an ever expanding reach over the face of the earth. From ancient Israel to The Church, as more men are sanctified in human history by GOD's grace, His Presence washes over and engulfs the darkness of this fallen world with His ever expanding marvelous Light!

XII. ON THE SHIFT FROM ORAL LAW AND AUTHORITY TO THE WRITTEN

Third, there is the shift from oral Law and authority to written Law and authority. Dillard and Longman observe that written "letters from kings initiate and stop action on both the level of actual events and the story. The most important written document, however... is The Torah of YAHWEH."³⁷ And it is to The Book of The Law of GOD that the newly re-covenanted community of GOD's faithful people rededicate themselves to hear, learn and live and worship by. Therefore the climax of EZRA-NEHEMIAH is in NEHEMIAH 8. For Nehemiah rebuilt the physical walls and gates of GOD's Holy City in which is people might again dwell securely. But it was Ezra's rebuilding of spiritual walls and gates in the public reading and teaching of The Torah by which the people of GOD might again dwell in the very Presence of The Creator!

The Almighty, in His foreknowledge of the need for His Old Testament Scripture to be written down and preserved in its entirety, that its fulfillments may be seen by all faithful men in the coming of GOD Incarnate Himself in His New Testament Scripture! For so did Isaiah write what was revealed to him in ISAIAH 45:22-23, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am GOD, and there is none else. I have

³⁵ 6, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Theological Message, paragraph 3, page 186.

³⁶ 1, KJV, COLOSSIANS 1:19-20.

³⁷ 6, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Theological Message, paragraph 4, page 187.

sworn by Myself, The Word is gone out of My mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”³⁸

So we read of the fulfillment of GOD’s prophetic Word from The Old Testament in The New in PHILIPPIANS 2:10-11, “That at The Name of JESUS every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that JESUS CHRIST is Lord, to the glory of GOD The Father!”³⁹ So is the cry of all righteous men who seek the face of The LORD fulfilled at The Cross of The Saviour JESUS The CHRIST, just as Nehemiah cried out in NEHEMIAH 13:31, “...Remember me, O my GOD, for good!”⁴⁰

XIII. IN CONCLUSION

In this and the companion paper, we have scanned the unity, content, authorship and dating of EZRA-NEHEMIAH. We have touched upon the remarkable Hand of GOD at work through men and their mortal agencies that brought about the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophesy that, after seventy years, Divine Providence would return a remnant of Jewish faithful from Babylon to Jerusalem and recreate The Chosen Nation there. We have gleaned three lessons for Christians today from EZRA: that we should ever give thanks to GOD; that GOD’s mercy is ever faithful; that The Church shall ever prevail. And we have examined The Creator’s Biblical prescription for spiritual and thus community revival held within NEHEMIAH 8. the shift from individual leaders to the community; the expansion of the Presence of the holiness of The LORD; the shift from oral Law and tradition to written law and tradition. And in all these movements in EZRA and NEHEMIAH, we have seen the all guiding arm of JEHOVAH guiding these great things in His will to accomplish all that He has ordained! In The Name of The Father, and of The Son, and of The Holy Spirit, AMEN!

³⁸ 1, KJV, ISAIAH 45:22-23.

³⁹ 1, KJV, PHILIPPIANS 2:10-11.

⁴⁰ 1, KJV, NEHEMIAH 13:31.

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