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Ezra and Nehemiah – The Reconstruction of the Temple and the Theocratic Jerusalem

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Abstract

This study explores the theological, historical and symbolic implications of the Books Ezra and Nehemiah, traditionally regarded as a single work. Set against the backdrop of the Post-Exilic Period in the Judean history, this research outlines the crucial roles of Ezra and Nehemiah in the restauration of Jerusalem and the reconfiguration of a theocratic society. By analyzing the historical background of the Neo-Babylonian period and the Persian domination period, and, in particular, of King Cyrus the Great, described as a providential figure, our study highlights the theurgy in the history of Israel. We tackle the identity of the authors, the Return from Exile, as well as the reconstruction of the Temple, along with the symbolic implications of these events. Special emphasis is placed on the concept of Jerusalem as a “theocratic capital” rebuilt in a joint effort of religious as well as social reforms. This work underscores the continuity in the Divine Plan, as manifesting in the sacred and national identity of the Chosen People.

Keywords

Ezra, Nehemiah, Jerusalem, babylonian exile, temple reconstruction, Cyrus, theocratic

I. Introduction

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are central to understanding the process of religious and national reconstruction of the Judeans after the Babylonian Exile. Although according to the Hebrew Tradition these writings were originally reunited into a single work, they are maintaining the consistency of a narration which links the deportation drama with the hope of return and restoration. Their importance is not only historical but also profoundly theological, as they are marking turning points in the relation of the people with God and in the shaping the Judean Post-Exile identity.

This study aims to provide a contextualization of these Books since it examines the political and social background against which they were written. In this respect, it is essential to understand the transition from the Neo-Babylonian Empire to the Persian Empire, with an emphasis on the Edict of Cyrus the Great, which allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and resume their religious practices. As regards the authors of these texts, the biblical Tradition mentions Ezra and Nehemiah as witnesses as well as direct participants in these events. However, modern researchers are raising legitimate questions about an alleged intervention of a chronicler-editor who purportedly organized the narrative material into a consistent form.

Beyond the way in which these texts were written, Ezra and Nehemiah are figures who reflect two complementary avenues of rebirth: the return to the Law, and the administrative reconstruction. Together, they symbolize the collective efforts of a community to rebuild their lives around their faith and inherited values. This work provides the necessary framework for a more detailed examination of the way in which Jerusalem gained its role as a spiritual and identity center of Judaism during the Post-Exile Period.

II. The Historical and Literary Background of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

The endeavor to write a paper on the Ezra-Nehemiah books (*or Ezra 2*) should begin with an introduction in which we will be attempting to explain

the historical background against which these two books – originally a single work - have emerged, to bring clarifications on the identity of the author(s), and even to tackle the symbolism of the text, which certainly brings forward new arguments to support the veracity of the Work of the Holy Spirit across the history of mankind, through the people of Israel, despite our original inclination to stick to a historical-wise review of the sacred texts¹.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are fundamental sources, both historically and theologically, for a deeper understanding of the post-exilic period and the restoration of the religious and national life of the Jews. These two books are highly relevant to the history comprised between two historical benchmarks - the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC and the rebuilding of the Second Temple - thus tackling a period of almost 100 years beginning with the Edict of Cyrus under which the Jews were “set free” and allowed to return to Jerusalem and ending in 420 BC when the reign of Darius II begins². Sources like Eusebius of Caesarea, Blessed Jerome and the Talmud posit that these two books used to be a single work that would be split later on for reasons pertaining to the narration of the text, but also to the existence of two distinct characters who, despite living during the same period, were two leaders with distinct activities and different personalities³.

This is what we know about the authors: Ezra was a descendant of Aaron, and his father, Seraiah, had been a great writer, a preacher and Chief Priest killed, by all accounts, during the destruction of Jerusalem as part of the Babylonians’ conquest. Ezra was taken to Babylon during the reign of Artaxerxes (465-424 BC)⁴. According to Jewish Tradition, Ezra is regarded as the author of the book that bears his name, although

¹ Regarding the “quality” of inspiration for a Book of the Bible, see the arguments in: Simion TODORAN, “Despre inspirația Sfintei Scripturi”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XXXVI (1984) 5–6, p. 313.

² Viorica S. CONSTANTINESCU and Baruch TERCATIN, *Dicționar de personaje biblice și reprezentarea lor în artă*, Hasefer, București, 2002, 114.

³ Vladimir PRELIPCEAN, Nicolae NEAGA, Gh. BARNA and Mircea CHIALDA, *Studiul Vechiului Testament*, 2nd edition, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1985, p. 202.

⁴ V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 113.

some sources argue that the text was composed around 330 BC. However, despite all doubts as to him being or not being the final author of this book, there are still many chapters that appear to have been written by his hand and large portions of these sections are written in the first-person singular⁵.

As for Nehemiah, we know that he was the son of Hachaliah and, apparently, the one who brought Ezra back with him according to the Talmud⁶. He held a distinguished position in the Persian Empire, as the cupbearer for the King Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC), who allowed him to return to Jerusalem, from where the former kept receiving disturbing news, and also named him Governor of his native land⁷. Regarding the authenticity of the Ezra-Nehemiah books, the specialists agree that these are specific to the period in which they had been written on account of the annotations made by the authors personally, who are quoting such official documents as decrees and powers of attorney, but also due to the well-known habit of the Jewish people of documenting their history, like, for example, in the Book of Chronicles (1-2 Chronicles)⁸.

However, as far as the identity of the author(s) of these books goes, there are multiple theories. Some are postulating that Ezra and Nehemiah knew each other and collaborated in their lifetime, each man documenting the period he lived in, from his perspective, while others suggest that these books belonged to the “Chronicler”, namely the “official” author of the Book of Chronicles, and that they were the predecessors the *Chronicles*, allegedly, and that said author might have outlived Ezra and Nehemiah and would have had access to the official documents and personal information of these personalities, whom he knew well⁹. The latter theory is refuted by the argument which emphasizes the obvious in the Nehemiah book,

⁵ J. S. WRIGHT, “Ezra”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, trad. Liviu Pup și John Tipei, Ed. Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 1995, p. 434.

⁶ V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 243.

⁷ J. S. WRIGHT, “Neemia”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 900.

⁸ “The biblical people from Abraham to Patriarch Jacob is called Jews (Acts 14, 13), from Patriarch Jacob they are generally called the people of Israel, and after their return from Babylonian captivity they are called Jews. It is a mistake to talk about Jews before Jacob, because almost only the captives from the tribes of Judah returned from captivity, the name ‘Jew’ is justified after this date”. See: V. PRELIPCEAN, *Studiul...*, p. 207.

⁹ John D. DAVIDS, *Dictionary of The Bible*, Ed. Westminster, 1944, p. 90.

namely the simplicity of the ideas written therein and the narration in the first person singular by this state dignitary, in total dissonance with the *Chronicles*. Moreover, it appears to some specialists that Ezra is the author of both the *Chronicles* and the “Ezra-Nehemiah” book, which should be considered a single work¹⁰.

III. The Role of Babylon in Israel’s History and the Prophetic Mission of Cyrus

The historical background covered by the books under review is one tightly linked to the history of Babylon or, more specifically, to the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean 626-539 BC) Period, followed chronologically by The Achaemenides (539-332 BC). The throne of Babylon was occupied by a Chaldean governor by the name of Nabopolassar. On 22 November 626 BC, he made peace with the Elam¹¹. In the first year of his reign, he launched a campaign against the Assyrians, pushing them down to the Tigris and Euphrates. He also conquered Nineveh, Haran (in 609 BC) and the Northern tribes. As he grew older, Nabopolassar was succeeded by Nebuchadnezzar, who went down in history as Nebuchadnezzar II. He ascended to the throne after the death of his father, on 6 September 605 BC, continued the conquest campaign he inherited from his predecessor, winning against the Assyrians and sustaining losses in the fights against the Egyptians. Upon his return, he shall have conquered the City of Judah on 16 March 597, when he took Jehoiakim prisoner, along with the Gold of the Temple, as documented in the *Chronicles*¹², and as revealed by new archeological evidence¹³, as well as a number of newly discovered texts

¹⁰ V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 115.

¹¹ “Elam” is the ancient name given to the Khuzestan Plain, crossed by the waters of Kerkh river, which flows into the Tigris, North of the Persian Gulf. Its civilization is dated as being as old as that of Mesopotamia. Its language was related to the Dravidian language family, although such adherence cannot be determined precisely. Mention is made in the Genesis 10, 22 that Elam was a son of Sem. (see: S. N. KRAMER, *History Begins at Sumer*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1958, pp. 57 and 230.)

¹² D. J. WISEMAN, „Babilon, statul”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 125.

¹³ “The confirmation of the events described in the books of the Old Testament by means of archeological data is also obvious in the case of the testimonies recorded

referencing this particular historical period and comprising information about economic and administrative documents, even marriage documents¹⁴. “Nebuchadnezzar also carried of the vessels of the house of the LORD to Babylon, and put them in his temple at Babylon. Now the rest of the acts of Jehoiakim, and his abominations which he did, and that which was found in him, behold, they are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah: and Jehoiachin his son reigned in his stead. Jehoiachin was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem: and he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD. And when the year was expired, king Nebuchadnezzar sent, and brought him to Babylon, with the goodly vessels of the house of the LORD, and made Zedekiah his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem”. (2 Chronicles 36, 7-10)

Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC, Jehoiakim and the Jewish people relocated to the Babylonian province were well taken care of by the successor of Nebuchadnezzar, as historically confirmed by the discovery of Babylonian *ration tabled* dated between 562-567 BC. After that, history has recorded a series of assassinations and usurpations by the time Nabonidus ascends to the throne. His son Balthazar will be killed by Cyrus, whose reign will begin in 539 BC and indeed coincides with the beginning of a new era¹⁵.

at the biblical site of Jerusalem, whose existence during the Old-Testament period is lengthy and so far generative of new data that is likely to contribute to a most precise knowledge thereof topography-wise... Among the multitude of archaeological investigations carried out on the ancient city of Jerusalem are those from 1975 and 1978. Thus, 1975 saw traces of Israelite occupation and pottery dating back to 1000-800 BC (the Secondary Iron Age) being uncovered in the so-called ‘Jewish Quarter’. Other artefacts are more recent and, through the charred items, indicative of a fire, prompting the archaeologists to link them to the moment of the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587-586 BC and which are also dealt with by the canonical books of the Old Testament (IV Kings 25, 1-9; Book of Chronicles 36, 11-19; Jeremiah 39, 1-3)”. Em. CORNÎŢESCU, “Cercetările arheologice (1915–1918) din Țara Sfântă confirmă Vechiul Testament”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XXXVII (1985) 9–10, p. 548.

¹⁴ Mihai VLADIMIRESCU, “Transmiterea textelor biblice ebraice”, in: *Studii Teologice*, nr. 2, 2006, pp. 63–64.

¹⁵ M. VLADIMIRESCU, “Transmiterea...”, p. 126.

III.1. Cyrus, the King of Persia, the prophesied leader and liberator of the jews

Amid the great historical upheavals and power dynamics of the Ancient Near East emerges Cyrus, the king of Persia—the prophesied ruler and liberator of the Jews¹⁶. Though a pagan and a stranger to the Law of Israel, he would become a key figure in the fulfillment of the divine plan, being presented in Scripture as the “anointed of the Lord” and a providential servant in the restoration of the chosen people. “Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron”. (Isaiah 45,1-2)

Whereas the beginning of the Book of Ezra is documenting this Persian king in its first verse, and out of an honest desire to shed light on a string of historical events from this Neo-Babylonian period, it is worth dwelling and focusing on the image of this pagan ruler whose birth was prophesized and whose work encouraged some Bible scholars to see in his reign a foreshadowing of Christ’s work, a messianic albeit flawed image.

Two of the world’s great historians made a point of mentioning this larger-than-life historic figure. Herodotus is the one who recorded a legend that circulated regarding his birth, which had been preceded by two great signs: “Astyages ... had a daughter whom he named Mandane. She dreamed a dream in which so much water had been flowing from her body that it flooded the entire city and even the whole of Asia...”. The second dream, Mandane dreamed it after she had been married to a Persian man, in fear of the first dream, by her own father. In it, a vine has been growing from her bosom and spreading across the whole of Asia, flooding it. That’s when her father sent her to the land of the Persians, ordering that her child be killed¹⁷. He is mentioned in the Scripture as an enlightened ruler and bringer of

¹⁶ “That saith 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”. (Isaiah 44, 28).

¹⁷ Werner KELLER, *Și Biblia are totuși dreptate*, Introduction to the Romanian edition by W.I. 1979, p. 313.

light who had experienced a childhood woven in legend, a meteoric, if not marvelous rise almost foreshadowing a divine assistance to his side, a reign unspoiled by violence, excess or atrocious acts, a man who appeared in the visions of the great prophet Isaiah, and the one to liberate the Jews on orders to start building the Temple¹⁸.

His peaceful entry into Jerusalem and his reign full of parental love and condescension towards all the peoples that made up the mosaic of the Babylonian Empire created such an impression on the historian Xenophon that he glorified Cyrus's reign in an entire novel, namely "Cyropedia"¹⁹.

Cyrus's personality was far from ordinary: it was built upon three profound inclinations deeply rooted in his nature – philotimía (a genuine thirst for honor), philanthrōpía (love for humankind), and philomátheia (love of learning). To these were added the virtues cultivated through education: sōphrosúnē (moderation) and enkráteia (self-mastery). Thus, from the blending of these qualities emerged not merely a skilled ruler, but a leader who was "loved, not feared", earning respect through benevolence rather than through fear, and whose reign was a source of blessing. Xenophon does not present him merely as a strategist, but as an ideal of virtuous leadership – one who, through generosity, temperance, and wisdom, succeeds in founding a kingdom of lasting peace, where ruler and subjects coexist in an almost providential harmony²⁰.

Tolerance for the religion of the Jews was not something only given to them, but to all of the conquered peoples that were making up the Babylonian Empire, who were each allowed to worship the face of their respective national deities. As far as his relationship with the Jewish people is concerned, Joseph Flavius says that Cyrus²¹ had become attached to it

¹⁸ V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, pp. 81–82.

¹⁹ W. KELLER, *Și Biblia are totuși dreptate*, p. 314.

²⁰ Rodrigo ILLARRAGA, *What the Rulers Want: Xenophon on Cyrus' Psychology*, published online by Cambridge University Press, april 2021, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/classical-quarterly/article/abs/what-the-rulers-want-xenophon-on-cyrus-psychology/22B97826CECB1552A3CF20E1230E18B2> , accessed on November 13, 2024.

²¹ It should be mentioned that Cyrus did not favor the Jews to the point of embracing their religion, not in the least. He had been in fact, like his Persian predecessors, a Zoroastrian, reliant on the assistance of Ahura Mazda (the names may vary depending on the type of encyclopedia). He did, however, favor the monotheism of the Jews,

ever since he had discovered a one-hundred-and-forty-year old prophecy that nominated him as the liberator of the people of the “Lord of Heaven”, who has no face, but must have a temple²². It is impossible not to associate this reign of peace with the “Kingdom of Peace” where Christ will rule, which is all the more reason why Cyrus is given a messianic forerunner aura as the liberator of the peoples, the peacemaker, the God’s “Messiah”²³.

III.2. The Return from Babylon and Reconstruction of Jerusalem

To many researchers, this period of the Jewish or, more accurately, Judean, people²⁴, as the tribe of Judah, along with what was left of Benjamin and the Levites, represented the people of God, is intimately linked to the religious identity of this people and the God of Israel worship (אֱלֹהִים, elohiym) that was being performed in Jerusalem (יְרוּשָׁלַיִם Yeruwschalaim), in the Temple of Yahweh (יְהוָה - יְהוֹה Yehovah). It is our understanding that the monotheist²⁵ identity of this people also coincides with its national identity, and its existence as a country was linked to this capital, which was also the “religious capital”. Moreover, upon the Return from the Babylonian Exile, the national rebirth, as we shall further see, is preceded by the resurrection of the divine worship and the reconstruction of the temple.

Augustin George and his colleagues formulate an interesting theory, especially meaningful for the structure of this chapter, the one positing the collective guilty conscience among the Jews during their occupation and displacement to Babylon. This theory lies the foundation for explaining

just as he had done with all the religions of all of the peoples he had conquered. See: “Cyrus” in: *Jewish Encyclopedia*, available at: <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4828-cyrus> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

²² JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS, *Antichități iudaice II Cărțile XI–XX. De la refacerea Templului până la răscoala împotriva lui Nero*, translation, notes and index by Ion Acsan, Ed. Hasefer, București, 2001, pp. 11–13.

²³ D. J. WRIGHT, “Cirus”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 235.

²⁴ For the etymological and historical explanation, see V. PRELIPCEAN, *Studiul Vechiului Testament*, p. 207.

²⁵ Michael MACH, “Concepts of Jewish Monotheism in the Hellenistic Period”, in: Carey C. NEWMAN, James R. DAVILA and Gladys C. LEWIS (eds.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, coll. *Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism*, vol. 63, Brill, Leiden–Boston–Köln, 1999, pp. 21–23.

the extraordinary dynamics and the motivated reasoning of a population which, as soon as 538 BC when the Edict of Cyrus was issued (2 Chr 36, 22)²⁶, decided that their worship would be resumed, and the Temple would be rebuilt even prior to the restoration of their administrative order. The Pre-Exodus prophets who voiced God's judgments which were to be, and have been, fulfilled during the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar²⁷: „What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?” (Ezekiel 18, 2). “And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined”. (Daniel 9, 26). “And it came to pass, while they were slaying them, and I was left, that I fell upon my face, and cried, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel in thy pouring out of thy fury upon Jerusalem? Then said he unto me, The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of perverseness: for they say, The LORD hath forsaken the earth, and the LORD seeth not”. (Ezekiel 9, 8-9).

The guilt felt by the Jewish community was attributed either to infidelity to the Sinaitic Covenant²⁸, or to grave sins such as idol worship, at any rate, in the Post-Exile we can talk about this collective consciousness of guilt²⁹ which actually aimed to “prove itself worthy once again” of the love of God and the fulfillment of the prophecies about the new covenant with

²⁶ Xavier LÉON-DUFOUR, Jean DUPLACY, Augustin GEORGE, Pierre GRELOT, Jacques GUILLET and Marc François LACAN, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*, Ed. Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice, București, 2001, p. 209.

²⁷ He was the king of Babylon between 625-605 BC. He pursued an aggressive war policy and went on to expend the borders of his empire tremendously. He attacked Judea and Jerusalem on multiple occasions during the reign of Kings Jehoiakim, Jeconiah, Sedechia. He was the one who conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and relocated its population to Babylon, along with all their wealth, thus launching the Babylonian captivity. See V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 238.

²⁸ V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 356.

²⁹ Marjo C. A. KORPEL, “Disillusion among Jews in the Postexilic Period”, in: Robert P. GORDON and Johannes C. DE MOOR (eds.), *The Old Testament in Its World*, Brill, Leiden–Boston, 2005, p. 136.

Judah and the New Jerusalem: “Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; As yet they shall use this speech in the land of Judah and in the cities thereof, when I shall bring again their captivity; The LORD bless thee, O habitation of justice, and mountain of holiness. And there shall dwell in Judah itself, and in all the cities thereof together, husbandmen, and they that go forth with flocks. For I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul. [...]Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah”. (Jeremiah 31, 23-25;31).

Thousands of years passed by, and Jerusalem has revealed itself as a city full of history, of which history is not without mystery given that, from what we can see, there is no unanimity among the specialists as to its origin, development, and repeated reconstruction. There are theories postulating that the large historical cities, and Jerusalem is no exception, had been founded by deities, as documented in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where reference is made to the marvelous building of the Eanna temple³⁰, or to the building of the bab-ilu (God’s gate)³¹ city by the God Marduk, and there is also the theory according to which cities had been funded by heroes; the historical examples include the cities founded by Alexander the Great, which were called, for example, Alexandria³². Regarding Jerusalem, things are rather vague. What is clear is that history attempted to pinpoint chronologically the moment of its founding only to stop around the 2nd millennium BC, namely, in the 14th century, when the Canaanite city of Urushalim (founded in honor of the god Shalem)³³ was ruled by a king named Abd Khiba, mentioned in the *Letters from el-Amarna* (14th century),

³⁰ “Go close to the Eanna Temple, the residence of Ishtar, such as no later king or man ever equaled! Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around, examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly. Is not (even the core of) the brick structure made of kiln-fired brick, and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans?”, available at: *Epopeea lui Ghilgamesh*, transl. Virginia Șerbănescu and Al. Dima, Ed. Mondero, București, 1996. (English translation available at www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab1.htm)

³¹ T. M. BOLIN, “The Making of the Holy City: On the Foundations of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible”, in: Thomas L. THOMPSON (ed.), *Jerusalem in Ancient History and Tradition*, T&T Clark International, New York, 2003, pp. 172–173.

³² T. M. BOLIN, “The Making of the Holy City...”, p. 175.

³³ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Vocabular de teologie biblică*, p. 263.

and was under Egyptian suzerainty, having the structure and importance of an isolated mountain-top fortress, no less³⁴.

IV. Key Stages in Jerusalem's History and the Restorative Role of Ezra and Nehemiah. Abraham "finds" Jerusalem

The first encounter of the Great Patriarch Abraham with Jerusalem is well-known from Chapter 14 from the Genesis, where Abraham and his allies defeated Kedarlaomer, as well as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and those with them, and Melchizedek of *Salem*, high priest of El Elyon ("God Most High") welcomed him as a "hero", with bread and wine, and blessed him in the name of the deity El Elyon, whom Abraham equates with Yahweh, the God of the Israelites³⁵. This episode, in which the glory of the "winner" reflects upon the city and the honorable meeting between Abraham and Priest Melchizedek worshipped with the recognition of the god of this city by the "embattled patriarch", is compared by the specialists with the episode in which Alexander the Great is coming to Jerusalem in all of his glory and is welcomed by the priest of the Temple to whom Alexander gives due honor, to the amazement of all of his companions, by recognizing the God of that Priest Judah as the one true God³⁶.

³⁴ D. F. Payne, "Ierusalim", in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 563.

³⁵ D. F. Payne, "Ierusalim", in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 564.

³⁶ "When he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest. The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about; whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind. However, Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews? To whom he replied, «I did not adore him, but that God who hath honored him with his high priesthood; for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios in Macedonia, who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain the dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians; whence it is that, having seen no other in that habit, and now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision, and the exhortation which I had in my dream, I believe that I bring this army under the Divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians,

IV.1. The conquest of Jerusalem by David

At the time of Joshua, this city was in the hands of the Jebusite, who were ruled by a king named Adonizedek. Attempts were made to conquer it, however, the Book of Joshua does not specify whether such occupation actually occurred³⁷. What is certain is that the Holy Prophet-King David will conquer it and it will become the “City of David” on the Mount Zion, as it is written in the Books 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles³⁸.

This conquest of Jerusalem by David was not an easy one given that none of the children of Israel had ever been capable to conquer this fortress before. The Jebusite used to mock the Israelites in their attempts, their ironies persisting well into David’s time, who conquered them and banished them³⁹; and yet, we will further see that the Jebusite must have been in Jerusalem when Israel was returning from the Babylonian Exile. The two versions of the conquest of Jerusalem, i.e. the conquest by Joshua, subject to much confusion, and the conquest of the city on the Zion (Mountain) by David, clearly have one thing in common: they prove the existence of a pre-Israelite population, which, I believe, can mark the beginning of Jerusalem⁴⁰.

David will make significant changes to this fortress, erecting walls, building a palace, placing the Covenant of the Law within its premises. Then Solomon, his descendant, will make the most important change of all by erecting the Temple and making the “City of David” not only the administrative capital but also the religious center of the entire Israelite people. A period of decline follows as the Egyptians are sacking the city

and that all things will succeed according to what is in my own mind». And when he had said this to Parmenio, and had given the high priest his right hand, the priests ran along by him, and he came into the city. And when he went up into the temple, he offered sacrifice to God, according to the high priest’s direction, and magnificently treated both the high priest and the priests. – translation taken from the *The Antiquities of the Jews*, by Flavius Josephus – <https://gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h.2848-h.htm>, FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichități...*, p. 61.

³⁷ D. F. PAYNE, “Ierusalim”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 564.

³⁸ T. M. BOLIN, “The Making of the Holy City...”, p. 186.

³⁹ Cristian ANTONESCU, “Putere politică și putere bisericească la Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur”, in: *Studii Teologice*, nr. 1, 2011, p. 128.

⁴⁰ C. ANTONESCU, “Putere politică...”, pp. 187–189.

during Rehoboam, and later the Philistines and the Arabs are sacking the city and the temple one more time. Uzziah repaired the damage and withstood a brutal assault. Nebuchadnezzar will conquer the city in 587 BC and will destroy it, along with the Temple, the population deported to Babylon⁴¹.

IV.2. The rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the Temple by Ezra and Nehemiah

The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah opens an important section of this study, as one of the main themes concerns the restoration of Jerusalem to its status as a capital city, closely tied to the role and actions of these two leaders. Some researchers choose to refer to this stage of Jerusalem's reorganization as a "colonization". However, this term should be avoided in this context, as it does not involve the occupation of a new or previously uninhabited territory by the Jews, but rather the return of a people to their own "mother city". The two leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, divided their responsibilities⁴²: Ezra restored the religious cult and taught the Law to the people, delivering a severe rebuke to the Jewish community that echoes the voices of earlier prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, warning of the consequences of sin and calling for repentance⁴³. Nehemiah, on the other hand, focused on rebuilding the city's structures and fortifications, as well as on reorganizing the population and overseeing the construction of a new Temple.

The territory of the city appears to have still been inhabited by surviving Jebusites, who remained there clandestinely. Nehemiah sought to remove them, motivated by a desire to purify the community from the mixture of races and cultures, thereby protecting the religious identity of the people⁴⁴. As for the Temple, this topic will be addressed in more detail

⁴¹ D. F. PAYNE, "Ierusalim", in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 563.

⁴² Some historians have suggested that these two would have never crossed paths until after the reinstatement of the law, according to Ch. 8-9 from Ezra. However, most Bible scholars reject this supposition as purely speculative and groundless.

⁴³ Thomas L. THOMPSON, "Holy War at the Center of Biblical Theology", in: Thomas L. THOMPSON (ed.), *Jerusalem in Ancient History and Tradition*, T&T Clark International, New York, 2003, pp. 226–227.

⁴⁴ T. M. BOLIN, "The Making of the Holy City...", p. 189.

in the following section. For now, we will limit ourselves to quoting a significant verse that captures the emotional reactions of those who had seen the Temple before its destruction: “But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy” (Ezra 3, 12).

V. The Restoration of Jerusalem and the Consolidation of the Jewish Theocracy

The idea of a theocratic capital takes clearer shape in the post-exilic period, when the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple becomes not merely a political or urban undertaking, but a deeply spiritual act. As we shall see, the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah to restore the city were largely motivated by a sincere desire for the atonement of collective sins – sins for which the people, in their collective conscience, recognized that God had delivered them into the hands of the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, allowing the destruction of the “City of David” along with Solomon’s Temple.

Our analysis begins with Chapter I of the Book of Ezra, where we learn of the decision made by King Cyrus of Persia and the decree⁴⁵ through which he released the Jews and permitted them to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the Temple of God. As previously noted in this study, this royal decision did not arise from political motives or human intervention, but from a deeply personal conviction on the part of Cyrus, following the direct action of God, without any violation of the king’s free will. This interpretation stands in contrast to the hasty and unreflective claims that some voices might put forward. To support this perspective, we will now refer to the words of Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, a true and profound interpreter of the Scriptures in the Spirit of God:

“How did the Magi came up with the idea of going to worship Christ, and who urged them to? In my opinion, this is due not only to the star, but also to God, who moved their souls, as He

⁴⁵ M. MACH, “Concepts of Jewish Monotheism...”, pp. 21–23.

did with King Cyrus, causing him to free the Jews from captivity. God did not do this by destroying their free will”⁴⁶.

We are further learning from Chapter I that King Cyrus sent the Jews under the leadership of Sheshbazzar⁴⁷, whom he entrusted with the Temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had seized during the conquest of Jerusalem. 40,000 Jews had left for Jerusalem, and “The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore”, (Ezra 2, 64); we should mention that these figures are estimates given that most of the Holy Scripture scholars consider them to be numeric notes, either translated from a poorly preserved text or from much older accounting documents, or allegorical, as with the gold and silver vessels and other adornments, which are also documented in a “fixed” number⁴⁸. We should also emphasize that this liberation from Babylonian captivity was not perceived by all the Jews alike given that some of them were not particularly fond of the idea of leaving a prosperous city where they had amassed great wealth for a pilgrimage to a city that had been deserted and destroyed and required a lot of “work” and sacrifice, albeit the “City of David”⁴⁹! Still, for the faithful, the conquest of Jerusalem and the deportation of a large part of its population to Babylon, which was now without a king, and who were also towards the end of their atonement in the form of this “exile”

⁴⁶ Sf. IOAN GURA DE AUR, *Omiliile la Matei*, transl. and index by D. Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, p. 82.

⁴⁷ The Babylonian name of Zerubbabel (*born in Babylon*), a descendant of King David, son of Pedaiah and grandson of Jeconiah. A highly capable man, administration-wise, he succeeded to win Cyrus’s favor, then Darius’s, and was authorized by them to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. He carried out a demographic reorganization by bringing together most of the diaspora back to the Jerusalem area and other parts of Judea. There are three theories revolving around this character. One such theory alleges that following a disagreement with the High Priest Joshua, he ceases his activities and disappears from the political landscape. Another theory claims that he died while taking part in an uprising in Egypt between 519-518 BC. Finally, according to the third theory, after the rebuilding of Jerusalem, he returned to Babylon. See V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 330.

⁴⁸ Ioan Sorin USCA și Ioan TRAIA, *Vechiul Testament în tâlcuirea Sfinților Părinți – Ezdra, Neemia, Estera*, Editura Cristiana, București, 2007, 13, 22.

⁴⁹ I.S. USCA, I. TRAIA, *Ezdra, Neemia, Estera*, p. 14: “...but many remained in Babylon, not daring to leave their wealth behind”.

which, to them, represented the punishment that *Adonai* had imposed for the sins of the “disobedient children”, will be an impulse towards a union under the umbrella of a pan-national religious conscience of all the faithful who, albeit without a parent (king), carried themselves, by their deeds of faith, compliance with the Law, the sacrifices and the rebuilding of the Temple, as the true sons of God. Furthermore, they will come to realize that they are all one chosen people, a single “son” of *Adonai*⁵⁰. This is the birth of the “democratic and theocratic” capital, if I may be allowed to use this oxymoron, which, in the light of the above, is not an oxymoron *per se*, but by syntax, because it conveys that the Jews were a people who governed themselves through representatives elected by the masses (*the case where Sheshbazzar is withdrawing on account of not being in accord with the religious will of the people represented by Joshua*), but theocratic nonetheless, as the true Law all of them were abiding to was the Law “of Ezra” – the Law of Moses – the Law of God⁵¹.

We see in the Book of Ezra that the return from exile was from the orders of the Persian king, who delegated Zerubbabel to lead the Tribe of Judah, the Tribe of Benjamin, priests, the tribe of Levy, and those from other tribes to Jerusalem on a mission to restore the city and build the Temple of God. Chapter II documents a “register” with the names of those who came back on their own accord, and at the end of this chapter we learn that they had begun to populate Jerusalem and the cities of Israel: “So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities”. (Ezra 2, 70). The construction of the Temple is next, but not before erecting a shrine⁵², this “holy city” restoration work prophesized in Psalm

⁵⁰ Cătălin VATAMANU, “Legitimitatea filiației divine a regilor davidici”, in: *Studii Teologice*, nr. 2, 2009, p. 119.

⁵¹ This specific paragraph in the text serves more as pre-conclusion, and it’s based upon the arguments presented beforehand and also serves as a pointer to the main conclusion of this paper: that the return in the homeland, and the reconstruction of the Temple, together with the spiritual rebirth and the revival of the governance of God’s Law were all possible by the glorious work of God thru these providential leaders Ezra and Nehemiah.

⁵² There are opinions claiming that Zerubbabel would not have erected a shrine and that he merely “renovated” the one potentially existing in Jerusalem throughout the Exile period. (My take is that the text from Ezra 3,2 is very clear with respect to the erection

59 “Who will bring me into the strong city? who will lead me into Edom? Idumeea? Wilt not thou, O God, who hast cast us off? and wilt not thou, O God, go forth with our hosts?” (Ps 59, 10-11)⁵³.

During the reigns of the Persian kings Xerxes (485-465 BC) and Artaxerxes (464-424 BC), respectively, the enemies of the Jews, aware of the ancient greatness of this people and the mighty kings who had raised in Jerusalem, were plotting at the court of the Persian king and, under the “guise” of a potential “relapse” of power among this people, finally succeeded to have the construction of the Temple halted by royal decree⁵⁴. Yet another proof of the direction of the true Judean theocracy, even reflected in the collective conscience of the neighboring people, the restoration of the Temple and of the religious service at the Temple was automatically perceived as foreshadowing the national restoration in all respects: political, economic, administrative. Prophets Haggai and Zechariah were those who moved the souls of the Jews by encouraging them to resume the construction of the Temple despite all obstacles, And the construction went ahead, with a subsequent royal decree from King Darius of Persia to reinforce the original resolution of King Cyrus⁵⁵.

of the shrine, [author’s note]). For more clarifications, see “Temple, the Second” in: *Jewish Encyclopedia*, available at: <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14309-temple-the-second> (accessed on May 19, 2024).

⁵³ Theodoret of Cyrus explains the term “strong” as expressing precisely the rebuilding of the walls (fortifications), while the word “cast off” designates the actual Babylonian captivity into which they were “cast off” by God for their sins, for a while. See “Din Sfinții Părinți ai Bisericii – tâlcuire la Psalmul LIX”, translation from Greek, introd. and notes by Marius Portaru in: *Studii Teologice*, nr. 3, 2010, 223.

⁵⁴ J. S. WRIGHT, “Ezra”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar biblic*, p. 434.

⁵⁵ “King Darius to Tangananas and Sambabas, the governors of the Sainaritans, to Sadraaces and Bobelo, and the rest of their fellow servants that are in Samaria: Zorobabel, Ananias, and Mordecai, the ambassadors of the Jews, complain of you, that you obstruct them in the building of the temple, and do not supply them with the expenses which I commanded you to do for the offering [of] their sacrifices. My will therefore is this, That upon the reading of this epistle, you supply them with whatsoever they want for their sacrifices, and that out of the royal treasury, of the tributes of Samaria, as the priest shall desire, that they may not leave off offering their daily sacrifices, nor praying to God for me and the Persians”. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antichități...*, p. 26. (English translation available at <https://gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm>)

Starting with Chapter VII of his book we become acquainted with Ezra. A great scholar and high priest, a descendent, as written in the introduction to this work, of a high priest of the Temple from Pre-Exile times, he was urged, and tasked, by King Artaxerxes to supervise the construction works, to teach Tora to the people and to appoint judges over the Jews. He received many gifts for the Temple from the king, and from the Jews in exile, and came back to Jerusalem with a large number of Jews, leaders, priests, Levites willing to “return home”. Upon his arrival during the Sukkot holiday, he convened the Great Assembly to regulate an intolerable situation for the chosen people: the status of foreign women. While history documents some instances of tolerated mixed marriages, as with Esau and the two Hittite women, Joseph and his Egyptian wife, David had an Armenian wife, and Solomon, who had a harem of Egyptian, Moabite, Hittite, Ammonite, etc. women, the law clearly provided that the wife of a Jew had to have “purity of the blood”, which also meant a “certificate” of true fate (Exodus 34, 15-16). It follows that foreign women were forbidden, and the measures adopted by Ezra and Nehemiah, albeit severe, were compliant with the Law of God⁵⁶. His resolutions and decisions had to do with the administrative and demographic situation, as well as with the religious standing of Jerusalem, an unmistakable mix since, as stated above, Jerusalem was a democratic theocracy. He also succeeded in teaching the Law of God to the people, which they had mostly forgotten, which gained him a reputation of a teacher just as important as that of Moses, according to the Talmudic records⁵⁷. And his contributions go above and beyond: he added ten more rules for the people regarding the worship and other issues, he was the founder of the Great Assembly (*a rather democratic aspect of Jerusalem, especially in the absence of a king*), he modified the Hebrew script by adding Aramaic symbols and would have also helped codify the Pentateuch. His body will be buried in Jerusalem⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ R. DE VAUX, *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament I: Les nomades et leurs survivances. Institutions familiales. Institutions civiles*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1958, pp. 55–56.

⁵⁷ *Talmudul Suca* (20,1): “Când Tora a fost uitată, a venit Ezdra din Babilon și a restabilit-o” (When Torah was forgotten there came Ezra from Babylon and restored it.), quoted in V. CONSTANTINESCU, B. TERCATIN, *Dicționar...*, p. 115.

⁵⁸ I.S. USCA, I. TRAI, *Ezdra, Neemia, Estera*, pp. 83–84.

To further support the concept of a “theocratic capital,” we will briefly refer to several passages from the Book of Nehemiah, which reinforce the validity and relevance of this idea. Jerusalem is portrayed as a space where religious authority is directly exercised over social and economic life. A clear example of this is Nehemiah’s rebuke of those who oppressed their fellow Jews through burdensome lending practices. “Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies? I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury. Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them. Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise. Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen”. (Nehem. 5, 9-13).

Here is recorded a time when Jerusalem was going through a period of severe economic adversity, with some of the Jews engaging in such actions as the oppression of their brothers through loan sharking and other commercial “justifications”, which Nehemiah was compelled to clarify by pointing out that everyone was to sacrifice something for the rebuilding of their city, formulating a law of sorts which abolished all the debts between brothers, a law he made a point of validating before God by an oath sworn by everyone before the priests⁵⁹, in the presence of Nehemiah, the Governor. So on the one hand we have a “democracy”, as Nehemiah convened the Great Assembly before which he proposed his solution, as well as a “theocracy” where God is the One Who gives authority to the “resolution” of the Great Assembly through His priests, who swore an oath

⁵⁹ “The sacred persons were chosen from among the people elected to consecrate themselves to serve God alone. They were making up the Tribe of Levi and, corresponding to the three parts of the Tabernacle, were divided into three classes: Levites, priests and archpriest”. In A. P. LOPUHN, *Istorie biblică*, vol. II, transl. Nicodim Munteanu, Tipografia Cărilor Bisericești, București, 1944, p. 166.

of the people. We are in the presence of a democratic theocracy: “And all the congregation [...] praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise”. (Nehem. 5, 13).

VI. Conclusions

The accounts from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are more than mere recordings of historical events; they give voice to an age of major upheaval and profound transformation for the Judean people. After the years spent in exile, these texts capture not only the physical return to a place, but also the rediscovery of national, and especially religious, identity. The restoration of Jerusalem is described not only as a political or administrative act but as an inner spiritual rebirth through which the connection with God is renewed.

Ezra and Nehemiah each play a crucial role in this process. Ezra reintroduces the Law in the life of the community and puts the worship back at the center of collective existence. Nehemiah, in turn, brings order, reconstruction, and a stable social environment. Together they offer a model of leadership in which God’s will is intertwined with the concrete involvement of the people, making for a form of governance which, while anchored in the Revelation, does not ignore human participation.

Jerusalem, as outlined in the pages of these writings, is more than a geographic capital. It becomes a living symbol as the heart of the faith, and the place where the covenant between God and His people takes on a new form. The Return from Exile, made possible by the intervention of Cyrus the Great, is viewed as an act of providence, a divine answer to the desire for return and restoration. It fulfills ancient prophecies and reasserts Israel’s vocation as the Chosen People.

This work aims to emphasize this profound implication of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah by going far beyond a simple historical interpretation. The restoration of Jerusalem thus becomes an image of hope rediscovered, genuine repentance, and obedience, which in turn lead up to blessings. In this sense, their story does not belong in the past. Rather, it continues to make a powerful and relevant impact in every age where faith is being tested.