

The Providential Direction of God in Post-Exilic Judaism

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Defeated and enslaved, God's chosen people seemed to Jew and to Gentile alike to have been abandoned by the God who had promised to preserve them. As they lay in exile far from the Promised Land, the people of Israel appeared to have been cut off from God's providence. Yet it was God's providence, not the Assyrians and the Babylonians, that had led His people into captivity, and God would use the prophesied return of his people from captivity to even more clearly display His providence.

That providence is particularly revealed in the two post-exilic books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Each book in its own way traces God's hand as it, sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, directs the people of Israel home to Jerusalem, rebuilds the Temple, protects the people from their enemies, and rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem. To understand how God providentially directed Israel during the post-exilic era, one must understand the meaning of the term *providence*. God's providence is "the unceasing activity of the Creator, whereby in overflowing bounty and goodwill, he upholds his creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for his own glory" (Douglas 979; internal references omitted). In Ezra and Nehemiah, God's direction of events and men is particularly highlighted.

God's Providence in the Book of Ezra

In its overall narrative of the history of the return from exile, the book of Ezra shows God's providential working. The cause of the exile itself is clearly attributed to God's sovereign displeasure at the sins of the people rather than to the power of Babylon (Ezra 5:12). But likewise it was God's providence that allowed Israel to leave the exile and rebuild the Temple and the wall (Ezra 9:8-9).

When one leaves the overall perspective of the book and focuses on the details of the narrative, one continues to discover the theme of God's providence. Throughout the book of Ezra, God's providence is particularly revealed in His control of the heathen rulers who ruled over the people of Israel and the enemies who opposed Israel when they had returned to the land.

Cyrus

The providential working of God in the post-exilic era is nowhere seen more clearly than in the life of Cyrus. And so it is fitting that the first biblical reference to God's control of Cyrus is recorded not in a history but in a prophecy. Nearly two hundred years before the events recorded in Ezra, Isaiah prophesied of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid" (Isa. 44:28). That prophecy was fulfilled and God's providence was displayed in Cyrus's decree to rebuild the Temple. The opening verses of Ezra show the true cause behind Cyrus's permission to rebuild the Temple: "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" (Ezra 1:1-2). That decree included financial and material provision for the rebuilding of the Temple and the return of the gold and silver vessels used in the Temple service.

The influence of that decree, and thus the influence of God's providence working through it, is seen continually in the book. When people of the region surrounding Jerusalem, adversaries of God's people, heard of the rebuilding of the Temple, they attempted to sabotage it by joining the work. But Zerubbabel and Jeshua were able to fall back on Cyrus's decree to exclude them. Thus, God's providence through the decree preserved the reconstruction from local enemies. God's providence also worked through the decree to continue the work despite the opposition of Tatnai, a more powerful foe who sought the intervention of Darius, Cyrus's successor, to stop the reconstruction. After the reconstruction had ceased and then restarted under the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Tatnai questioned under the authority under which the Temple was being built. But even then, the people did not cease the work again, because "the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease" (Ezra 5:5). The primary argument of the letter sent back to Darius was that the work had been authorized by the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 5:13, 17). And so, when the decree was found by Darius, the work was allowed to continue. Therefore, God's providential direction is seen in Cyrus's decree allowing the reconstruction of the Temple to begin, in preserving the reconstruction from local enemies, and in allowing the work to continue without Darius's commanding it to cease.

Darius

God's providential control of rulers was not limited to Cyrus, for that control can also be seen in the life of Darius. So closely tied was God's providence to the commandment of Darius that the two are almost seen as synonymous: "And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia" (Ezra 6:14). It was the decree of Darius, declared because of God's influence, that allowed the work to continue. In that decree Darius even makes mention of God's providential working (Ezra 6:12). This mention was almost certainly made in ignorance by the heathen ruler; nevertheless, he spoke accurately, for he was but a pawn in the God's plan for His people.

Artaxerxes

God clearly controlled Cyrus and Darius in order that He might be glorified by the rebuilding of the Temple during the first return from exile. Likewise, providence directed Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to send a second wave of Israelites to return who would adorn the Temple. Ezra had requested permission for another return to the land, and "the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him" (Ezra 7:6). The decree of Artaxerxes to beautify the temple granted financial support from the king himself, the vessels for the service in the Temple which had been taken captive, the ability for Ezra to draw support from treasurers outside of the center of Persia, and "whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven." Ezra knew whom to thank for the king's generosity, for he attributed it to the providence of God, praying, "Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:27).

One final reference to God's providence in the book of Ezra deserves mention, though it does not fit into the same pattern as the others. During the second return, the people returned to the land without a military escort, because Ezra had told the king that God's

protection was sufficient (Ezra 8:22). Accordingly, the people petitioned God for protection while journeying (Ezra 8:21-23) and by God's providence were protected (Ezra 8:31-32).

God's Providence in the Book of Nehemiah

In Nehemiah, the second post-exilic book, God's providence is no less clearly seen than in Ezra, yet the author chooses a different method to bring out that theme. Rather than exhibit God's providence by showing His control over heathen rulers, the author chooses to exhibit it by showing how the people, especially Nehemiah, relied upon God in their prayers.

This method is used in the very beginning of the book, in Nehemiah's prayer that is recorded in chapter one. In that prayer, Nehemiah relies upon God's promises that He would restore Israel (Neh. 1:8-9; cf. Deut. 28:63-67; 30:1-5) and attributes the redemption of the nation only to "thy great power, and . . . thy strong hand" (Neh. 1:10). The same principle of reliance upon God's providence evident in Nehemiah's first prayer is repeated in his second prayer during the first crisis in the book. When Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah what his request is, Nehemiah does not ask his request of the king first. Rather, he petitions God first and then makes his request of the king (Neh. 2:4). Neither does Nehemiah attribute the king's granting of that request to the king; rather, he recognizes that the king granted the request only "according to the good hand of my God upon me" (Neh. 2:8).¹ Nehemiah also showed a reliance upon God's providence when first exhorting the people to rebuild the wall, for he testifies of God's goodness to him (Neh. 2:18) and urges that goodness as a motivation for the people to join the reconstruction effort (Neh. 2:20). Next, when Sanballat and other enemies threatened to attack Jerusalem, Nehemiah first prays for God's aid and then continues building (Neh. 4:4-6, 9). Then, after more opposition by Sanballat, Nehemiah again prays for God's strength as being directly opposed to the weakness that his enemies have predicted for him (Neh. 6:9).

A reliance upon God's providence is also evident in the lengthy prayer of the leaders in chapter nine. In that prayer, much of which is a recitation of the history of God's dealing with Israel, the following examples of God's providence, among others, are mentioned: God's preservation of the earth (Neh. 9:6); His deliverance of the people from Egypt for His name's sake (Neh. 9:9-10); His faithful care in the wilderness (Neh. 9:19-21); His gift of the land in the conquest of Canaan (Neh. 9:24-25); His deliverance from oppression during the era of the Judges (Neh. 9:27); His preservation of the people in captivity (Neh. 9:31).

Conclusion

Throughout both Ezra and Nehemiah, the theme of God's providence is repeatedly emphasized, both in narratives of the actions of rulers and in the prayers of God's people. The people of God recognized God's providence, and praised Him for it, but so apparent was it that God controlled the actions of men and the outcome of events that even the heathen "perceived that this work was wrought of our God" (Neh. 6:16).

¹ The phrase "good hand of God" or some variation of it, reflecting a recognition by the author of God's providence, is repeated eight times in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh. 2:8, 18.

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