

# “The God of Heaven”

## The First in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 1:1-4; Revelation 11:1-13

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We begin a new series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These two closely related books cover that period in Israel’s history from the decree of the Persian king, Cyrus, in 538 BC, until about the year 458 BC, the time of Ezra. These two books demonstrate God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises—YHWH will bring his people back to the land after a time of exile in Babylon, and direct them to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its temple—both now destroyed. Familiarity with these two books will help us to understand the establishment of a form of Judaism (so-called “Second Temple” Judaism) much different from that which existed in the days of Joshua, and then later under king David. By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, Israel is no longer a victorious, thriving military power. Israel is now the vassal state of a Gentile empire, living on past glory, and although there are moments of revival and faithfulness among the people, this is a time when the Jewish people sought former glory and to recover that which was lost. Yet all of this serves to set the stage for a future Messiah—who alone can restore true Israel, and turn the hearts of a stubborn and rebellious people back to the covenant promises of their ever-faithful God. And so we begin our new series by setting the stage for the work of Ezra and Nehemiah and their accounts of an exile people who return home to find their temple in ruins, and their beloved city of Jerusalem all but deserted and now desolate.

587 BC was a year of great consequence for the people of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. Israel had been a divided kingdom for nearly two hundred years—a time recounted in redemptive history in the ministries of the Old Testament prophets Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. This was a time in Israel’s history characterized by division and a growing apostasy and idolatry among the people, a time when God’s covenant curses were meted out upon both the faithless Israelites and their unbelieving rulers, and a time of the ever-increasing threat of domination by foreign powers.

The northern kingdom (Israel) was defeated and overrun by the Assyrians in 722 BC, but the southern kingdom, Judah, remained a functioning monarchy, continuing the Davidic royal line through the series of kings listed in 1 Chronicles 3:1-16. Eventually, Judah too became largely apostate—although there was a significant Reformation in the days of Josiah (around 620 BC). But Judah too eventually fell to the Chaldean armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as recounted in 2 Kings 25:1–7, where we read of a siege of Jerusalem, and Judah’s total collapse in the days of king Zedekiah.

And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it. 2 So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. 3 On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. 4 Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king’s garden, and the Chaldeans [a tribe ruled by the Babylonians] were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. 5 But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. 6 Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. 7 They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains

and took him to Babylon.

Israel had fallen a long way from the glorious days of her great empire during the successive reigns of David and Solomon. Now, the formidable walls of Jerusalem were breached by Nebuchadnezzar's armies, and the city and its defenses were left in ruins—an event which will figure very prominently in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Jerusalem temple was sacked, and its precious metals removed (i.e., the gold and silver vessels in temple) and taken as booty to Babylon by the victorious captors.

Judah's presiding king, Zedekiah, was nothing but a weak vassal (subject) of the Babylonians, yet he eventually rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and was subsequently was forced to witness the death of his sons, before his own eyes were gouged out—so the last thing he would see before being blinded was the death of his sons. Then he, along with many of the remaining citizens of Jerusalem, in addition to a number of the people of Judah, were taken into captivity, and transported as human chattel (property) to the capital of the Babylonian empire, the city of Babylon. Anywhere between twenty to one hundred thousand Jews were taken captive (a number toward the higher end is likely), although many more Jews remained behind in Judah, without a king, without a capital, and without a temple.

Given the history of the Jews, it was only natural for these captives to reflect upon this tragic and depressing turn of events through the lens of redemptive history. One thousand years earlier, the Jews found themselves in Egypt, facing increasing oppression and eventually full-blown slavery under the Egyptian Pharaoh. They had entered Egypt as group of families seeking relief from a famine in their own land, but they exited their captivity as a great nation.<sup>1</sup> The Jews witnessed firsthand the sovereign power of YHWH in bringing devastating plagues upon the Pharaoh and his people, YHWH gave them two defining sacraments (circumcision and the Passover), and then miraculously parted the Red Sea for them, making a way of escape from the armies of Pharaoh which pursued them into the desert when they left Egypt. He then gave them his law at Mount Sinai, and miraculously fed them in the wilderness. When Moses recounts to the Israelites their own history while on the plains of Moab before they enter the promised land, in Deuteronomy 26:5-9 he reminds them:

“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6 And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. 7 Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. 9 And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The children of Abraham left Egypt, and then entered the promised land of Canaan as a great nation, in direct fulfillment of God's promise to the patriarch and father of all the faithful.

And yet, by the time of the divided kingdom (within a generation of the death of Solomon) and the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC, God's people had grown ignorant of his word and his promises. The people demonstrated a great desire to live like their pagan neighbors, and their reckless intermarriage

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol. 11, D. J. Wiseman, ed. (Wheaton: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 13.

with various Canaanites tribes would lead to their undoing. As God's covenant people married the pagans around them, which ensured the worship of the false gods of the surrounding nations, the land of promise (that good land flowing with milk and honey promised them by YHWH) had become a wasteland. Canaan was filled with hostile invaders, and the Israelites soon found themselves defeated and then exiled, hauled off into distant and harsh captivity in Babylon in 587, the capital of a pagan king and his vast pagan empire. Thus began the so-called Babylonian captivity of the people of God.

But if the people of God had come under YHWH's covenant curse, were cast from the land of promise, and sentenced to exile in the midst of a pagan empire, then what remains of YHWH's covenant promises to Abraham: that Israel would be a great nation, that Abraham would have descendants so numerous they cannot be counted, as well as possess the land of promise? The very fact that the Jews have been taken into captivity and exiled from the promised land, sets the stage for a new Exodus of the people from their bondage in Babylon, a rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem (and its defenses), and a rebuilding and re-consecration of the temple. If the Jews went from a family to a nation while in Egypt, then while in Babylon, the Jews in exile, go from a scattered flock to a covenant people with makings of a church.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout their captivity and exile in Babylon, we see yet again that God will indeed mete out his covenant curses upon his disobedient people and their enemies, while at the same time keeping his covenant promises. His disobedient people will be punished, but God's purposes will not be thwarted. Although God used Nebuchadnezzar as the instrument of judgment upon the Israelites, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire are themselves short-lived, overcome by the Medo-Persian empire, led by king Cyrus. In fact, Isaiah prophesied about this event (Isaiah 44:28); "*Who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'*" In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah we witness the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

The time frame here and the changing historical circumstances are important to keep in mind. The two books of Ezra and Nehemiah (which the Jews considered to be a single volume) pick-up where 2 Chronicles ends, and cover a time span of about eighty years, from the year 538 BC, when Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a decree to send the Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple, until the time of Ezra, about 458 BC. Cyrus and his Medo-Persian empire defeated the Babylonians in 550 BC., before finally taking the city of Babylon in 539, some fifty years after the Jews were taken into captivity. The fortunes of God's captive people would change dramatically when the Persians capture Babylon.

Unlike the Babylonians, who regarded the peoples whom they defeated as slaves and laborers, the Medo-Persian empire sought instead to build strong local political alliances with those whom they conquered. This made for better local government—you did not deal with a proud people like the Jews as their occupiers and masters, but rather, you treat them as vassals (subjects). This strengthened the Persian empire, because occupied nations, if treated well, would aid in the defense of the empire, pay tribute to the Persian king, and not require Persian troops to occupy their lands. The Persians were largely indifferent to the various religions of their subjects, and even helped various tribes and nations re-establish their own temples, shrines, and priests. Happy subjects, make for loyal subjects, the Persians reasoned. We know this to be the case due to the discovery of the so-called Cyrus Cylinder, discovered in Babylon 1879, which among other things, lays out the king's policy of returning exiles to their homeland, and his desire to help them rebuild their cities and religious institutions throughout the entire

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 13.

region occupied by the Persian empire.

The Book of Ezra opens with the declaration in verses 1-4, that *“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: 2 “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. 3 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. 4 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.”* The decree of Cyrus issued in 538, both sets forth the time frame, and then guarantees that the Jews in Babylon (a city now under Persian control) will return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.

Historical evidence shows that the Jews actually flourished during their time in Babylon, as documented in Ezra 2, over 40,000 of them returned to Judah. The prophet Jeremiah instructed them that during their exile, *“thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare”* (Jeremiah 29:4–7). God’s instructions to his exiled people entail remaining faithful to him and not serving pagan gods, yet getting on with life while living among the pagans. Not a word about “transforming” or claiming Babylon for YHWH, only remaining faithful while seeking the welfare of the pagan city—which, as we saw from our time in 1 Peter, are instructions which apply to us as well.

The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra describe the eighty years or so from the issuing of Cyrus’ decree in 538 BC until Ezra himself appears on the scene in chapter 7. So, in the first six chapters of Ezra, we read of those returning exiles, now released from their captivity in Babylon, and given the opportunity and means to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the city, its walls and defenses, as well as the temple. It is during this period that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are active, and together with Ezra, will tell us of the struggles faced by the Jewish people trying to rebuild the city and its temple. We will read of Zerubbabel—a Jew born in Babylon, who serves as the Persian-appointed governor of Jerusalem beginning in 538 BC. Under his direction, work began on the temple about 529 BC, but little had been accomplished until the year 520 BC. This slow progress was due to much in-fighting and dissent among the Jews, and much political intrigue with the Persians. Despite the ups and downs recounted by Ezra, the temple was eventually rebuilt and dedicated to YHWH in 516 BC, with the Passover and Feast of Unleaven Bread celebrated in Jerusalem that year for the first time since the exile in 587.

The first six chapters of Ezra then, recount the story of the first generation of returned exiles (from 538-516 BC)—the time of Cyrus’ decree until the temple was completed and dedicated. It is not until chapter seven (vv. 1-5), that we finally meet Ezra, a priest, who returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC, more than fifty years after the temple had been rebuilt and dedicated in 516. Ezra is said to be a son of “Seraiah” who was the last high priest in Jerusalem before the exile, which ties Ezra into the line of a priest named Azariah, who was high priest in the Jerusalem temple in the days of Solomon, and a biological descendant of Aaron (Israel’s first high priest). Erza’s genealogical chart clearly shows him to be the right man for the job.

Because Ezra is a descendant of Aaron, the restored Israel stands in continuity with Israel before the exile.<sup>3</sup> But the return of the people under the leadership of Zerubbabel resulted in a rebuilt temple; the so-called “second temple,” a temple which is no longer the “temple of David.” Even as Haggai and Zechariah prophesy regarding a messianic hope for Israel, the future course of redemptive history will reveal that the hopes of a true temple are fulfilled in a biological ancestor of David—none other than Jesus himself. This “second temple” will be rebuilt under Gentile supervision, before eventually coming under the control of the high priest and elders of Israel, who themselves were under the careful watch of first the Persians, then a series of Greek kings (the Selucids and Hasmoneans) and then eventually the Romans.<sup>4</sup> God will keep his covenant promises. The people will return home to Jerusalem in a new Exodus, they will rebuild their temple and reconsecrate it, and then offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. But it will be the case, that the temple’s true glory is past, and that whatever temple is rebuilt—no matter how magnificent it may appear—ultimately serves the greater purpose of pointing the people of God ahead to the coming of that one (Jesus) who is indeed greater than the rebuilt temple.

As for the authorship and history of Ezra and Nehemiah, most scholars conclude that given the fact Ezra’s opening six chapters pick-up right where 2 Chronicles leaves off (even repeating the final paragraph of 2 Chronicles) this indicates that the Book of Ezra was written by the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles (the so-called “Chronicler”). Add to this the fact that Ezra and Nehemiah circulated in early Jewish circles as one book (“Ezra”) it is certainly possible that Chronicler composed Nehemiah as well.

But there are also good reasons to believe that someone else (unknown to us) composed these two books. The author of Chronicles makes no reference to intermarriage between Israelites and pagan Gentiles (which is a major theme of Ezra and Nehemiah). And in the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles follows Ezra-Nehemiah in canonical order. It may be that the final words of Chronicles (found in the opening of Ezra) connects Chronicles to Ezra-Nehemiah which was written first. Furthermore, the Jewish Talmud explicitly identifies “Ezra” as the author of these two books.<sup>5</sup> Whoever the author was, he certainly utilized the “memoirs” of Ezra (chapters 7-9) and Nehemiah (chapters 1-2, 4-7, 12-13). The extensive lists and inventories found in these two books likely come directly from the Jerusalem temple archives. The imperial (Persian) decrees were written at the time of the events recorded, and so were available to either the Chronicler, or to someone like Ezra (a priest) who had access to such things in the temple.

In the opening four verses of the Book of Ezra, we discover one of the main themes running throughout these two books—the sovereignty of God, directing all things to their divinely-appointed end. Ezra opens with the declaration that “*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.*” Cyrus, acting freely, and carrying out a policy he thought best for his empire, is actually fulfilling the purposes of God, as directed by God to do so. Cyrus even identifies YHWH (of whom he has heard) as “the God of heaven,” an acknowledgment that even though God is in heaven (and is unseen), he is sovereign over all events, as

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Waltke, An Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 782.

<sup>4</sup> Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, 772.

<sup>5</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 137-38; H. G. M. Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 16 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), xxxiii-xxxvi.

well as the comings and goings of the inhabitants of all the earth.<sup>6</sup> Without even knowing that he is doing so, a Persian king is fulfilling another prophecy from Isaiah (45:13) in addition to the prophecy we read earlier in Isaiah 44:28. *“I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the LORD of hosts.*” Cyrus, acting freely, is fulfilling biblical prophecy as directed by the Spirit of YHWH, who is sovereign.

The identification of YHWH as God in heaven who rules over all the earth, is also found in Revelation 11:13 (part of our New Testament lesson), as in John’s vision God directs events on earth to serve his greater purposes, even as he rules from heaven. The earth’s inhabitants witness the power of God and give glory to “the God of Heaven” just as Cyrus has done. In Revelation 11, we read of the two witnesses (who represent the church) preaching the gospel in the face of great opposition, even death. But God preserves his people, even as the Gentiles plunder the outer court of the temple (symbolic of the earth), while God preserves the Holy of holies (symbolic of his heavenly throne) from the wrath of the nations. In effect, this is what is happening during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. God allows his disobedient people to be persecuted, even killed, and his temple was desecrated by pagans. Yet he preserves his elect during their time in exile, and accomplishes his purposes through his mighty power. As we see in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, YHWH sends additional servants (i.e., Ezra and Nehemiah) forth to accomplish his purposes, and over the course the coming centuries YHWH will prepare the way for the coming of his son Jesus—who is the true temple of God.

Having moved Cyrus’ heart and previously given Judah the prophecy (through Isaiah) and Jeremiah that the Jews would be exiled from the land and then return, we read in verses 2-4, the details of Cyrus’ decree. *“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.”* The Cyrus cylinder expresses Cyrus’ primary allegiance to Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, as well as Cyrus’ desire that the foreign “gods” would pray to Marduk on his behalf.<sup>7</sup> Cyrus’ respect for “the God who is in Jerusalem,” who is the “God of heaven,” is not therefore a confession of faith, but rather an acknowledgment of how the Jews spoke of YHWH. All Cyrus cared about is that the Jews would pray to their God on his behalf, after he set them free to rebuild their God’s house in Jerusalem.

Unwittingly, perhaps, when Cyrus speaks of survivors of the fifty years in captivity, those Jews who will become sojourners upon their return to Israel, he is not only fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy that a “remnant” would return to the land (as we read in Isaiah 10:20ff.), but the gift of gold and silver, recalls the Israelites escaping from the Pharaoh and Egypt with large quantities of similar wealth as recounted in Exodus 12. What Cyrus—a pagan king—is doing, in light of Isaiah’s prophecy and echoes from the Exodus (a thousand years earlier) is instituting a second Exodus of the people of God from their captivity in Babylon so that they might return to the land (in Canaan) originally promised to them by YHWH. Cyrus even ensures that the Jews have the fiscal means and material support (goods, beasts, offerings) to

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<sup>6</sup> G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic; 2007), 1122.

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 32-33.

accomplish the work of rebuilding Jerusalem and the “house” of YHWH (i.e., the temple).

From the opening verses of the Book of Ezra, until the end of Nehemiah, we witness God keeping his covenant promises. He has punished his disobedient people—as threatened—by casting them from the land of promise (Canaan), then sending them to into a time of exile in pagan Babylon. Then God removed Nebuchadnezzar from power—because the Babylonian king sacked the temple and cruelly enslaved those to whom God promised the land of Canaan. YHWH then stirred Nebuchadnezzar’s successor, Cyrus, to issue a decree to allow the Jews to return home, rebuild their temple and their capital city. God even ensured the Jews would have the means to do so. And so the Book of Ezra opens with the call for a second Exodus—foretold by Isaiah and fulfilled by Cyrus—that a remnant would return to Judah and rebuild that which had been destroyed. The first point of application we find in Ezra is that God works all things for good, for those who love and have been called according to his purpose. Even a pagan king like Cyrus, acting from unbelief and self-interest, fulfills the will of God. Just as presidents, prime-ministers, kings, tyrants, and terrorists do today.

We also see God foretelling of these events and then fulfilling them, ensuring that the sins of his people do not thwart his plans, plans which require a rebuilt temple, a return to the land, and the realization that although the temple can be rebuilt and Jerusalem can come to life again, a rebuilt temple and a restored capital city cannot turn the hearts of God’s people to worship and serve him as they ought. Yes, there are moments of revival and renewed trust in YHWH’s promise, but the nation of Israel continues its slow but steady decline, losing faith in YHWH’s promise, or becoming increasingly confident in human righteousness and good works. It will take a coming Messiah, a life of perfect obedience, a bloody cross, and an empty tomb, for the true Israel and the true temple (Jesus) to show us clearly that to which Ezra and Nehemiah are ultimately pointing us through the efforts of the Jews to rebuild their city and their temple.