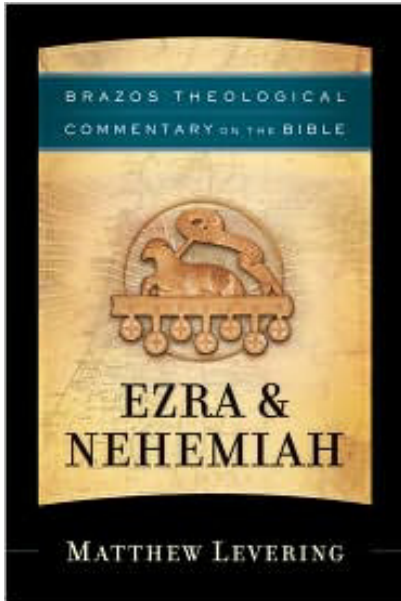


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Levering, Matthew

Ezra and Nehemiah

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible

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The Brazos Theological Commentary was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. Commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. Levering is Associate Professor of Theology at Ave Maria University in Naples, Florida.

Three things characterize his approach, according to the author: the template of holy people and holy land, that is, that the entire Bible is about *caritas*, self-giving love; the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are best appropriated and understood in light of other biblical texts, or their status as canonical scripture is the most important thing about them; and a distinct view of history, “namely, from eternity the Creator God, the Trinity, brings forth time with its fulfillment already in view, and so in God’s knowledge earlier persons and events relate to later ones in ways that escape the historian’s tools” (22). Within these far from self-evident presuppositions, the author has achieved his goal.

Levering begins with a harsh polemic against Lester Grabbe, John Howard Yoder, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the latter two not recognized as specialists in the field, but all of whom do not put much positive value on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Little attention is paid to current commentators in the book, and the two-page bibliography

shows significant gaps—no mention of the commentaries of Gunneweg, Rudolph, Williamson, or the current reviewer, for that matter.

Levering imposes a rigid Christian understanding on the text, with little attempt to understand these books in their fifth-century B.C.E. context. Without Zerubbabel and Jeshua, Haggai and Zechariah, he asks, could Jesus have enacted the return of YHWH to Zion, cleansed the temple, or healed the blind and lame in the temple? Granted, I suppose, but the next question borders on the absurd: “Could Jesus have done this, to the same effect, from the Ziggurat of Babylon?” (34). The commentary looks backward to Jeremiah, Moses, David, and the exile “so as to draw the reader into the narrative and worldview of Ezra, from within which Paul (and Christ Jesus) must be understood” (35).

Levering dates the beginning of the exile to the accession of Jehoiakim so that it lasts exactly seventy years in fulfillment of prophecy. Throughout one runs into typological prefiguration and rectilinear prophecy, such as the claim that God saved the Israelites by the blood of the Passover lamb and the water of the Red Sea, prefiguring the Eucharist and baptism that flow from Christ’s side on the cross (41). Or again: “Ezra suggests that Cyrus, unlike Pharaoh, is moving toward a deeper understanding of God: *The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth*. Only an almighty God, not a merely local god, could give *all the kingdoms of the earth*, and only one God could be *the God of heaven*” (43).

Levering claims that his commentary on Ezra develops more clearly the theology of Israel, whereas his commentary on Nehemiah develops more clearly the theology of the church. He attempts to defend against the charge of supersessionism by arguing that “the later reality [that is, Christianity], truly participates in (i.e., is already to some degree hiddenly present in) the earlier reality [that is, the Old Testament]” (120). The earlier reality is not negated, but it comes into its own when its teleological focus is revealed. That sounds pretty much like supersessionism to me.

Levering denies that Ezra and Nehemiah are instantiating a Judaism that can function quite well without a Davidic king (121). In his own words: “Ezra the Scribe therefore leads the people in renewing their covenantal obligations, clearly with the hope of a restoration that includes a Davidic king ruling in Jerusalem” (123).

Some will find meditative or homiletical use in his numerous citations of biblical passages from both Testaments that were evoked by words or actions in Ezra or Nehemiah. But, sadly, one will learn very little about the meaning of these books in their original setting.