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978-0-521-09759-8 - The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

R. J. Coggins

Excerpt

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THE BOOKS OF
EZRA AND
NEHEMIAH

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THE WORK OF THE CHRONICLER

In the volume in this series dealing with 1 and 2 Chronicles those books were described as 'a neglected work'. The reasons for this neglect are twofold: the fact that much of their contents can be paralleled elsewhere in the Old Testament, and the unattractiveness to us of the long lists of names which are so prominent a feature. When we come to Ezra and Nehemiah, the situation is very different. They deal with a period of history of which we have little knowledge from other sources, and they have therefore been given detailed attention so that we may find out as much as possible about an important but obscure epoch; and the lists of names – though still to be found – are less prominent here than in the earlier work.

It will be seen that the assumption is already being made that Ezra and Nehemiah should be linked with 1 and 2 Chronicles, and it is important to establish the nature of that link. The most obvious starting-point is to notice that the end of 2 Chronicles (36: 22–3) is repeated as the beginning of Ezra (1: 1–3*a*). All kinds of explanations for this repetition could be thought of, but the simplest remains the most likely – that the works were originally continuous; that Ezra and Nehemiah came to be regarded by the Jews as sacred scripture before Chronicles (Ezra–Nehemiah precede Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible); but when all were received as scripture, the link between the works was emphasized by the repetition of these

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phrases. Further support for the view that regards Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah as essentially one single whole is provided by the fact that the apocryphal book 1 Esdras spans the period covered by the last chapters of 2 Chronicles and the book of Ezra, and is almost certainly dependent upon the canonical books, though the exact nature of the relationship is a complex question.

To these considerations can be added others of a more general kind. There are close linguistic similarities between Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah, and – though the point has been disputed – it is most likely that these point to common authorship. More important for our purposes in this commentary, there is a similarity of theological viewpoint to be found through the whole work. Since this must inevitably affect our judgement of much of the content of Ezra and Nehemiah, it needs to be set out more fully. Some further indication of the grounds for the views here set out will be found in the volume on 1 and 2 Chronicles (pp. 3–7).

It seems most likely that the Chronicler (the name customarily given to the author or authors of Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah) was active in Jerusalem, probably about the middle of the fourth century. (It has been suggested that Ezra was himself the Chronicler; but it seems more likely that the author looks back at Ezra's achievement from the viewpoint of a slightly later age.) For the Chronicler, it was at Jerusalem, and particularly in the temple, that God most especially showed his favour to his people, and so the whole work has the Jerusalem temple as its main focus of interest. The earlier history begins in detail only with David, and it is emphasized throughout that Jerusalem is the city of David. In this latter part of the work the emphasis is on continuity; that the newly rebuilt temple was on the same site as that which had been destroyed; that it was served by the same personnel, using the same sacred vessels. The whole community centred upon Jerusalem was, therefore, to see itself as the direct descendant of those who had received God's earlier promises.

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The Chronicler's presentation of this thesis is by means of an extended survey of the nation's past, emphasizing those aspects which were of particular relevance to his own interests. We tend to think of such a presentation as 'historical', but the term may be somewhat misleading. Undoubtedly much historical information is contained within the work, but it should not be approached primarily as a history, or as a source of information about a particular period, but as a presentation of the kind of theological viewpoint which has just been outlined. Some consideration will be given later (pp. 5–8) to the historical problems associated with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and this point will be seen to be of considerable importance.

THE AUTHOR'S USE OF SOURCES

Before any satisfactory consideration can be given to historical problems, however, it is necessary to examine in more detail the material underlying the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The problem here is more complex than for 1 and 2 Chronicles, where it is clear that the underlying sources are for the most part to be found elsewhere in the Old Testament – parts of the Pentateuch, and the books of Samuel and Kings. There are no readily identifiable sources of this kind underlying Ezra and Nehemiah.

Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that these books cannot simply be taken as free compositions of a single author. Even a cursory glance through them will show that they contain what appear to be official documents, and that two substantial parts of the book of Ezra are written in Aramaic (4: 8 – 6: 18; 7: 12–26). This was a language closely akin to Hebrew, which came to replace Hebrew for everyday speech among the Jews in the last centuries B.C., and was also the language of Persian imperial records. There is, therefore, an inherent likelihood (which is to some extent borne out on closer examination) that the author had available to him material which may have originated from a kind of official archive, though the purpose

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to which he puts it is always his own. This point is seen with especial clarity in ch. 4, where Aramaic material from a number of periods has been brought together to illustrate the single theme of opposition to the loyal Jews. Another part of the Aramaic material, found in chs. 5 and 6, appears to form an alternative presentation of the rebuilding operations described in Hebrew in ch. 3.

The Hebrew sections of the two books also contain material which may have originated in quasi-official sources such as census-lists. This would apply to the lists of names in Ezra 2 (substantially repeated in Neh. 7) and in Neh. 11–12. In all these instances the essential point is that the author was able to use this material for his own overriding purpose of describing and accounting for the fortunes of the Jerusalem community.

Another problem of a similar kind concerns the relation of the first-person material in Nehemiah to the rest of the two books. This material is found in chs. 1–2; 4: 1–7; 5; 12: 27–43; and 13: 4–31. The difficulty here is twofold. First, it has in the past often been assumed, almost without question, that this can be regarded as a 'memoir' written by Nehemiah himself. But just as it is now commonly accepted that the stories about prophets in the Old Testament were written by their followers rather than by the prophets themselves, so it is more likely that this was written by someone else to do honour to Nehemiah, rather than representing his own 'diary'. It would have been put into the first person in a way that is common for such material both in the ancient world and today. (It was not many years ago that it was reported as remarkable of a British prime minister that he wrote his own speeches.) We should therefore keep this apologetic motive in mind when assessing the historical value of the first-person material.

The second difficulty in regard to these sections concerns their relation to the rest of the Chronicler's work. Many have taken the view that they are a later addition to the main body of the work, that the Nehemiah tradition existed separately

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for a considerable time, and that the Chronicler's work should not be regarded as including the Nehemiah material in its 'first edition'. As will emerge at various points during the commentary, there is certainly a curious lack of relation between the material relating to Ezra and that concerned with Nehemiah, but we may not need to suppose a separate existence for the Nehemiah tradition, and the very complex editorial process which would thereby be involved; it may be better to suppose that here, as elsewhere, the Chronicler had sources available to him which have not always been fully incorporated in the main body of the work.

HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

1 and 2 Chronicles are rarely regarded by scholars as more than a secondary source of historical information for the period which they cover. Estimates of their historical reliability have varied very greatly, but if the view taken here and in the companion volume dealing with 1 and 2 Chronicles is correct, the main purpose of the Chronicler was to set out the religious point of view explained above rather than to write accurate history. When we come to Ezra and Nehemiah the position is very different. Now there are no longer alternative sources of information available for the greater part of the period covered, and these books supply us with much of what we know, and present considerable problems.

From extra-biblical sources we know that the Babylonian Empire, virtually founded by Nebuchadnezzar, was short-lived. By 539 B.C., it had collapsed, and power had passed into the hands of Cyrus, the ruler of Persia. Persian rule was rapidly consolidated in Palestine and as far as the borders of Egypt. For a time Egypt itself was under Persian control. The Persians on various occasions unsuccessfully attempted to extend their rule into Europe, but though these attempts were thwarted, they remained in undisputed control of the whole of south-western Asia until the spread of Greek power by

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Alexander the Great, who ruled from 336 to 323 B.C. It is within this overall context of Persian rule (539–336) that the events described in Ezra and Nehemiah took place. (See Table of events, p. xi.)

Many historical problems arise in the study of these books, and some attention will be given to the chief ones in the commentary, but there are two matters which have been the subject of much discussion and may appropriately be noted here. The first concerns the period of the rise of Persian power, and the events described in Ezra 1–3. It is clear that permission was given for the rebuilding of the temple and this meant that Jerusalem could resume something of its old role as a cult centre. It is much less clear whether Persian policy envisaged a substantial return of those who had been deported from their homelands. Two forms of the decree of Cyrus are found in Ezra (1: 2–4 and 6: 3–5). The latter, which is in the Aramaic section of the book, is concerned only with the temple rebuilding; the former, in Hebrew, also authorizes a large-scale return to Palestine. Since we have no supporting evidence of such a migration, which is not suggested by the books of Haggai and Zechariah, which also date from this period, it may well be that this is an idealization by the Chronicler. For him, it was inevitable that the exiled congregation should have taken the first opportunity to return to their homeland; the reality may have been much less exciting, with greater freedom of movement allowed under the Persian régime, but nothing corresponding to the movement of many thousands of people as described in Ezra 2.

The other historical problem concerns a period somewhat later. It is that of the chronological order of Ezra and Nehemiah. At first sight, the Old Testament seems to provide a clear answer. Since both are placed in the reign of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7: 7; Neh. 2: 1), it appears that – assuming the Persian king Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.) is meant – Ezra can be dated at 458 B.C. and Nehemiah at 445 B.C. The assumption that the references are to the same Persian king has, however, been

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widely questioned, and many scholars, perhaps a majority, have felt that Ezra should be placed after Nehemiah, in the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–358 B.C.), i.e. around 398 B.C. The grounds for such a view are mainly the curious lack of cross-references between the descriptions of the work of Ezra and of Nehemiah although as the biblical text now stands Ezra is envisaged as carrying out his task of proclaiming the Law at the time when Nehemiah was governor (Neh. 8). In support of this reversal of order a number of details have been adduced, such as the likely succession of high priests (see the commentary on Ezra 10: 6), and the general impression created by the text that Nehemiah was carrying out a pioneering work, whereas Ezra was preaching to an established community.

An answer on these lines may well be correct, but it is important to recognize that we have no real supporting evidence from other sources which enables us to date either Ezra or Nehemiah. Certainly neither of them is mentioned by name in extra-biblical sources. It has, indeed, commonly been assumed that we have one piece of evidence which makes Nehemiah's date almost certain at 445 B.C. Early in this century, a number of texts written on papyrus were discovered at Elephantine, near Aswan in Egypt, which referred to the life of a Jewish colony there. Among these texts were references to 'Delaiah and Shelemaiah the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria'. This text dates from about 408 B.C., and the assumption has commonly been made that Sanballat – active nearly forty years earlier, at the time of Nehemiah – was now an old man who left his sons to carry out the duties of governorship. This may indeed be the case, but the position has been complicated by other texts, the so-called 'Samaria papyri', which mention the existence of another Sanballat as governor in the fourth century. Some scholars have argued that Nehemiah's mission should be dated in the time of Artaxerxes II, that is, from about 384 B.C. onwards. This would be another way of explaining the lack of cross-reference between the two leaders.

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Finally, the possibility of retaining the traditional dating – Ezra in 458, Nehemiah in 445 – should not be excluded. The lack of cross-reference between the two men may be more of a problem for us than it was for the ancient writer, and we are reminded of the lack of any reference between other Old Testament figures who were contemporaries – Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example. If the sources of information about Ezra and Nehemiah were originally separate, it is perfectly possible that each concentrates on its own presentation of events without reference to the part played by others. If this is so, the passages which refer to both men together (e.g. Neh. 8: 9) would be later glosses, but would nevertheless give the right sense.

It seems best, therefore, to admit that we do not know the answer to the question of precedence. If a reconstruction must be attempted, then that which places Nehemiah in 445 and Ezra in 398 may be the least unsatisfactory, but we have seen that each date is open to challenge, and it is better to admit frankly that the materials for a precise reconstruction are not available to us.

Following on from this, a more general caution may usefully be made. As has already been observed, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah often provide the only information we possess about the period they cover. Compared with later presentations of the same period they are obviously more reliable historical witnesses, as may be seen, for example, by a comparison with the picture in 2 Maccabees 1 and 2 of the work of Nehemiah, where he is described as having ‘built the temple and the altar’ (2 Macc. 1: 18). A moment’s reflection will show, however, that this greater reliability in no way implies absolute historical trustworthiness, and – just as in the rest of the Chronicler’s work – we may expect to find a theological motivation underlying many apparently historical statements. In short, the same caution with regard to historical reconstruction that is commonly accorded to 1 and 2 Chronicles is also necessary here.

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THE BOOK OF

EZRA

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*The return of the exiles to
Jerusalem*

THE LORD'S FAVOUR SHOWN THROUGH CYRUS

NOW IN THE FIRST YEAR of Cyrus king of Persia, so **1**
that the word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah
might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the heart of Cyrus
king of Persia; and he issued a proclamation throughout
his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing, to
this effect:

This is the word of Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD **2**
the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the
earth, and he himself has charged me to build him a
house at Jerusalem in Judah. To every man of his people **3**
now among you I say, God be with him, and let him
go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of
the LORD the God of Israel, the God whose city is
Jerusalem. And every remaining Jew, wherever he may **4**
be living, may claim aid from his neighbours in that
place, silver and gold, goods^a and cattle, in addition to
the voluntary offerings for the house of God in
Jerusalem.

Thereupon the heads of families of Judah and Benjamin, **5**

[a] Or pack-animals.

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EZRA I

The return of the exiles to Jerusalem

and the priests and the Levites, answered the summons, all whom God had moved to go up to rebuild the house
 6 of the LORD in Jerusalem. Their neighbours all assisted them with gifts of every kind, silver^a and gold, goods^b and cattle and valuable gifts in abundance,^c in addition to
 7 any voluntary service. Moreover, Cyrus king of Persia produced the vessels of the house of the LORD which Nebuchadnezzar had removed from Jerusalem and placed
 8 in the temple of his god; and he handed them over into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who made an inventory of them for Sheshbazzar the ruler of Judah.
 9 This was the list: thirty gold basins, a thousand silver
 10 basins, twenty-nine vessels of various kinds, thirty golden bowls, four hundred and ten silver bowls of various types,
 11 and a thousand other vessels. The vessels of gold and silver amounted in all to five thousand four hundred; and Sheshbazzar took them all up to Jerusalem, when the exiles were brought back from Babylon.

* Ezra I is properly understood as the sequel to 2 Chron. 36, according to which all 'who escaped the sword he [Nebuchadnezzar] took captive to Babylon' (verse 20), while the land lay desolate. For the Chronicler, that is to say, the true community was to be found in Babylon, and the picture given here and more fully developed in succeeding chapters is of the continuing kindness of the LORD toward them. When the punishment is complete, they are allowed to return to their homeland, the sacred vessels are restored to them, protection against enemies is given to allow the rebuilding of the temple,

[a] with gifts. . . silver: *prob. rdg., cp. 1 Esdras 2: 9; Heb.* with vessels of silver.

[b] Or pack-animals.

[c] in abundance: *prob. rdg., cp. 1 Esdras 2: 9; Heb.* apart.