

EZRA &
NEHEMIAH

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EZRA & NEHEMIAH

M A T T H E W L E V E R I N G



BrazosPress
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*,
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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levering, Matthew, 1971–

Ezra & Nehemiah / Matthew Levering.

p. cm. — (Brazos theological commentary on the Bible)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 10: 1-58743-161-0 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-58743-161-6 (cloth)

1. Bible. O.T. Ezra—Commentaries. 2. Bible. O.T. Nehemiah—Commentaries.

I. Title. II. Title: Ezra and Nehemiah. III. Series.

BS1355.53.L48 2007

222'.707—dc22

2007028245

Dedicated to
Ralph and Patty Levering

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EZRA 4

Obstacles to Rebuilding the Temple

The Peoples of the Land: The History of the Samaritans

Ezra 4 recounts the threat to the rebuilding project posed *by the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin*. It is from Abraham's seed that the blessing to all nations will come, as God promised Abraham after he showed trust in God to the point of being willing to sacrifice Isaac, the son on whom the promise rested. By not counting his son as gain for himself, but instead by recognizing that his son is God's gift, Abraham makes manifest his profound faith, his stance of receptivity toward the Lord. The Lord tells him: "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Gen. 22:16–17). The Lord again promises that through Abraham blessing will come not only to Abraham's descendants, but to all nations: "And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (22:17–18). But who and where are Abraham's descendants?

This question of who constitutes the true Israel becomes paramount when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard about the efforts to build a new temple. These adversaries claim to be friends: *Let us build with you; for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.*¹

1. Some historians doubt the account of the origin of these adversaries as presented in Ezra 4 and 2 Kgs. 17; see Davies 1999, 17–18.

The reference to the king of Assyria locates the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin within the covenantal history. Under the arrogant and foolish King Rehoboam, son of Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel—united under Saul, David, and Solomon—were divided into north and south: Israel and Judah. The threat of division had already plagued King David, who ruled for seven years over only the southern tribes before finally defeating the family of Saul in a civil war and thereby reuniting the twelve tribes (2 Sam. 5:3–5). The division in Rehoboam’s time occurred through a dispute over taxes and proved intractable due partly to the strong leadership of Jeroboam, now king over Israel (the north), with Rehoboam king of Judah (the south). At the root of the split was Solomon’s idolatry (1 Kgs. 11:9–14), which poisoned the unity of the land.

The split had effects far more serious than the geopolitical ones. One of the first acts of Jeroboam as king of the north was aimed at destroying the unity of worship that the Lord had ordained to strengthen Israel’s separation from the idolatry of the surrounding peoples. In Deuteronomy, Moses bestows his blessing upon this centralization or unification of Israel’s worship. He commands that the people of Israel, when they are established in the holy land, take their firstfruits “to the place which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, ‘I declare this day to the LORD your God that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us’” (Deut. 26:2–3). The place that the Lord chooses to “make his name to dwell” is Jerusalem—and specifically Solomon’s Temple (1 Kgs. 8:29). Jeroboam, then, consciously rebels not only against Rehoboam, but also against the name of the Lord: “And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David; if this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah’” (12:26–27). Jeroboam’s shrewd solution is to make two golden calves for his people to worship: “And he said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’ And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan” (12:28–29). Bethel and Dan were the southern and northern limits of his new kingdom, making it easy for his entire people to commit idolatry, which they proceeded to do over the course of two centuries.

The book of Ezra assumes that nothing in human history escapes the governance of God, and Jeroboam’s rebellion is a case in point. Already during the reign of King Solomon, the prophet Ahijah met Jeroboam and, as a symbolic depiction of what was to come, tore his own clothes into twelve pieces, giving ten to Jeroboam. Ahijah prophesied to Jeroboam: “For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon . . . because he has forsaken me, and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god

of the Ammonites” (11:31, 33). (The Lord goes on to say through Ahijah that the kingdom will be divided in the time of Solomon’s son.) “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:29–30).

Two consequences result from the northern kingdom’s rebellion and corresponding fall into idolatry. On the one hand, great prophets are raised up to fight for the Lord. During the time of King Ahab, Elijah single-handedly defeats at Mount Carmel, by the power of God, “the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kgs. 18:19), and Elisha raises the dead son of the Shunammite woman. On the other hand, two centuries after Jeroboam, God allows the Assyrian Empire to conquer the northern kingdom.

This has a profound effect on the situation depicted in the book of Ezra. Many Israelites of the northern tribes went into exile in Assyria, from which they never truly returned, while “the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel” (2 Kgs. 17:24). At first these foreigners did not worship the God of Israel, but when lions (whose presence is ascribed to the Lord) killed some of the newcomers, “the king of Assyria was told, ‘The nations which you have carried away and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the god of the land; therefore he has sent lions among them’” (17:26). In response the Assyrian ruler sent back to the northern kingdom one of the priests of the Lord, but this action had little effect: the people simply “feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away” (17:33), thus treating the God of Israel as merely another god.

The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin who meet the returned exiles, therefore, have already been inhabitants for at least two hundred years of the northern part of what was originally the promised land given by God to the twelve tribes of Israel. In a certain sense they do worship the Lord, but they worship him as a god among gods. For this reason, the leaders of the returned exiles reject their petition to assist in the rebuilding of the temple, whose significance for “all the nations of the earth” depends upon the Abrahamic particularity—linear descent from Abraham and inclusion among those who received the Mosaic and Davidic covenants—of the renewed people of Israel: *You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.* The particularity of salvation does not undermine its ability to be offered to all. On the contrary, the more particular, the more universal. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

The Lord Will Build It

In order to understand the remainder of Ezra 4, one might recall the foolishness of King David, who, having built himself a cedar palace, decides that it is time to build a temple for the Lord, since “the ark of God dwells in a tent” (2 Sam. 7:2). David’s ambition suggests that David thinks that he provides for the living God rather than vice versa. For this mistaken perspective, David is thoroughly chastised by the Lord through the prophet Nathan: “Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (7:5–7).

The Lord issued no such command to the judges, who ruled the twelve tribes for two hundred years, but David might well have wondered why the Lord failed to do so. By the end of the period of the judges—such a woeful time—“every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). This recipe for chaos was embodied by such dreadful acts as the rape and murder of a Levite’s concubine while he and she were guests at a home in Gibeah in the tribe of Benjamin (which led to war among the tribes). When the last judge of the twelve tribes, Samuel, was a boy in the house of the priest Eli, ministering before the ark of the Lord, “the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision” (1 Sam. 3:1). When “the word of the LORD” is not heard, all Israel suffers: it is not Israel who provides for the Lord, but the Lord who provides for Israel.

David is right, therefore, that the temple should be built, but the builder must be God himself: “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1). Similarly, the returned exiles rightly seek to rebuild, but these efforts bear fruit only slowly. Even though the rebuilders of the temple are assisting in the accomplishment of *the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah*, God permits them to undergo adversity. Immediately after the rebuilders boldly proclaim that *we alone will build to the LORD*, they learn that the success of the labor will not be due to their own strength. *Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.* These counselors make the returned exiles *afraid to build*. Work stops on the new temple after the foundation had been laid. *Then the work on the house of God which is in Jerusalem stopped; and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia*, that is, until 520 BC.

The Weakness of Israel

It seems incredible that the same returned exiles who had “shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid” (Ezra 3:11), discontinued work on the temple for fifteen years. How could fear stop such holy zeal? We have already observed evidence of a certain lack of fervor, namely, when only “some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site” (2:68).

In fact, the experience of the returned exiles conforms to the pattern of all the covenant renewals of Israel, due to the sinfulness and weakness of the human partners in the covenants. Their actions strive toward a fulfillment that is as yet beyond them because they are not yet holy people: they await the accomplishment (in Christ Jesus) of *the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah*, that “I [the LORD] will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33).

We find the pattern of weakness already in Abraham. Having received the covenantal promise of a son by his wife Sarah (Gen. 17), he jeopardized everything by fearfully pretending to King Abimelech of Gerar (where Abraham was sojourning) that Sarah was not his wife but his sister. It took God’s intervention to avert Abimelech’s sexual coupling with Sarah, which would have called into question whether the promised son was Abraham’s or Abimelech’s: “God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, ‘Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man’s wife.’ Now Abimelech had not approached her. . . . Then God said to him in the dream, ‘Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her’” (20:3–4, 6).

Likewise, even Moses—having led Israel out of Egypt, given them the law, and found such favor that “the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod. 33:11)—nonetheless could not enter the promised land but could only look upon it from Mount Nebo (Deut. 34), because Moses “broke faith with me [the LORD] in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribath-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin; because you [Moses] did not revere me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel” (32:51) but instead in a fit of pride took credit for God’s work (cf. Num. 20:10–12).

Again, almost immediately after God proclaimed his covenant with David, David committed adultery with Bathsheba, had her husband Uriah the Hittite killed, and stirred up a nest of incest, revenge, attempted parricide, and civil war among his own children—so that the temple had to wait until Solomon’s time.

In this context, the returned exiles’ failure to continue to act upon their initial impulse makes clear that, like those who have gone before them, they

too await from God's Messiah the fulfillment of the covenantal promises, so that they might be holy and dwell in marital intimacy with the Lord. They are not yet what they should be.

Persecuting the Returned Exiles

The book of Ezra stresses that the persecution that temporarily stopped construction is by no means a mere trifle; its impact grows in the next century. Ezra cites some letters from provincial officials instigating such persecution. These letters were written in the fifth century BC, whereas otherwise the book of Ezra treats the sixth century BC. Why does Ezra include these letters here?

Three letters are described. First, *in the reign of Ahasuerus (485–465 BC), in the beginning of his reign, they [the people of the land] wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.* Second, *in the days of Artaxerxes (464–424 BC), Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia.*² Third, the peoples of the land sent another letter to Artaxerxes, from *Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their*

2. Blenkinsopp comments: "In the long section dealing with opposition which begins here it is particularly important to grasp the logic of the narrative. After the resumptive 4:24, 5:1–2 continues 4:1–5 and takes us down to the second year of Darius (520). The intervening passage 4:6–23, dealing with opposition under Ahasuerus/Xerxes (485–465) and Artaxerxes (464–424), is obviously out of chronological order. This is not unusual in ancient historiography and neither calls for a theory of interpolation nor requires us to conclude that the author was ignorant about the correct order of the early Achaemenids. Having just dealt with opposition under Cyrus, he simply wished to carry this theme through the reigns of Darius (4:5), Xerxes (4:6), and Artaxerxes (4:7–23)—in the correct chronological order—omitting Cambyses, for whose reign he probably had no comparable information. He then doubled back to continue the account of the rebuilding under Darius, including Tattenai's intervention, the imperial edict reaffirming the authorization and, finally, the completion and dedication of the temple in the sixth year of his reign" (Blenkinsopp 1988, 105–6). By contrast Davies suggests that Ezra 4:6–7 are confused: "The identity of the writers is unclear. Their names are detailed, but confused. Perhaps an irregularity in the transmission of the text has resulted in the combination of two letters under two Persian kings signed by people whose names vary. Did they write 'in the beginning of the reign of Ahasuerus' (v. 6) or 'in the days of Artaxerxes' (v. 7)? Are Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and 'the rest of the associates' (v. 7) the same group as in v. 9—Rehum the chancellor, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates listed by rank and nationality including all the nations deported by the Assyrians?" (1999, 19–20). Davies agrees with Halpern 1990, 110, that the ambiguity may be intentional. See also Davies's postmodern reflections on Ezra 4–6: "History is not computable or even sequential here. It is prismatic. An event can be recounted in different forms that provide both continuity and plasticity. New realities are brought into focus by shifting the optic on the past" (1999, 30). Blenkinsopp, I think, has the better of this argument. Like the Revised Standard Version, Fensham 1982, 71–72, holds that "Bishlam" is a proper noun, against other interpretations that take its meaning to be "in accord with" (Blenkinsopp 1988, 109) or "in the matter of Jerusalem."

associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations.

The letter that Rehum and Shimshai send to Artaxerxes receives significant attention from Ezra. In addressing their letter, Rehum and Shimshai recall *the great and noble Osnappar*,³ the king of the Assyrians who two centuries earlier bore responsibility for exiling the peoples of the land into the northern kingdom (displacing the ten tribes of Israelites). Rehum and Shimshai suggest that Artaxerxes should follow the example of Osnappar, rather than continuing to allow the returned exiles to establish a quasi-independent nation.

Their letter warns that *the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.*⁴ In short, the returned exiles are becoming strong again. In the distant background is Hezekiah's defeat of the forces of the Assyrian Empire, due to the power of the Lord (cf. 2 Kgs. 19:5–7); even lowly Jehoiakim had tried to avoid paying taxes to Babylon. For this reason the letter warns that *if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.* Rehum and Shimshai present themselves as the king's loyal functionaries, seeking the king's interests: *Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That is why this city was laid waste.*

None of this could be denied by the returned exiles; indeed it is a mark of honor and a manifestation of the power of the Lord. As a counterweight to the image of weakness given earlier by the description of how *the people of the land*

3. "Osnappar" is Ashurbanipal, who as the last king of Assyria ruled 668–627 BC. See Fensham 1982, 73.

4. Blenkinsopp comments on this verse: "The wording of the opening sentence would more naturally refer to an aliyah during the reign of Artaxerxes I Long Hand (465–424) rather than to the return under Cyrus. In all probability, Ezra and his caravan arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year of this reign (458) and Nehemiah thirteen years later (445). The allusion could not be to the latter, who received personal authorization from the king to rebuild the city" (1988, 113). If it does not refer to Ezra the Scribe, Blenkinsopp adds: "Another possibility is suggested by the report of Hanani to his brother Nehemiah in the twentieth year of the reign that the wall had been broken down and its gates burnt (Neh. 1:3). Since the natural assumption is that this had happened quite recently—it was news to Nehemiah—the action of the authorities in Samaria may have taken place shortly before Nehemiah's mission (in 446 . . .). In that case the correspondence could have been occasioned by the revolt of Megabyzus, satrap of Abar-nahara, some three years before Nehemiah's mission, which would also explain why the complaint was lodged by a provincial official without reference to the governor of the satrapy. That the king reversed his decision soon after at the request of Nehemiah does not rule out this possibility, especially since the revolt was of brief duration and Megabyzus won his way back into favor. Reversal is also contemplated in the king's reply (Ezra 4:21)" (1988, 113–14).

discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, the book of Ezra rejoices in this image of preexilic Israel's power. Ezra describes Artaxerxes as almost afraid of the Israelites. In his reply to Rehum and Shimshai, Artaxerxes observes that *mighty kings have been over Jerusalem* and commands that *this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. And take care not to be slack in this matter; why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?*

By the mid-fifth century BC the Persian Empire was in gradual decline. Heavy taxes and a scarcity of gold imposed an increasing burden upon the subjugated peoples. Both the Greeks and the Egyptians were fighting the Persians. Megabyzus, the Persian general who put down the Egyptian rebellion, later took offense against his king and in 449 BC successfully rebelled against Artaxerxes (Fensham 1982, 15–16, 73). Artaxerxes takes seriously the possibility of a rebellion in Jerusalem. Upon receiving the king's answer, Rehum and Shimshai *went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease the work of rebuilding the city.*

Why does Ezra include these fifth-century letters in the midst of discussing the rebuilding of the temple in the late sixth century BC? He thereby recalls the power of the people of God despite their seeming weakness in the midst of persecution. Their power depends solely upon God, who has acted and will act again through his people.

The power-in-weakness of Israel is a theme present already in the person of Abraham, and one that extends through Jacob into slavery in Egypt and even to the person of Moses. Often as a rebuke, one finds it throughout the history of the judges and kings. In Jeremiah, the Lord explicitly addresses it: "Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.' But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a youth"; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD'" (Jer. 1:6–8). This power-in-weakness points forward to Christ Jesus, whose power is hidden in weakness: "Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12).

Power in Weakness

The returned exiles no longer possess the divinely given power that they had under Moses and Joshua "to go in to take possession of the land which the LORD your God gives you to possess" (Josh. 1:11). Even under Moses and Joshua, however, the people of Israel participated in the working out of God's plan not as a powerful nation but as a weak people: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon

you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage” (Deut. 7:7–8). Moses says to Joshua: “You shall not fear them; for it is the LORD your God who fights for you” (3:22). Regarding the returned exiles, one could say with even more truth that they are “the fewest of all peoples,” but they do not receive military power from the Lord.

Their weakness instead displays their dependence on the Lord: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. . . . The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still” (Exod. 14:13–14). It will be in weakness that the power of Jeremiah’s new covenant is brought about through the Messiah’s holy embodiment of Israel’s people and land; and in weakness, too, that Christ’s followers will find their strength in the Lord: “And Agrippa said to Paul, ‘In a short time you think to make me a Christian!’ And Paul said, ‘Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains’” (Acts 26:28–29).

Only God can accomplish *the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah*. By working through the human striving that Ezra records, God raises up a Messiah out of the people of Israel worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem. The risen Lord says to his apostles: “‘These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:44–45).