

ROUTE 66:THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 9: RETURN FROM EXILE: EZRA, NEHEMIAH & LAST PROPHETS

Probably one of the most welcome signposts seen by those who had been exiled and their families was the one which pointed away from Babylon and back to Judah. When the Babylonian empire was overthrown by the Medes and Persians in 539BC and the new Emperor Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Judah, faithful Jews would have seen this as the fulfilment of God's promise to restore the land to His people. The question was – what kind of restoration would emerge from the opportunity given to the returning exiles to revive and rebuild their unique heritage? The answers to that question are found in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi which cover the last 125 years or so of the Old Testament period. Four landmarks dominate this section of route 66. The first is the situation of the returning exiles.

Isaiah 44:26-28 (NIV) who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' 28 who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."

Ezra 1:1-4 (NIV) In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: 2 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. (see 2 Chronicles 36::22-23).

First, they found that the territory of Judah was greatly reduced in size. One estimate is that it was barely 25 miles from north to south. There had been encroachment by Edom from the south and other boundaries were fluid because the Babylonians had divided the empire into administrative areas called satraps. The Persians had made no major alterations to these. Samaria had become the dominant area in Palestine and consequently what had been Judah had had an influx of the peoples from surrounding nations including Ammonites and Edomites. So, apart from Jews who had not gone into exile, the returning exiles had problems finding land, places to stay, establishing businesses, generally building a new life for themselves and their families. The number who returned initially was relatively small, but as more returned, and especially as they tried to reclaim their ancestral holdings, opposition to them mounted. If they had expected to be welcomed back with open arms by their compatriots they were sadly disappointed. The records of opposition and signs of despair, discouragement and disillusionment, recorded especially by the prophets of this period, stand testimony to the fact that this would not conform to the images of the restoration to the glories of Zion spoken of in the writings of the pre-exilic prophets like Isaiah. Nevertheless, the remnant, through which God would work out His plan of salvation, established the physical and religious infrastructure to further the development of that plan.

In general terms, it could be said that what Ezra and Nehemiah built on the foundation laid by Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, in re-establishing a Jewish church and state in Judah.

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Ezra 3:2-3 (NIV) Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

Ezra 6:6-12 (NIV) 7 Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site..11 Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. 12 May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

Cyrus' decree permitted the building of a temple in Jerusalem and the men appointed to lead the people back to do this work in 538-536 were Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. Ezra tells us that Sheshbazzar was a "prince of Judah" (1:8), but that is all that is definitely known about him. He also tells us in 5:2 that Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel who was the son of Jehoiachin, one of the last kings of Judah. Zerubbabel, however returned to Judah, not as a king but of the same kind of status as a governor. So, at the very least, Cyrus can be given the credit for appointing men who understood the centrality of the symbolism of the temple when they started the daunting task of rebuilding the temple. Evidence of the opposition to this recorded in Ezra chapters 3-6. Already fear of the surrounding peoples was affecting the returnees, an indication that their presence was not welcome, especially when it came to returning to their own cultural practices. The temple was started in 538BC. Work stopped because of letters of accusations were sent by local leaders which stopped the work in 534BC and it was not until 520C that the work resumed when Cyrus's original decree was found and Darius ordered that the work was not to be hindered in any way. The temple was finally completed in 516BC. Because of opposition it had taken 20 years to get the temple built.

The rebuilding of the temple takes us to our second landmark for it was essential to the practice of the Jewish religion. And when Ezra returned in 458BC he was responsible for reviving the tenets of that religion by reaffirming and insisting upon the observance of the Mosaic Law.

Ezra 7:6-10 (NIV) Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. 8 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. 9 He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. 10 For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

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Ezra 7:25-26 (NIV) And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. 26 Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

Ezra's mandate was clear and was backed by an imperial decree of severe punishment for disobedience to both the laws of God and the law of the land. It appears too that he had a mandate to appoint officials to establish a legal system for the Jewish community. This meant that the Jews from the time of their return had a separate legal system based on their own laws.

Ezra 6:16-22 (NIV) 18 And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses..... 20 The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. 21 So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it (the Passover), together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbours in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel.

When Ezra returned he found that the temple was already functioning in terms of administration and ritual according to the Book of Moses. The Passover together with the emphasis of things being done according to what was written in the Book of Moses, reminded this community of their shared history. Thus, before Ezra arrived, birth and religious loyalty had already begun to set the lines of demarcation between Jews and all other peoples. That these lines were still very blurred was the first problem Ezra faced as far as community conduct was concerned. Apostasy and forbidden intermarriage with Canaanite tribes were rife among the Jews.

Ezra 9:1-4 (NIV)the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. 2 They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

Ezra 10:2-8 (NIV) Then Shekariah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. 3 Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. 4 Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.”..... 7 A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. 8 Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with

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the decision of the officials and elders, and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

As a priest, a scholar steeped in the Law of Moses and as a teacher of that Law, Ezra was appalled at this state of affairs tearing his clothes, pulling out his hair weeping and turning to God in prayer confessing the shame this practice brought on His people. In particular, as far as he was concerned intermarriage was anathema because it was explicitly forbidden by God. For Ezra, without exception and regardless of the hardship it would cause, it was something which had to be completely eradicated from the Jewish nation. The loss of property and expulsion from the community may seem harsh to us, but it was only by this drastic action could the purity of the Jewish bloodline be secured. It would appear that apart from this initial insistence on complete prohibition on intermarriage that Ezra concentrated on establishing those other matters given in his mandate.

Nehemiah 7:73 - 8:1, 8 & 18 (NIV) When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, 1 all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.....They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read..... From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.....Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

But 13 years later when Nehemiah arrived and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, Ezra was recalled into public life and, aided by priests and Levites, there began a week long reading and teaching of the Law of Moses. Living in tents as they had done in the wilderness was re-enacted and it is remarkable that the record takes the people's minds back to the time of Joshua regarding the mood of the celebration. But there was also another aspect to this celebration which indicated that Jewish distinction from the surrounding peoples was taking on a permanent recognition of the exclusiveness of their race.

Nehemiah 9:2-3 (NIV) Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. 3 They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God.

Nehemiah 9:5-6 (NIV) Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.” “Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. 6 You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

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Nehemiah 9:32-33 (NIV) Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. 33 In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.

Worship acknowledged the one exalted Lord of creation. The praise concentrates on God's faithfulness throughout their history from the call of Abraham to their present situation. There is the acknowledgement that their ancestors refused to heed all the warnings they had been given and for that reason they now were a subjugated people under foreign rule. At the end all the people pledged to worship God obey the Mosaic Law. Specifically, they promise not to allow sons or daughters to intermarry with other nations.

This landmark is one that clearly depicts the return of the exiles to their religious roots. The rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem were the symbols of their national identity and the revival of their ancestral worship practices appeared to once more establish them as the people of God.

Nevertheless, as our third landmark reveals, all of this was accomplished in the midst of opposition and hardship. Nehemiah's mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and establish its governance was not without its problems.

Nehemiah 1:8-9 & 11 (NIV) “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’ Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

When Nehemiah heard that the returning exiles were left without the protection of a fortified city, he was deeply alarmed. In those days it was common practice for people living outside a city to take refuge behind its walls when there was threat of attack. A walled city was essential for security. Jerusalem was therefore of strategic importance, but beyond that, it was also the city of David and believed to be the city God chose as His dwelling place on earth. Not only would the rebuilding of the walls boost the morale of those who had returned in terms of security, it would also serve as an assurance that God was once more prepared to favour them with His blessing of prosperity and protection. Here we have Nehemiah's acknowledgement that disobedience led to the exile, but his prayer is for the future. Throughout this whole book, Nehemiah's prayers, which would make a study in their own right, mark each step in the rebuilding of the walls. Like his predecessors who relied on God to guide their steps, Nehemiah succeeded because he was given permission to leave the imperial court and return to Judah to complete his task.

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Nehemiah proved himself to be a man of action which was governed by prayerful wisdom, prudence piety and unselfishness. In terms of personnel, he faced two problems.

Nehemiah 4:1-3 & 8(NIV) When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews.... in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, 3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, ...They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.

Nehemiah 6:1-2 (NIV) When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates— 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” But they were scheming to harm me;

The first was the hostility he faced from Samaria and Ammon. Taunts and ridicule failed to stop the building work. Further opposition came in the form of threats to his life and the list in chapter 6 of the intimidation tactics used to frustrate Nehemiah's schedule and put fear into the workers. But in spite of all their efforts, Sanballat, Geshem and Tobiah failed and the wall was completed in 52 days. This, episode, however, entrenched Judah's enmity with Samaria and after that time the breach became irreparable.

The second problem arose within his own community. The returning exiles were exploited by their compatriots.

Nehemiah 5:1, 6-8 (NIV) Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews..... When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with themThey kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

Nehemiah 5:15-18 (NIV) But the earlier governors...—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine....But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. 16 Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

17 Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

Nehemiah stopped the exploitation and refused to impose any greater financial burdens on the people as previous governors had done. His fair and just governance enabled the city to become populated as the genealogical records were approved. As mentioned, Ezra's public proclamation of the Mosaic law and the ensuing teaching and worship established the religious ethos of Jerusalem. The dedication of the walls described in chapter 12 was a matter of great rejoicing, after which Nehemiah organised the administration of the temple

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and the city, which involved the expulsion of all foreigners from the city and the closing of the gates on the Sabbath to prevent commercial activity desecrating it.

Between them, Ezra and Nehemiah had reconstituted what remained of Judah to its pre-exilic state in all but jurisdiction. Unfortunately, as time went on, all of the negative aspects of that state reappeared. The landmark of the prophets of the time highlight this fact. Haggai's prophecies came in the time of Zerubbabel and his work began in 520BC when the work on the temple had been stopped.

Haggai 1:3-4 & 9 (NIV) Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: 4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"...."You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.

Haggai gave a wake-up call to the people who were more concerned with getting on with their lives rather than concern themselves with the building of the temple. Complacency had set in and as mentioned life hadn't turned out as the returnees had expected. Haggai put this down squarely on the fact that they had neglected the things of God. Haggai was the catalyst that during the next four years was the driving force of encouragement that resulted in the temple being completed in 4 years. Although short, in this book, Haggai gives encouragement and hope for the future. People are assured that Zerubbabel is God's choice for this work. The reference to him being God's signet ring, the mark of the authority of a king, was related to events in the future, in which the name of Zerubbabel would play a part. There is the promise, too, of the future glory of God's house and blessing on a defiled people.

Zechariah was Haggai's contemporary and tradition holds that the two men were buried in the same grave. Like Ezekiel and Daniel before him, Zechariah's expresses the prophecies in apocalyptic language.

Zechariah 8:3 & 7-8 (NIV) This is what the Lord says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain."..... This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. 8 I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God."

Zechariah 9:9 (NIV) Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.....(NIV) He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah 14:20-21 (NIV) On that day holy to the Lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty.

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The New Testament contains many references from Zechariah and, as on all the landmarks at this point on our route, we find a review of the past history of the returning exiles and their present situations during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah 70 years later when hopes for restoration of Judah had started with such optimism and expectation. Zechariah's prophecies had encouraged them to look beyond that present to a glorious future when Yahweh would again be their God and they would be His people. It would be a perfect and secure environment for no Canaanite would dwell there. Zechariah's words would have given the people hope and encouragement for the future in the midst of their struggles to rebuild their lives. The might and prestige of David's kingdom was a distant memory, but these visions pointed to the return of such a kingdom, even though it would be in the distant future.

Malachi 1:6-8 (NIV) “A son honours his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the Lord Almighty. “It is you priests who show contempt for my name. “But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’ 7 “By offering defiled food on my altar. “But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’ “By saying that the Lord’s table is contemptible. 8 When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty.

When it became obvious that those prophecies would not be fulfilled by the returning exiles, disillusionment did set in. The social and religious life of the Judeans deteriorated into lip service to the law and negligent conformity to its rituals. It bore no resemblance to the ideals Ezra and Nehemiah had set before them and which they had agreed to follow. Starting with the priests, Malachi, who prophesied during the time of Nehemiah, went on to condemn the breaking of the covenant through injustice, through withholding tithes, through speaking arrogantly about God. Yet, Malachi also added his voice to the hope for the future.

Malachi 3:17-18 (NIV) “On the day when I act,” says the Lord Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. 18 And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

Malachi 3:1 & 4:5 (NIV) “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty..... “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

Malachi 4:2 & 5 (NIV) But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.....

Malachi is both the last book in the Old Testament and its last prophet. Scholars place the end of Malachi's ministry around 415BC. As we leave this last major stretch of route 66, he leaves us with the impression that the restoration of the Jews to their homeland in Judah left the people in a sorry state. But the

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landmarks here do indicate the beginning of traits which will evolve to define the Jews as a distinct people. Their shared history reinforced their sense of national identity. Genealogies took on even greater importance to enable identification. Mention of separation from the practices of their Gentile neighbours, particularly in Samaria, clearly indicates these people regarded themselves as a race apart from every other nation. Genealogies were also important for establishing who was a Jew by birth. To be recognised as a Jew you had to be born of Jewish parents. Adherence to the Torah, regardless of how lax that had become, was the second hallmark separating the Jews from all other religions. Jewish nationalism in the restoration period expressed in terms of birth and religion, centred on the Jerusalem temple and local synagogues, became the demarcation lines between Jews and all others.

Judah was a very small fish in a very, very large pond and there was a recognition as time went on that the restoration was not going to bring about freedom from subjugation by foreign powers. Nevertheless, as a result of prophecies like those in this period, faithful Jews began to study the writings of their prophets. Apocalyptic works replaced prophecy, which in its Jewish form, fed the Messianic hope which took root into the national and religious psyche of the Jewish population. From that moment on, God's plans and purposes would take His people in a different direction and His revelation, which would meet that Messianic expectation was going to come in a way they were not expecting.

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