

A Little Reviving in our Bondage

Ezra-Nehemiah as a “lightened exile”

Is Ezra-Nehemiah the ultimate fulfillment of restoration prophecy?

No: a glance at the major prophecies and these themes in Ezra-Nehemiah clearly shows that it is not:

	Prophetic Promise	Developments in our Period
New Exodus	Isa 40–55 A spectacular return culminating in the radiance of Zion	Ezra 1 Cyrus allows their return peaceably, with temple vessels but relatively few return, Yahweh does not return to Zion
Temple	Ezek 40-48: a glorious, huge new temple with Yahweh himself there	Ezra 3-6 Temple built but it is small, lacking glory, no theophany appearing
King	Isa 11:1-10: a new David will reign	Ezra 3 Zerubbabel comes back but he is a governor, under a foreign king
Purity of the People	Ezek 36:25; 37:23, 28 No more idols; God will sanctify Israel	Ezra 9-10 The people repeatedly separate themselves from the nations but they stubbornly keep on marrying foreign women, etc.
Repentance of the People	Jer 24:7 The people will return to God with their whole heart; Jer 31:33 God will write his law on the people’s hearts	Neh 1, 8-9 The people return, prayers of repentance but in the end we see that it is not whole-hearted
Jerusalem Rebuilt, End of Reproach/Shame	Isa 25:8; 29:22-23; 45:17; 54:4; Jer 31:38-40	Neh 2-6 Wall is rebuilt but it cannot keep out Tobiah and merchants selling on the Sabbath
Rejoicing	Isa 12:1-6; 25:9; 26:1; 27:2; 29:23; 30:19, 29, 32; 35:10; 42:10; 43:21; 44:23; 48:20; 51:3, 11; 52:7-9; 55:12; 61:11; 65:13-14, 18-20; 66:14 Great joy accompanies restoration	Ezr 3,6; Neh 12 Movement from mixed to joy to great joy but undercut in Neh 13 by anguish once again
Forgiveness of sins, Removal of guilt	Isa 1:18, 25–26; 4:4; 33:24; 40:2; 43:25; 44:22; 53:5; Jer 31:34	God is graciously blessing them throughout but Neh 13 guilt clings to them

The pattern: the prophecies speak of BIG, ultimate (eschatological) blessings that will never be surpassed, but Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes that every one of the blessings they receive after the return from Babylon is small, ineffective, tainted.

Also, the people repeatedly indicate that they are still in exile:

- “We are slaves” (Ezr 9:8–9; Neh 9:36)
- Repeatedly are called “the exiles” even after they return (Ezr 4:1; 6:19, 20; 8:35; 9:4; etc.)

- By their prayers of repentance they position themselves as exiles, even when they are back in the land (compare Deut 30:1–3 and Lev 26:40–42 with Ezr 9; Neh 1, 9)

Conclusion: in the ultimate scheme of things, we are still in exile. *There is no realized eschatology in Ezra-Nehemiah.*

How then do we describe the blessings?

If the blessings are not the ultimate things they were waiting for, what are they?

Several options:

1. Partial fulfillment of the ultimate realities (i.e., the gifts in Ezra-Nehemiah are the same “in kind” of the ultimate blessings, not shadowy substitutes).
Not likely because even the good things themselves are so muted, faint.
2. Shadowy first fulfillment of the ultimate realities (a shadowy substitute)
Strongest argument is from Ezra 1:2 “to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah.”
However:
 - Nowhere else in the book does the book claim that it is a fulfillment, and the Hebrew in Ezra 1:2 is quite unusual. The phrase could be rendered, “toward the completion of the word of the Lord.”
 - In earlier first fulfillments (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:20–21, 56), the emphasis was strongly on the positive ways in which these realities cohered with God’s promises. Here, the positive elements are strongly overshadowed by the shortcomings.
3. Not a fulfillment, but a pledge of the ultimate realities
 - In Ezra’s words, God has granted “a little reviving in our bondage” (Ezr 9:8). Ezra-Nehemiah reflects gratitude for God’s blessings, but makes no claim that these are the realities hoped for. Instead, the “escaped remnant” has been given a “tent peg in the holy place” in keeping with God’s steadfast love (Ezr 9:8–9).
 - Other Persian-period prophets speak of their present situation as pledges (Hag 2:7, 21–23; Zech 6:9–15).

Conclusion: Ezra-Nehemiah is a period of “lightened exile” where they are still in a position of bondage for their sins, but God is showing that he is with them even in the valley of the shadow of death. While there may be isolated prophecies fulfilled (e.g., the fall of the Babylonians to the Persians in Jer 51:11), it is difficult to view the book of Ezra-Nehemiah as even a shadowy first fulfillment of the restoration.

What purpose do these pledges serve?

1. An answer to the pastoral question of exile: “will he be angry forever?” (Ps 79:5; 85:5; Jer 3:5); the answer is decidedly NO!
2. An encouragement to faith: although exile will be very long, God will not forget his promises; just look at these pledges he has given!
3. Pointing through despair to true hope: The reviving of the shadows they had prior to exile shows that these shadows do not have the power to overcome sin. Even the negative failings of these pledges are redemptive: when they despair over the power of their sin, they are ready to set their hopes on God’s final redemptive in-breaking into history.

Conclusion: the pledges are the encouragement of a generous God who will never leave nor forsake his people, and will one day keep his promises in a decisive, ultimate way. They are not to be mistaken for the things hoped for, but are profound encouragements to hope.