



# *Ezra & Nehemiah*



REFORMED  
EXPOSITORY  
COMMENTARY

DEREK W. H. THOMAS

“We may not be naturally drawn to this record of the gray days of the kingdom of God and the yo-yo experiences of success and setbacks there, but Derek Thomas wades into Ezra-Nehemiah and, with a firm confidence in the ‘instructability’ of all Scripture, takes us all the way from the theology of pots and pans to the semi-anticlimactic conclusion of the whole. He allows no wall to be built between the ancient context and our ‘today.’ Nor does he consider it sinful to cause his reader to squirm. You may wonder what you can make of these strange books with their memoirs and lists, sins and prayers, conspiracies and providences, tenacity and anger. I can think of nothing better than to take your Bible text and use Dr. Thomas’s commentary as a ‘pony’ to ride through it.”

—**Dale Ralph Davis**, Minister in Residence, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

“Ezra was an author, Nehemiah a cupbearer—and Derek Thomas is a master teacher and chef who combines many of their gifts to prepare a meal for today’s church. Here are the best of biblical ingredients served in a rich variety of courses calculated to nourish the mind and spirit. Dr. Thomas loves great narrative, traces plotlines with skill, understands how biblical theology works, and brings out telling contemporary application. In his hands the books of Ezra and Nehemiah express their inherent power to reveal the character of God, the power of his Word, the nature of the life of faith and prayer, and the purpose of the church. A feast indeed—the courses simply get better and better!”

—**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary; former Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

“Derek W. H. Thomas’s *Ezra-Nehemiah* is a must-have for the serious Bible student, whether a layman or a pastor. Thomas’s keen engagement with the text brings to life the struggles and success of the leaders of Israel as they sought to rebuild the temple and walls of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. With penetrating insight and judicious selections from pertinent commentators and theologians from the past and present, this commentary on a fascinating epoch of the redemption story speaks richly to the needs of our souls. The themes explored throughout Dr. Thomas’s exposition

address the timeless issues of God's people who are committed to the Word and prayer. Not only are seeming problems such as numbers, genealogies, and imprecatory prayers addressed, but so are the nourishing truths of the sovereignty, promises, redemption, and providence of God for his oft-discouraged people. Wisdom and encouragement are provided for those who seek to labor and to lead well in seasons of opposition, inequality, government intimidation, personal adversity, and even conspiracy. Study Ezra and Nehemiah with Derek Thomas to discover a renewed sense of joy in worship, holiness, generosity, and mission."

—**Peter A. Lillback**, President, Westminster Theological Seminary

"For several decades, Derek Thomas has exhibited the highest caliber of expository preaching. His sermons are well known for their faithfulness to the biblical text, theological precision, and rich application. Dr. Thomas has also shown an entire generation of Christians how to preach the Old Testament. This commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah is a rich resource for preachers and for any other Christian who wishes to understand how these Old Testament books fit within the biblical story line and their meaning for Christians today. This commentary is a model of faithful evangelical interpretation with a pastoral heart."

—**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Derek Thomas has the happiest knack of leading his readers right into the heart of the biblical text. Think of his eye-opening 'God delivers' on Isaiah. In the present volume he tackles the intriguing (and too-neglected) books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and through him we not only enter into fruitful contact with the Bible but also meet with two of the most attractive characters that the Old Testament offers. Rightly, he refuses truck with that silliest of 'liberal' Old Testament 'problems' (did, in fact, Nehemiah precede Ezra?). As ever, what matters is the testimony that this history bears to the nature and working of the Lord. We find ourselves in the safest of hands and possessors of a book of solid worth."

—**Alec Motyer**, former Principal, Trinity College, Bristol, England; Author, *Look to the Rock*; previously Old Testament Editor, The Bible Speaks Today commentary series

“During Israel’s dark night of exile, God raised up two leaders: Ezra the churchman and Nehemiah the highly placed civil servant. As a wise and careful pastor-teacher, Dr. Derek Thomas unfolds their stories before us, displaying the sovereignty and goodness of God amidst difficult and distressing times. Dr. Thomas exhorts us in our moment not to cower in the shadows, but to set a watch, to pray, and, above all, to return God’s Word to its rightful place at the center of our lives.”

—**Stephen J. Nichols**, President, Reformation Bible College; Chief Academic Officer, Ligonier Ministries

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# *Ezra & Nehemiah*

DEREK W. H. THOMAS

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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ISBN 978-1-62995-003-7 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-62995-004-4 (epub)

ISBN 978-1-62995-005-1 (mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Thomas, Derek, 1953- author.

Title: Ezra & Nehemiah / Derek W. H. Thomas.

Other titles: Ezra and Nehemiah

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing Company, 2016. |

Series: Reformed expository commentary a series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016019052 | ISBN 9781629950037 (cloth) | ISBN 9781629950044 (epub) | ISBN 9781629950051 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Ezra--Commentaries. | Bible. Nehemiah--Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1355.53 .T46 2016 | DDC 222/.707--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016019052>

To the faithful Sunday-evening congregations at  
First Presbyterian Church  
Jackson, Mississippi  
and  
Columbia, South Carolina

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# SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

## *Series Introduction*

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted

authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips  
Philip Graham Ryken  
Series Editors



# PREFACE

The expositions that form the basis of these chapters were originally preached to a faithful gathering of the people of God on Sunday evenings in two churches at two different times in my life: the first, in 2008, at First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi; and the second, in 2012, at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to study these two books with these two wonderful congregations.

Both studies were, for me, a reinforcement of how God uses two very different people to accomplish his purposes. Ezra and Nehemiah were very different men, with distinct gifts, temperaments, and achievements. Both, however, were equally important in the narrative of advancing the redemptive purposes of God. One was a priest, and the other was a civil servant. One excelled in preaching, and the other demonstrated an exemplary commitment to prayer. Relating the call to work at one of the most exciting periods in Old Testament history—the return from exile in Babylon—the books never fail to captivate the imagination as to what life for the people of God was like in such challenging times.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah have much to teach us about kingdom life in our time. As Alec Motyer writes, “The balancing ideas of the Word of God and prayer sum up the spiritual priorities of Ezra and Nehemiah.”<sup>1</sup> Ezra was skilled in prayer (Ezra 9:3–15), but he was wholly devoted to preaching the Word. Nehemiah put the Word of God at the center of the life of the city of Jerusalem (Neh. 8:1–9:3), but his book demonstrates how prayerful a man he was (1:4–11; 2:4; 4:4–5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:22, 29, 31). And if the church of our time is to recover and be renewed, commitment to prayer and the Word of God are vital, too.

1. Alec Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament*, ed. John Stott (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 173.

## *Preface*

I am grateful to two editors, Richard “Rick” D. Phillips and Iain M. Duguid, who greatly improved and corrected elements of this manuscript. In addition, I am indebted to the staff at P&R Publishing for their labors in bringing this manuscript to fruition. On both occasions when these sermons were preached, I colabored (as the “evening preacher”) with two redoubtable giants and dear friends, J. Ligon Duncan (then the senior minister at First Presbyterian Church, Jackson) and Sinclair B. Ferguson (then the senior minister of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia). Like Ezra and Nehemiah, they were (and are) very different men. But both, in the Lord’s kind providence, were enthusiastic and supportive, believing that an exposition of these two Old Testament books would prove valuable for the church at the present time. And both encouraged me as I attempted to do that work.

Chiefly, my appreciation is for my long-suffering wife, Rosemary. As we approach forty years of marriage, her love grows sweeter.

Now, enough of these introductory words. It is time to go to Babylon and the year 538 B.C., a half-century after Jerusalem’s collapse to a foreign power.

# ABBREVIATIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCB	New Century Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism





*Ezra*

THE MAN OF GOD'S WORD



# 1

## SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY!

*Ezra 1:1–11*

*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 Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.*

(Ezra 1:1)

It was difficult to sing in exile. One of Israel's poets put it this way:

By the waters of Babylon,  
    there we sat down and wept,  
    when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
    we hung up our lyres.  
For there our captors  
    required of us songs,  
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
    “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How shall we sing the LORD's song  
    in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:1–4)

## *Sweet Land of Liberty!*

As the book of Ezra opens, the sound of singing is absent. Israel's thousand-year history as a nation has come to a disastrous end. She would never again be what she had been. Jerusalem, which since the time of King David served as the political capital and religious focus of Israel's existence, had collapsed to Babylonian domination. Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's most impressive ruler, threatened the city for more than fifteen years. Over ten thousand of Israel's finest were taken into exile, including Daniel in 605 B.C. and later Ezekiel in 598 B.C.

Even though Jerusalem managed to resist, in the end its resistance proved futile. By 587 B.C., on the eve of the city's collapse, conditions in the city (including starvation following an eighteen-month siege) led Zedekiah, the southern kingdom's final king, to flee along with his two sons. He was captured on the outskirts of Jericho and taken the two hundred miles to Riblah in Syria, Nebuchadnezzar's base for his western campaigns. There, he was made to witness the execution of his sons, shortly before his captors put out his own eyes (2 Kings 25:7). The execution of his sons was the last thing he saw. Poor Zedekiah was marched off in chains to Babylon, never to be heard from again. The end of Zedekiah also marked the end of Israel's monarchy. A month later, when Nebuchadnezzar's men came back to methodically destroy the entire city, everyone else of any consequence still living in the area was likewise deported to Babylon: "Night had fallen on the Hebrew kingdoms."<sup>1</sup>

Signs of Jerusalem's demise were evident in the ninth century after the country split into two kingdoms. Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, fell in the year 722 B.C. to the powerful kingdom of Assyria. The southern kingdom continued for another 150 years, but its increasingly incompetent rulers finally brought the nation to its eventual conquest by Babylon. As a nation, Israel was finished. She would emerge on the other side of the Babylonian exile as something different and smaller.

## **WHY THINGS HAPPEN THE WAY THEY DO**

The book of Ezra begins in the year 538 B.C., a half-century after Jerusalem's collapse. Ezra the man does not appear until halfway through the book, some eighty years after the initial return of the Jews from Babylon (457 B.C.).

1. Michael Wilcock, *In the Days of the Kings* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2010), 161.

The opening paragraphs of Ezra tell the story of the first two generations of returning exiles and how they rebuilt the ruined temple. It is not a heroic tale but a tragic one, with more failures than successes. The prophets Zechariah and especially Haggai will rail against the exiles' selfish preoccupations and lack of vision. But that is in the future. We begin with the Jews' return, and with a perspective without which all of life, past as well as future, makes no sense and has no discernible purpose. It is a perspective as relevant for our personal history as for the returning exiles of the sixth century B.C.

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:2–4)

Why do things happen the way they do? Why did the Lord's people find themselves in exile? And why were they now en route to the ruined city of Jerusalem? One answer is that Cyrus, the Persian king, decreed that the Jews should return and rebuild their city. Two centuries earlier, Isaiah had foretold these events, mentioning Cyrus by name (Isa. 44:28; 45:1).

We can learn more about Cyrus II than what we find in the Bible. We could, for example, visit his tomb in the Fars province of Iran at the site of the ancient Persian city of Pasargadae. A clay cylinder, known as the Cyrus Cylinder, written in Babylonian cuneiform, was discovered in 1879 by the Assyro-British archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam in the foundations of the Esagila, the Marduk temple of Babylon, and is kept today in the British Museum in London. The text includes a reference to the king's policy of returning the images of non-Babylonian deities to their respective cities, repatriating exiled worshippers, rebuilding ruined sanctuaries, and soliciting prayers for himself.

We may admire Cyrus's benevolent, so-called enlightened, administration. Certainly, his rule was a far cry from previous dictatorships of both the Babylonians and Assyrians. His willingness for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, taking with them precious artifacts, is remarkable. But he was not a believer in Yahweh, the God of Israel. He worshiped the god Marduk,

### *Sweet Land of Liberty!*

and even though the first-century Jewish historian Josephus suggested that Cyrus had been shown the prophecy of Isaiah and wished to be Yahweh's messenger, no real evidence for it exists. Cyrus was probably in favor of religious tolerance, as later the Romans were, knowing that exiled people are best controlled if granted their religious rights and liberties. Perhaps, too, he was syncretistic at heart, thinking that benevolence to Judaism would work in his favor with the pantheon of gods.

Still, a benevolent dictator showed mercy to God's people, and for that we ought to be thankful. Paul, writing in similar circumstances, urged that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Governments, politicians, and civil servants who have no saving knowledge of the gospel may implement policies that enable the kingdom of God to advance.

## **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

It may have been Cyrus who issued a decree for the Jews to return to Jerusalem; from another—and far more important—point of view, it was the Lord's doing. Man proposes, God disposes. Thus, the author of the first chapter of Ezra makes it very plain indeed: "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1). God did it! At no point did the Lord abandon his control.

"God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all his creatures, and all their actions," WSC 11 informs us. The relevant word here is *all*—"all his creatures, . . . all their actions." Every event of every circumstance is the outcome of the sovereign overruling of God. That includes the actions of an otherwise godless king of a tyrannical empire: "It was the same Lord who, unknown to Cyrus, had already 'stirred' him, years before, to begin his march across the world, and had smoothed his road to victory with exactly this in view."<sup>2</sup>

From the point of view of the exiles, it was reassuring that God had not forgotten them, nor were they beyond his reach. What a blessing it is to know that even in the darkest of places, the Lord can overrule politicians and leaders to turn events around to favor the church of Jesus Christ! God

2. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 32.

had a plan, and not even Cyrus could impede it; in fact, he was part of it. From one point of view, these events were the result of human planning and ingenuity; from another point of view, it was the hand of God!

The initiative of men and the sovereignty of God are *concurrent* or *confluent* events. Without violating the way things happen—the meaningfulness of cause and effect, or the freely given agency of individuals—God ensures that *his* will, *his* sovereign decree, occurs. *How* he does this is a mystery to us, but it is the consistent teaching of Scripture:

- God “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).
- “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13).
- Even if clear malice is intended by humans, God may overrule it to ensure his “good” purpose, as in the case of Joseph: “you [Joseph’s brothers] meant evil against me, but God meant it [the same event] for good” (Gen. 50:20).
- More poignantly, the same is true of the crucifixion of Jesus. Peter told his Pentecost audience that “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23).
- Humans sin and are culpable for their actions, yet God is not the author of sin, but its Judge: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:13–17).

The cause of Israel’s downfall was no accident. The prophet Amos made this clear to the northern kingdom facing the threatening might of Assyria: “Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6). The exile itself was the result of Israel’s rebellion. God came in judgment as he

## *Sweet Land of Liberty!*

had threatened (Jer. 13:15–27). God’s sovereign involvement at every point does not negate Israel’s responsibility for her failure.

Baffled? Yes, to some extent! How many can say that they “understand” this? But for our purposes, it is a most reassuring truth. We may find it difficult to understand. We may attempt to resist it, in an attempt to maintain free agency rather than something that sounds close to fatalism. But ask yourself this question: Do I really want to believe that in the darkest of circumstances, God is not in full control? No, of course not! And whatever the philosophical difficulties involved, concurrence is the Bible’s consistent teaching. Human beings act according to their own will and ability, but at the same time, God acts to accomplish his sovereign will and purpose. And *that* is a most reassuring thought. God’s will is done. The future that God has willed is certain.

## **THE UNFAILING PROMISES OF GOD**

What is the explanation for the events that occurred in 538 B.C.? One answer is that Cyrus decreed it. Another is that God decreed it. But why did Cyrus *and* God decree that the Jews return to Jerusalem? For Cyrus, it was all a part of an enlightened policy of repatriation. But from God’s point of view, it was in order to fulfill a promise that he had made in prophecy: “that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled” (Ezra 1:1).

The prophecy in question, one to which Daniel also alludes (Dan. 9:1–2), is found in Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10, given just before the exile began, and describes the captivity as lasting seventy years. Even if we begin counting at the point when the Babylonians first began deporting Jews to Babylon in 605 B.C. rather than 587 B.C.—the year when most of the exiles were taken—it still amounts to less time than seventy years.<sup>3</sup> Evidently there was grace in the judgment. The author might also have been thinking of other prophetic passages, including those in Isaiah that referenced Cyrus either by name or by implication (Isa. 41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1, 13), as well as Jeremiah 51, with its poetic description of the fall of Babylon. The point in Ezra 1 is to underline the fulfillment of the promise; the author of Ezra is exhorting the exiled believers in Babylon—and us modern readers—to continue trusting in the word of God’s promise.

3. Initial skirmishes with Babylon had begun as far back as 605 B.C., followed by another in 597 B.C. But for most of the exiles, their ordeal began in 587 B.C.

The promise of the return of the exiles to Jerusalem was significant enough in itself, but it was part of a larger promise in Scripture, one that is initiated in Genesis 3:15, showing God’s determination to save his sinful people. Israel’s history demonstrated God’s design, that from within her ranks a mediator would come. The story of Israel cannot end in obscurity in Babylon. A remnant of true believers must return to Jerusalem and continue the story.

The author writes with “a biblical view of history,”<sup>4</sup> not only from a personal point of view but, especially at this point in Judah’s history, from a redemptive perspective; God had not forgotten his promise to save his people. However difficult it must have been in exile to imagine *how* this was to be done, the promise of their return fueled in the faithful a conviction that even in their darkest hour, the promises of God are sure and certain. We know little of the actual experience of exile in Babylon or the experience of those who remained in Judah during that time. Among the exiles were those who managed to work out a strategy for survival—both physically and socially—and, more significantly, came to realize in a profound way that God had not altogether abandoned them. Many families were separated forever. Most of those who did return were born in exile; a few, such as Ezekiel—exiled as a young man—were octogenarians when the return took place. His tomb is thought to be in Iraq, suggesting that he never returned.

## THE FAITHFUL FEW

It must have been difficult for those who returned to Jerusalem. Most had no homes or property in the city or its environs that they could call their own. Perhaps existing family members who had remained in Jerusalem—family that the exiles had never met—allowed their kin to live with them for a while. The returning exiles had never seen or experienced the temple and its worship—nor, for that matter, had those born since the Babylonian invasion in Jerusalem and its environs. What faith remained had been kept alive in family structures and small-group settings. But kept alive it had been. Among the exiles were those who were prepared to return with a single-minded purpose: “to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5).

4. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 66.

## *Sweet Land of Liberty!*

Not everyone wanted to return! Cyrus knew this all too well and mentions the fact in his decree. “Survivor[s]” in the former Babylonian empire (Ezra 1:4)—what the Bible might refer to elsewhere as the “remnant”—who did not wish to return were ordered to provide gold and livestock for those who were eager to return to Jerusalem, reminiscent of what had occurred at the time of the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:35f.). This is why Isaiah had recorded this event two centuries earlier, likening it to a second exodus:

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,  
declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,  
send it out to the end of the earth;  
say, “The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!”  
They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;  
he made water flow for them from the rock;  
he split the rock and the water gushed out.

“There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.” (Isa. 48:20–22)

Besides these gifts, the royal treasury also provided for this Jewish venture—something that Ezra will mention in chapter 6.

Despite the urgings for them to leave Babylon, the Bible does not record any negative comments about those who remained (Isa. 52:11; Zech. 2:7). But neither does it have anything good to say about them. The vast majority had never known any other way of life. Among them were true believers, who kept alive the faith of their fathers and ensured that knowledge of the true faith would be known in faraway places. But the survival of true faith required that the Jewish believers regather in Jerusalem. This is what God had promised, and this is exactly what happened.

## **THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS**

Those who remained in Babylon were to provide voluntary gifts as a contribution to the rebuilding effort in Jerusalem. Some had lost the faith; others perhaps contributed for motives that were less than pure. But no questions were raised about the acceptability of their contributions. Additionally, the articles that had been removed from Jerusalem—especially from the temple—were now to be returned. These articles were brought to a man

named Mithredath (a Persian name), “the treasurer,” who counted them out to Sheshbazzar (possibly another Persian name), “the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8). As a province of the Persian empire, Judah had its own official ruler, Sheshbazzar. His identification as Zerubbabel is only a speculation.<sup>5</sup>

Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:5–11)

What is all this talk of pots and pans? Are we really to think that these items have anything at all to do with true religion? Does the true faith of Israel—and the Christian church—really come down to what sounds like a kitchen inventory? The answer, of course, is yes! These were not just pots and pans; they were vessels used in the temple and therefore “holy.” They amounted to over five thousand items (Ezra 1:11), though only a part of the inventory is listed here, perhaps the most significant items.

Back in the eighth century, Isaiah had foretold that when the exiles left Babylon, they would return carrying these temple vessels (Isa. 52:11–12). The faithful Israelites in exile, constituting those from the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, to be precise, as well as the priestly tribe of Levi (Ezra 1:5), held these items dear; they were symbols of God’s covenantal dealings with his people.

As these items were “counted” (Ezra 1:8), the scene looked perhaps a little whimsical. No doubt other exiles of different religions had magnificent

5. Some commentators assert that *Sheshbazzar* was the Persian court name of Zerubbabel. Daniel, for example, was given the court name of *Belteshazzar* (Dan. 1:7). But it is not clear whether *Sheshbazzar* is a Babylonian name.

## *Sweet Land of Liberty!*

idols in gold and silver, but Israel had no images of God. Its faith could be measured only in terms of pots and pans. But they were temple vessels and therefore holy vessels, desecrated by Babylonian uncleanness (see Dan. 5:2). Their return would signal to the faithful the precise nature of God's promise to fulfill his covenant. Israel's God counts pots and pans. That is the degree to which his careful supervision extends. These were the very basins and censers (translations of the Hebrew have ranged from "knives" to "changes" [of priestly raiment]) taken from the temple (see 2 Kings 24:13; 25:13–15; 2 Chron. 26:7, 10, 18), and the same items now being returned.

"If God is concerned about exact numbers of basins of gold and silver, then how much more is he concerned about the lives of men and women?" This is what faithful Jews might say to each other as they made the long journey to Jerusalem. If he cares for the sparrow, then how much more does he care for me: "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26).

These utensils were taken by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C. and placed in "the treasury of his god" (Dan. 1:2). Later, Babylonians drank to Belshazzar's health, praising the pagan god Marduk for the defeat of Yahweh, using templeware to do so. Or so it seemed. But Marduk has had his comeuppance. The tables have been turned, and Yahweh, who works according to a different, less showy timetable, has proved to be conqueror after all.

Not every item was returned. The ark of the covenant wasn't among this inventory. It contained the two tablets of stone upon which the law had been written, and Aaron's rod. The ark was never seen again after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. It had almost certainly been destroyed much earlier. The second temple, for all its importance, was never quite as glorious as the first—a point to which the elderly who had managed to survive through the exile could testify (Ezra 3:12). Perhaps God was already preparing the time when his people would be his temple (1 Cor. 3:16), and preparing where the law of God would be written, not on stone but on hearts of flesh (Jer. 31:33).

The return of these items to Jerusalem in itself was no small thing; the items represented the people's hope of a rebuilt city and a rebuilt temple, which, given their present circumstances, was quite important. Yet even more significant were those who returned with these items. For those who carried the items back, most of whom had never seen Solomon's temple or

the city of Jerusalem, the journey was one of faith. There were few guarantees about any aspect of this journey.

As the chapter closes with the words “from Babylonia to Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:11), a new era begins for the people of God. Nothing could signal more precisely the event governing this chapter than these words. God has returned to his people in favor, and a journey lies before them of greater significance than the trek to the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem has become a symbol of God’s city just as Babylon has become the symbol of the fallen world’s city. There is no promise of instant health and wealth if the Israelites return. They have no homes to go to! They must trust in the Lord’s guidance and provision. They must step out on a journey of faith, looking to the Lord every step of the way. In faith, they must trust that God will open up a path for them to tread. It is a pilgrimage to a city in ruins, but in their hearts it will bring to mind the true nature of God’s promise of a “city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). With *this* journey every believer can identify. And uniquely, it is a journey that Jesus took for us.

After the Visigoths sacked Rome in the fifth century, many Christians—Christians who had placed too much hope on the success of the empire—were in a deep state of shock. In this atmosphere, Augustine wrote one of the most important books in all of Christian history: *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*). The book presents human history as one of conflict between what Augustine called the “City of Man” and the “City of God”; only the latter will triumph.

All of human history is one of conflict between “Babylon” (the City of Man) and “Jerusalem” (the City of God). The closing pages of Scripture record Babylon’s downfall:

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” (Rev. 18:2)

And within these words lies the great divide between the way that leads to death and the way that leads to life. As the pilgrims set their faces toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51, 53), they are indicating that a clear choice has been made. They have chosen the way of life, the city of God. And the question that rings in our ears as we read this chapter is clear: Have we chosen that city? Are we marching in union with Christ toward Jerusalem—“the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22)?

“Derek Thomas has the happiest knack of leading his readers right into the heart of the biblical text. . . . He tackles the intriguing (and too-neglected) books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and through him we not only enter into fruitful contact with the Bible but also meet with two of the most attractive characters that the Old Testament offers.”

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