

in which we should operate, but we do well to heed the message of Proverbs 14:12: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death".

We rejoice in the fact that the Bible teaches there is no distinction between women and men in terms of spirituality, value, salvation or destiny. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that Christ and his apostles established clear functional differences when it comes to teaching and leadership of the assembled ecclesia. The New Testament

says sisters should not exercise a formal teaching or leadership role in ecclesial meetings, but, these two restrictions aside, it also makes it clear that sisters should make use of their teaching (and other) skills in spreading the gospel, in the nurture of children and the ecclesial community, and in the instruction of their fellow sisters. All members must take advantage of the abundant opportunities God provides to use their gifts in accordance with the Divine will, and with the objective of glorifying Almighty God.

(Concluded)

## Exposition

# Ezra: a book for today

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*The book of Ezra records the return of a small group of faithful Jews to Jerusalem. Their struggles to rebuild the temple and to re-establish the nation in the Land are recorded. This is more than interesting history; it is Divinely edited history "written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope".*

**E**ZRA AND Nehemiah, together with the post-exilic prophets, cover the final chapter of Old Testament history: the return of the Israelites to the land of their fathers and their attempts to re-establish themselves in the land of the promises. After the moral decline and failure of first Israel and then Judah, the return from exile testifies to God's continuing work of salvation. These books confirm that God's "hand is not shortened, that it cannot save" (Isa. 59:1); they encourage us to trust in God's promises; they exhort us to recognise that God is in control; and they inspire us to look with confidence toward the day when Jerusalem is once again a centre of praise in the earth.

All Israelites, both natural and spiritual, in all ages have yearned for the restoration of the Kingdom of God. These sentiments motivated those faithful few who in faith returned from captivity to their ancient homeland, and yet their hopes and aspirations were not realised. Often it must have seemed like it was one step forward and two steps backward. As one of their prophets said, it was

a "day of small things" (Zech. 4:10). Some of the returning exiles despised its limitations, but they were blind to what was really happening. Believers in the twenty-first century also live in a day of small things; at times we can despise the circumstances, but that is because we too can be blind to what God is doing.

## God at work

The book of Ezra opens with a statement acknowledging that God is in control and that God's plan and purpose will be worked out in accordance with His will: "Now 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (1:1,2).

Cyrus was a canny, worldly-wise leader. He would have made his decision to order the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the return of the exiles for sound political and strategic reasons. The writer of Ezra, however, is at pains to underline the fact that the actions of Cyrus fulfilled the Divinely inspired words of Jeremiah the prophet, as recorded in Jeremiah 29. This is

how God works. The angels, as His servants, are active in manipulating events in the world to bring about His purpose. This was the case in the court of Cyrus and it remains true today in London, Moscow, Paris, Washington, Teheran, Jerusalem, Cairo and anywhere else where world leaders take an interest in the land and people of God.

Chapters 1 and 2 of Ezra detail the response of some of the Jews in Babylon to Cyrus' decree. The generosity of Cyrus should have encouraged the Jewish exiles to embrace this opportunity wholeheartedly. A lengthy list of those who responded is recorded in chapter 2, but when the total is given we find it was a mere fraction of the Jews in Babylon at the time: "The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women" (vv. 64,65).

### **Too comfortable in this age?**

What was wrong? The prophecy about the return to the Land was unambiguously clear. They knew the promises that God had made to their fathers. They knew their hopes and aspirations were tied up in Jerusalem. Why did so few respond? In considering this we need to think about its significance for us. We too have clear, unambiguous prophecies about the re-establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. We also know that the hope of the gospel is the hope of Israel. We know Jerusalem will one day soon be the centre of world worship. And yet we also can be reluctant to respond to the promptings of God.

Many of the Jews in Babylon had become very comfortable in the luxury of that city. They were well accepted and established. It would seem that for many the thought of relocating to a broken-down city was unappealing. They were too happily ensconced in Babylon. Is this the case for us in our modern-day Babylon? Are we so comfortable in this world that we are unwilling to respond to the demands of Almighty God to prepare properly for the restoration of His Kingdom in Jerusalem? As always when reviewing the Divinely inspired history of Israel, it is worth examining ourselves before we condemn the faithless Jews of the days of Cyrus.

And what of those faithful ones who did respond to the decree of Cyrus? Well, there is exhortation for us here also. What started so

promisingly quickly petered out into mediocrity. The decree of Cyrus was made in about 537 B.C. As we saw in Ezra 1:2, it required the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. But within a few years the people left off building the temple. From Ezra 4 we might think this was because their enemies conspired against them and secured a ban on the rebuilding work: "when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power. Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem" (vv. 23,24).

### **Opposition causes loss of vision**

Local opposition, however, was only part of the problem. The next verse (5:1) refers to Haggai, who prophesied in about 520 B.C., less than twenty years after the decree of Cyrus. It is true that there was opposition from their enemies, but Haggai tells us that an even more powerful force was at work to undermine the rebuilding work. That force was apathy and a focus on self: "Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the LORD'S house should be built. Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?" (1:2-4).

What a scathing indictment of the people! This was spoken to exiles who had accepted the challenge to return to Jerusalem. Yet less than twenty years later even those who had turned their back on Babylon had turned from the work of God to devote their time and resources to the things of this life. Is this also a problem for us? Have we forsaken the world and embraced the hope of Israel only to allow ourselves to be ensnared by the cares of the very world upon which we once turned our backs? If it happened to the returning exiles it can happen to us.

Haggai was successful in spurring the Jews on to finish the temple, and construction was completed in about 516 B.C. But Haggai's influence did not last. The Jews in the Land settled down and appear to have allowed the cares of this life to overwhelm them. It is obvious, for instance, that having built the temple they did not go on to rebuild and refortify the walls of Jerusalem, for this still needed to be done in the days of Nehemiah over seventy years later. But God sought to rekindle their enthusiasm in the interim.

### **Faithful leaders raised up**

Just as in the days of the kingdom, God raised up prophets like Haggai to spiritually enliven the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem. He also raised up faithful leaders to spur them—in particular Ezra and Nehemiah. In about 458 B.C., nearly sixty years after the temple was completed, Ezra was sent from Babylon to encourage a spiritual revival in Jerusalem. Whom better could God have sent? Ezra 7:1-5 sets out his impeccable pedigree. Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron. It is possible that he was the leading priest among the community of Jews in Babylon after the initial return. It is obvious that Ezra was a man of influence in both the Jewish community and the wider Babylonian society: “Ezra . . . was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him” (v. 6).

It would seem that Ezra had access to and the confidence of the king. More importantly, however, he was a “ready scribe”, or “skilled”, as the RSV says, or “well versed”, as the NIV renders it, in the Law of Moses. It is all very well for ecclesial leaders to enjoy the confidence of the authorities of the land in which we live; the Brotherhood has benefited from this in many ways over the years. It is much more important, however, that they are well versed in the Word of God. Ezra’s qualifications in this regard are set out in verse 10: “Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments”.

Ezra was raised up by God, but he had a disposition with which God could work. He “prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach”. Ezra was first and foremost a man of the Word. This was manifested in three ways: firstly, he sought the Law, meaning that he studied it; secondly, he did the Law, meaning that he lived it in his life; and thirdly, he taught the Law to Israel. Here is a model for us: preparation, action and extension.

### **Preparing oneself for the work**

Note what verse 10 does not say. It does not say that God or anyone else prepared Ezra’s heart. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. God does raise people using circumstances in their life, but He does not override their personal accountability. Each of us has an obligation to prepare ourselves for the work of God. Through providence God can

provide any number of opportunities to work, but we must first be willing to give ourselves to preparation through attention to the Word. And having prepared, we must be prepared to live that Word in our life. Our preparation must be more than an intellectual exercise; our purpose is not to pass an academic examination but to develop attitudes and behaviours that reflect the ways of God rather than the ways of men. Only then are we fit to teach.

As a faithful servant, well versed in the Word, Ezra recognised that God is in control of everything. Nothing happens that is not according to God’s will. This comes out quite incidentally in the text. We have already noted that the book opens with a statement to this effect. It is also evident in 7:6, which we have already considered (“according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him”); Ezra knew that he was no more than an agent of God, a tool used by God to effect His purpose. And the same sentiment comes out incidentally throughout the record (see 7:9; 8:18,22,31).

Ezra came to a community whose commitment to the Word of God and His ways had been allowed to slip. They had become corrupted and apathetic about the commandments of Almighty God. In particular, they had allowed themselves to become integrated with the Gentiles around them through intermarriage. Not only is marriage out of the faith always unwise, it was expressly forbidden by the Law of Moses.

### **Confession and reform**

In Ezra 9 the ready scribe confronted the spiritual failings of the returned exiles head on. He did not try to make excuses for their failings; he did not look for loopholes; he did not seek to reinterpret God’s Word to find a way around an inconvenient Scriptural teaching. We are sometimes tempted to do all of these things, but Ezra did not. But nor did Ezra manifest self-righteous indignation. Instead he identified himself with the people to whom he had come to minister: “And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, and said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (9:5,6).

The full prayer in chapter 9 is very moving. Repeatedly we see Ezra identifying himself with his sinful brethren. He speaks of “our iniquities” and “our trespass” (vv. 6,7); he says, “we have

forsaken Thy commandments" (v. 10); he refers to "our evil deeds", "our great trespass" (v. 13), and so on. Though personally a righteous man, like all faithful priests Ezra identifies with the people on whose behalf he is interceding. In this regard he is like our own high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shared our nature, who was in all points tempted like we are, who in his body bore our iniquities.

We may take comfort from Ezra's prefiguring of our Master's merciful work as our high priest, but we should also draw from Ezra's example an exhortation to act as he acted. Let us never look upon our erring brothers and sisters as beyond the pale, as unworthy of our care and concern, as less honourable than ourselves. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and we must be willing to reach out and support those who are straying from the ways of God, but always with a view to upholding God's standards and God's righteousness.

### **Awareness of the living God**

We noted earlier that Ezra was acutely aware of the hand of God in all things. Ezra saw the hand of God in delivering his party from the threats posed by their enemies as it journeyed to

Jerusalem (8:31). In his prayer Ezra recognised that the same God Who had delivered his party from harm had also delivered the erring nation into the hands of its enemies when it had sinned: "Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day" (9:7).

God is not mocked. We cannot recognise that Almighty God is at work in the nations and at the same time think that He is not at work in the ecclesia. We should not despair when troubles come upon us, but we should also not ignore what might well be the chastisement of a loving heavenly Father Who may be seeking to correct us.

The Lord Jesus Christ today walks amongst the ecclesias. We are never alone, never forsaken. Angels minister to us in ways we do not comprehend, just as they work amongst the nations in ways which world leaders who delude themselves that they are in charge can never perceive. The Lord wants us to examine ourselves, to "consider [our] ways" (to use the words of Haggai), as we await the fulfilment of His promises and prophecies. Ezra's example can help us to this end.