

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

IN recent years a number of commentators and historians have dealt very drastically with the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the main conclusion to which these writers have come, and to see whether their view is inevitable, or whether after all there is a great deal more to be said for the acceptance of the history as it stands in the Bible account.

I

First of all it will be useful to run through the Bible account in very brief outline. The two Books were probably originally one, and they form a continuation of the Books of Chronicles, and appear to be compiled by the same hand. Ezra i. 1 to iv. 5 (and also iv. 24) are concerned with the return under Cyrus in 537. The people begin to build the Temple, but owing to Samaritan opposition they are forced to desist until the beginning of the reign of Darius in 520. For the moment we omit iv. 6-23.

The next section is v. 1 to vi. 22, and occupies the period 520-516 B.C., when the people, encouraged by Haggai and Zechariah, re-commence the work on the Temple, and, in spite of opposition, are permitted by Darius to complete the work.

Then follows a gap of about 60 years, until the 7th year of Artaxerxes I, (i.e. 547 B.C.) (vii. 7) when Ezra came to Jerusalem. The remainder of the Book of Ezra from vii. 1 onwards, deals with the coming of Ezra and his reforms.

Before turning to the Book of Nehemiah, it is necessary to go back to Ezra iv. 6-23. This is a passage which is out of chronological order. It is not a question of a slip on the part of the Chronicler, since the passage is accurately dated. It belongs to the reign of Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, the king whom Esther married, and to the reign of Artaxerxes I, who gave permission for both Ezra and Nehemiah to return. It is possible that the Chronicler has placed the passage here in order

to group together several examples of Samaritan opposition. It is not unlikely that the historical document that he was using here had so grouped them. In any case their dating and their contents show that these protests to the Kings of Persia belong to a time when the city wall was being rebuilt, and not to the time of the building of the Temple.

NOTE. There is no justification for the idea in the Schofield Bible that Ahasuerus in iv. 6 is Cambyses, and Artaxerxes in iv. 7 is the Pseudo-Smendis. There is no evidence that they bore these names, and although they came between Cyrus and Darius, the contents of the letter would raise very great difficulties, since it does not deal with the building of the Temple.

It appears then that during the reign of Ahasuerus (485-464), and near the beginning of the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424) an attempt was made to rebuild the city walls, and for a time this met with some success. Probably Ezra refers to this wall in ix. 9 (an important verse for the modern theory). It appears however from iv. 7-23 that the protests of the surrounding peoples to King Artaxerxes met with the desired effect, and the King gave orders for the work to be stopped. The opposition carried out this work very thoroughly, and completely demolished the work that had been done on the walls. This was evidently after the coming of Ezra, and since Ezra no doubt took the lead in continuing the work that was already on foot when he arrived, it might account for his temporary eclipse at the beginning of the Book of Nehemiah, though one need not press this.

The opening chapter of Nehemiah now falls naturally into place. Nehemiah suddenly receives news from Jerusalem which fills him with dismay. i. 3. "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire." If this refers to the original destruction by Babylon in 586, (140 years before) it is difficult to account for Nehemiah's sudden grief. But it obviously refers to the recent havoc wrought by the opposition, and implied in Ezra iv. 7-23. This also gives point to Nehemiah's fear when he stood before the King. For he was about to ask him to reverse a decree that he had recently made.

Now it may seem surprising that the King should have reversed the decree, but it is difficult for us to realize how much the policy of an Eastern king could be swayed by a favourite.

Fantastic things could be done by some favourite courtier, or by some woman, who happened to appeal to the King. In any case Artaxerxes altered his original command, and gave Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem and to rebuild the wall; in addition he promised him substantial help, and made him governor of Judah. Chapters i.-vii. record the building of the wall in spite of opposition. The remainder of the Book is concerned with the reading of the Law book by Ezra, and the establishing of various ordinances and reforms. During part of this time Nehemiah returned to Persia, but came back again to Jerusalem to carry out further reforms (xiii. 6).

II

This is the outline of the history as it appears in these Books. It hangs together in a reasonable and coherent way. Perhaps it would be well to set the modern reconstruction alongside of it straightaway.

According to the modern view the return in 537 was comparatively small, and no attempt was made to rebuild the Temple. It was not until Joshua and Zerubbabel, with Haggai and Zechariah, returned with another party in 520 that the work on the Temple was begun. After the Temple was completed, there is a gap in the history until the coming of Nehemiah in 444 B.C. After Nehemiah there is another gap until 397 B.C. when Ezra came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes II. Omitting for the moment the question of the rebuilding of the Temple, we have the two entirely different views. The Chronicler makes Ezra come to Jerusalem in 457 B.C., in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I, and Nehemiah in 444 B.C. The modern view is that Nehemiah came in 444 B.C. (as the Chronicler says) and Ezra in 397 B.C. The basis of this theory is that the Chronicler made a mistake over the name Artaxerxes, when he came to describe the work of Ezra. The document that he used was really speaking of Artaxerxes II, whereas the Chronicler took the king as being Artaxerxes I, and fitted Ezra into the history in accordance with this idea.

The reasons for this drastic modern reconstruction are that there are said to be clear signs in these Books that Nehemiah must have preceded Ezra. These reasons we will come to in a minute or two. But in the meantime there is one radical objection which, as far as I can see, makes this modern conclusion

impossible. Yet, as far as I know, it has never been mentioned by anyone who holds the modern view.

It is this. The date of the compilation of Ezra and Nehemiah is accepted as being approximately 300 B.C. According to the modern theory Ezra came to Jerusalem ninety-seven years before this. How long he lived at Jerusalem we cannot tell, but since he attained considerable eminence in Jewish history and tradition, we can hardly believe that he lived for less than ten years at Jerusalem, and there would be nothing unlikely in supposing that he lived there for twenty years. But taking the minimum of ten years, and supposing that he died in 387; when the Chronicler came to compile his Book, he would be writing about someone whom one or two of the oldest inhabitants of Jerusalem would remember having seen. Those who were too young to remember him would have heard the full story of him from their parents. Yet when the Chronicler writes his history, he not only places Ezra sixty years too early, but even puts him thirteen years before Nehemiah, whom no living person then remembered. Quite honestly I believe that this argument by itself sufficiently refutes the modern reconstruction.

But to turn now to the arguments advanced against the accuracy of the Books. You must forgive me if the attitude that I take up is largely a negative one. In the nature of the case it must be so. In these Books there is what I believe to be a reasonable and coherent piece of history. My task is not so much to prove the accuracy of this history, for in most places that is impossible; but to examine the arguments that are held to show that this history is inaccurate in many particulars.

First of all the question arises of the general accuracy of the Chronicler in these Books, quite apart from the special question of the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah. If there are any obvious inaccuracies or contradictions, then the Chronicler is clearly an unreliable guide in matters of history. Now on the face of it the subject matter of these Books should be most reliable. For it does not appear to be so much a written history, as a carefully selected series of documents, put together more or less verbatim and in chronological order. Thus decrees, letters, registers and memoirs are carefully arranged to form a record of the events of the time. If the Chronicler has falsified

these records, a careful investigation will probably disclose it. If, however, such an investigation shows no inconsistencies, then there is no reasonable cause for doubting that the Chronicler has incorporated his sources accurately. There is, of course, the further possibility that the sources themselves may be inaccurate, but this does not come into the argument that we are now examining. The blame for the supposed inaccuracies is commonly laid at the Chronicler's door.

In looking for inaccuracies there is one paradox that must be borne in mind. That is, the more glaring the inconsistency, the less likely that it is an inconsistency at all. The author may easily overlook a small point, but if he introduces two statements that no one can overlook, it is obvious that to him there is no inconsistency, even though he may fail to make it clear to others where the harmony lies.

A good example of this is the two forms of the Decree of Cyrus given in Ezra i. 2-4 and vi. 3-5. The first decree is fairly general, ordering a return of the Jews to rebuild the Temple, and urging those who did not wish to return to help with gifts of various kinds. Incidentally it is often held that this decree is not general enough, and that Cyrus would never have issued one in this form; in particular he would not have said that Yahweh had given him all the kingdoms of the earth (verse 2). On the other hand a knowledge of human nature suggests that such a decree would be most likely. Cyrus was a king who was anxious to please his subjects. He allowed all the captive peoples whom he found in Babylon, to return to their own countries. A general decree is not as effective as the personal touch. Hence I suggest that Cyrus, being a wise man, summoned the leaders of the different peoples, and in consultation with them drew up the decrees in a form that would specially appeal to each. If we believe in the historicity of Daniel, we may well suppose that Daniel was responsible for the wording of this Decree.

But the second form of the Decree, given in vi. 3-5, is entirely different. It gives detailed instructions about the size of the Temple, a thing which certainly appears to be strange as coming from Cyrus. Now in chapter i we have the public decree. In chapter vi we have the record of this decree (verse 2). The decree is amplified, and put into a legal form, and deposited with the state documents. Cyrus was prepared to make a grant

towards the building of the Temple, and this is duly recorded. But he was no fool. These Jews were not going to claim an unlimited amount from his agents in Palestine. So he carefully specifies the maximum size of the building for which he was prepared to supply materials. Thus interpreted, these two forms of the Decree amplify, but do not contradict one another.

III

It has been worth while looking at this question of the Decree in some detail, since it is commonly quoted as an example of falsification by the Chronicler. One other instance may also be taken before we actually come to the story of Ezra and Nehemiah. We have, in fact, already touched upon it. Do Haggai and Zechariah contradict the Chronicler over the question of the rebuilding of the Temple? In particular does not Haggai say that the foundation of the Temple was only laid in 520 (ii. 18), while the Chronicler gives a detailed account of the laying of the foundation in 536 (Ezra iii. 8-13)? Again a knowledge of human nature will save us from seeing any discrepancy here. So little work had actually been done in 536, that the Temple was still in ruins in 520. It would be very unusual if the people merely began to work again without a fresh foundation ceremony; and this is the ceremony to which Haggai refers.

Incidentally it is worth noticing a slight difference of terminology between the Chronicler and Haggai and Zechariah, due to the different periods at which they wrote. Both sets of writers use the title "the people of the land". The Chronicler uses it of the Samaritans and others who opposed the work of building. Ezra iv. 4 and vi. 21. The reason for this is that at the time when he wrote the term meant this to the Jews.

NOTE. The statement in Ezra v. 16 which implies that continuous building had been going on between 536 and 520 comes from the letter of the opposition. Its accuracy is not vouched for. If it was really spoken by the Jews, the exaggeration is quite natural. They would not want to admit that they had abandoned the work finally if Cyrus had permitted it.

It was the natural title to use in his day for the non-Jewish people round about. Haggai and Zechariah, on the other hand, use the term in a different sense. At the time when they wrote two titles were in use to denote the two groups in the Jewish state. "The remnant of the people" (Haggai ii. 2) was the

title of those who had been in captivity and had now returned. "The people of the land" was the title of those Jews who had remained in the land without going into captivity. They naturally took part in the rebuilding of the Temple (Haggai ii. 4. Zechariah vii. 5). The supposed contradiction thus vanishes when it is realised that the same term, "the people of the land", was used in the Chronicler's time to describe a different set of people from that which it denoted in the time of Haggai and Zechariah. Thus the prophets say that the people of the land helped to build the Temple, while the Chronicler declares that the people of the land were excluded from building.

So much for the general vindication of the accuracy of the Chronicler in these books. There is no need to begin our investigation of the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah with a prejudice against the man who has compiled the stories.

The modern theory holds that a close examination of the stories shows that Nehemiah must have preceded Ezra. Typical representatives of those who believe this are Dr. W. O. E. Oesterley, in Volume 2 of the *History of Israel* for which he is responsible in conjunction with Professor T. H. Robinson; and also Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson in his *History of Israel*. Both of these books are now, of course, standard books in our Theological Colleges, and the arguments for the priority of Nehemiah are set out there.

Not all the arguments are of equal force. For example, Ezra ix. 9 speaks of the wall of Jerusalem, but it by no means follows that the allusion is to Nehemiah's wall. As we saw earlier, the Chronicler has already indicated in Ezra iv. 6-23 that work had been going on on the wall, and Nehemiah i. 3 is only understandable if this wall had been recently destroyed. Once it is granted that there was some sort of a wall before the time of Nehemiah, and the three separate allusions in Ezra and Nehemiah indicate that there was, then the difficulty of Ezra ix. 9 vanishes.

Another not so serious difficulty is the difference between Nehemiah vii. 4 and Ezra x. 1, 13. Nehemiah remarks that "the city was wide and large; but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded". Ezra, on the other hand, speaks of "a very great congregation of men and women and children". The deduction drawn from this is that the large population mentioned in Ezra must have belonged to a later

time than the small numbers of the time of Nehemiah. This conclusion, however, is not warranted by the context of these verses. Nehemiah is faced with the problem of inducing more people to settle within the confines of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had few permanent residents. In fact the implication of the context is that there were plenty of people living round about who might be expected to come and build houses and settle within the newly-completed walls. Ezra says nothing about the numbers actually living in Jerusalem. But he does relate that very large numbers came into Jerusalem on this special occasion "out of Israel" (x. 1. Note the words, and compare verses 7, 9, 14). It is clear from these words of Ezra and from the record of the builders from different parts of the country in Nehemiah 3, that there were numbers of people living within a reasonable distance of Jerusalem, but they were in no hurry to give up their new houses and lands in order to settle in Jerusalem itself. There appears to be no evidence for Dr. Oesterley's statement in his "Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament", p. 128, that "in Ezra's time there was clearly a large settled population in the City".

IV

The two main arguments that remain are of a different order. The first is based on the person of Johanan, Jonathan, or Jehohanan. To quote from Dr. Oesterley (*History*, p. 117) "From Nehemiah's memoirs it is seen that he was a contemporary of the High Priest Eliashib (Neh. iii. 1). From Ezra's memoirs (Ezra x. 6) we learn that Ezra was a contemporary of the High Priest Jehohanan, the son of Eliashib". Oesterley amplifies this note. Nehemiah xii. 11 indicates that "son" is used in the sense of "grandson", as frequently in Scripture. Further, the Elephantine Papyri show that Johanan was High Priest in 408 B.C. This fits in well with the theory that Ezra came to Jerusalem in 397.

This seems to me to be the strongest argument for the modern view, but its strength may be exaggerated, and the conclusion that is drawn from it is certainly not inevitable. In the first place it is not fair to assume, without further evidence, that Johanan was High Priest in Ezra's day. The passage in Ezra x. 6 says, "Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of

Eliashib". It is not said that he was then the High Priest, but simply that he had a room, presumably in the Temple precincts. Now assuming, for the sake of argument, that this Jehohanan is the same as the later High Priest mentioned in the Elephantine Papyri in 408, that is about fifty years after this, it is perfectly possible that, as High Priest elect (i.e. eldest son of the eldest son of Eliashib), he would have his own apartment in the Temple precincts. Nothing more than this need be implied by the passage in Ezra.

But we are not bound to suppose that the Jehohanan of Ezra's day is identical with the later High Priest. The name is not uncommon, and it is in fact quite likely that one of Eliashib's sons bore the name as well as the grandson who later succeeded to the office of High Priest. In this case "son" in Ezra x. 6 really means "son" and not "grandson". The common use of the name may be judged from the fact that in one form or another it is the name of seven (or possibly eight) different individuals in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as may be seen in Young's Analytical Concordance. (Ezra viii. 6; x. 28; x. 15. Nehemiah xii. 11; xii. 13; xii. 14; xii. 35. Possibly xii. 42.) So that although this argument appears at first sight to be extremely strong, yet when all the factors are taken into account it does not seem to be convincing enough to overthrow the entire scheme of the Chronicler's history.

The other main argument is negative rather than positive, but it certainly raises a difficulty. In these two Books the Chronicler incorporates the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, written in the first person singular. Yet neither mentions the work of the other, with one possible exception which is usually rejected as not being genuine. How can this silence be explained?

Now in the first place the silence of Ezra needs no explanation. His memoirs do not run beyond the end of the Book that bears his name. That is to say, they cease before Nehemiah's arrival at Jerusalem.

When we turn to Nehemiah's memoirs, we must remember that we only have selections from what was evidently quite a considerable diary. These selections deal at first with Nehemiah's coming to Jerusalem, and then describe the various forms of opposition encountered whilst the wall was being built. Unless Ezra was doing something of great moment at this time, it would only be by chance that his name might be

mentioned. Even the High Priest, Eliashib, is not mentioned in this section, except in the list of the builders in chapter iii. At first sight one might expect Ezra to be mentioned in this list too. But Ezra was one of the priests, and hence he is included in the body of priests who are mentioned in verse 1 as building with Eliashib. Only the leader of each section is mentioned by name.

After chapter vii. the Nehemiah memoirs cease for a time. They are certainly resumed in chapter xiii., the events of which take place more than twelve years after Nehemiah's first coming to Jerusalem (xiii. 6), and more than twenty-five years after the arrival of Ezra. Very likely Ezra was dead by this time. Hence he is not mentioned by Nehemiah in this section.

But the question arises whether the memoirs of Nehemiah are resumed before chapter xiii. I am inclined to think that they re-commence at x. 28, since several times in this section the first person plural is used (e.g. verse 30). But in any case

x. 28-39 might be the memoirs of Ezra but the resemblance to xii. 27-43 suggests Nehemiah.

the Chronicler professes to use them again in xii. 27-43, the passage dealing with the dedication of the wall. The first person singular is used several times in this section, as in the rest of the memoirs. Now in this section Ezra is clearly mentioned. Verse 36 declares, "Ezra the scribe was before them." Thus there is a mention of Ezra by Nehemiah.

Unfortunately the commentators who hold the modern view reject the evidence of this passage. The reason for this is that the passage contains the ceremonial ideas of the Chronicler, and hence must have come from his hand. But what if the ceremonial ideas of the Chronicler were also those of Ezra and Nehemiah? Is it likely that there was no solemn dedication of the walls? And if there was, what is there in the description in this passage which could not have come from Nehemiah? We know from the undisputed memoirs in xiii. 10 that Nehemiah had a great regard for the Levites and the singers. Would he have had a dedication ceremony and left them out altogether?

V

There is one further point in favour of the authenticity of this section, and that is the use of the first person singular. Everywhere else when the Chronicler uses this, he is obviously

quoting from authentic memoirs. In the rest of the Book apart from the memoirs he uses the third person, and there is no reason why he should not have continued to use the third person here, unless he was once again using the memoirs. It is, as a matter of fact, quite possible that in some other places he has transposed the first person into the third, and thus made the memoirs read more like a historical record, but there is no other case of his having turned the third person into the first, so far as we can tell. It is significant that in both of these passages the title "The Tirshatha" occurs, and I would suggest that in both cases the Greek versions have become confused over this unusual title, as 1 Esdras has in an earlier passage. Thus in place of "the Tirshatha said unto them" in Ezra ii. 63, the version in 1 Esdras v. 40 has "unto them said Nehemias and Attharias". In the parallel to Nehemiah viii. 9, where 1 Esdras omits the name Nehemiah, it reads "Attharates" instead. Attharias and Attharates are evidently the best attempt that the Greek can make for Tirshatha, and I believe that it is the occurrence of this title in the Hebrew that has caused the confusion in the Greek texts, and that our Hebrew text may be accepted as sound in both instances, thus giving us at least two places where Ezra and Nehemiah are mentioned as contemporaries in the historical record, which shows every sign of being more or less contemporaneous with the events that it relates. The third passage in Nehemiah xii. 26 is obviously a comment by the Chronicler, and has not the same value as the other references. So we may omit it.

I do not see how we can very well avoid the conclusion that Nehemiah does mention Ezra in his memoirs in this place, and that the silence in the other places can be accounted for by the fact that the Chronicler has only given a selection from the total memoirs, and that in the selection that we have there was no occasion to mention him.

In the historical portions there are of course three places where Nehemiah and Ezra are mentioned together. These are on the occasion of the reading of the Law (Nehemiah viii. 9), and at the sealing of the covenant that followed (x. 1), and again in the list of names which ends at xii. 26. But all of these have been ruled out on the ground of textual uncertainty. One feels, however, that this uncertainty has perhaps been magnified in the interests of the theory that it might support.

In viii. 9 the parallel passage in 1 Esdras ix. 49 omits the name of Nehemiah, while in x. 1 the Greek MSS. retain Nehemiah, but omit the title "the Tirshatha", thus showing that some confusion exists.

I have done my best to show that the modern conclusion of the priority of Nehemiah is not inevitable. I have tried to state the arguments fairly, and to give full weight to every important point. As I said earlier, this paper has been necessarily of a negative character. But in concluding, there is a certain amount of positive evidence which supports the Chronicler's history. It comes from one or two of the names which occur in these Books.

The Chronicler has a fondness for names and lists of names. It is extremely unlikely that he invented them. If he had done so, individual names would have been repeated in different lists in an obvious way. But although there is a certain amount of recurrence of names, such recurrence is not obvious. In fact Dr. Wheeler Robinson, in his *History of Israel*, uses as an argument to support the modern view that "none of those named as returning with Ezra (Ezra viii. 1-14) are mentioned as helping Nehemiah to build the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah iii)". Dr. Robinson has been a little unfair here. The following is actually the case.

In Ezra viii. 33 Ezra weighs the silver and the gold into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest. In Nehemiah iii. 4, 21, Meremoth, the son of Uriah, is given as one of the builders. In Ezra x. 31 Malchijah the son of Harim is one of those who had married foreign wives, and in Nehemiah iii. 11 he is one of the builders. The name Hattush also occurs in Ezra viii. 2 as one of those who came with Ezra, in Nehemiah iii. 10 as one of the builders, and in x. 4 as one of those that were sealed. The reason why more are not mentioned is that Nehemiah iii. only gives the names of the chief builders, and it is more likely that these leaders would be those who had been in the land for some time, rather than those who had returned with Ezra comparatively recently. Nevertheless, the occurrence of these few names in passages that belong both to the time of Ezra and to that of Nehemiah is a proof that the two were contemporaries.

In the light of all these facts the conclusion must surely be that the modern reconstruction has failed to justify itself.

So far from being an inevitable deduction, it is in fact most unlikely. For this one may be thankful. The alternative conclusion, that the Chronicler has made such an astonishing blunder over comparatively recent history, raises difficulties that are almost insuperable. But until far stronger evidence than has yet been produced compels us to take this position, we may accept the Chronicler's history as being accurate, and say that Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, the former arriving at Jerusalem in 457, and the latter in 444 B.C.

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