

# AN OLD TESTAMENT PATTERN FOR EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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*Ezra provides an unusually clear and inspiring pattern of expository preaching in his ministry to the people of Judah at the outset of the postexilic period. He models an expositor's commitment studying, practicing godliness, and teaching which leads him to perform an expositor's task reading distinctly and explaining the Scriptures. In so doing, he challenges expositors of all generations to handle accurately the Word of truth.*

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Was Ezra an expositor<sup>1</sup> of the Word of God? If so, what can preachers learn from one to whom both Christian and Jewish expositors look as a prototype?<sup>2</sup>

In a true sense, expositors today stand in a succession which

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson argues that Ezra was an "expositor of the word of God for the community of the faithful" (H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1987] 70). The term "expositor" in some respects affords too much latitude of definition. By "expositor" the present writer has in mind one who uses exegesis to determine the normal meaning of a text: "It is evident from Ecclus. 39:3 that detailed exegesis was part of the scribal expertise" (Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins: From Messianic Movement to Christian Religion* [Minneapolis: Augsburg 1985] 48). Talmon maintains that the writings of this period also reveal the development of certain exegetical principles (Shemaryahu Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* [ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987] 357).

<sup>2</sup>Yamauchi argues that it was Ezra's celebrated scribal role that "attracted various attempts to ascribe all kinds of writings to him" (e.g., the books of Esdras) (Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Postbiblical Traditions About Ezra and Nehemiah," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer* [ed. by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood; Chicago: Moody, 1986] 174).

spans from before Ezra<sup>3</sup> down to the present. According to Rabbinic tradition, Ezra introduced many basic tenets out of which the "Great Synagogue" and its preaching developed.<sup>4</sup> Centuries later the early church borrowed much of its polity, order of worship, and even its preaching from the synagogue. If Judaism followed the pattern established by Ezra and if the church took many of its first practices from Judaism, is it possible that expository preaching has enjoyed an *unbroken* succession of "pulpiteers" from this early period?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>If the Talmud is correct, Ezra was an understudy of Baruch, scribe of Jeremiah (*Megilla* 166).

<sup>4</sup>R. J. Coggins, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. by R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; London: SCM, 1990) 229.

<sup>5</sup>Regardless of the answer to this question, Larsen's point still holds: "Preachers today stand in this awesome [but perhaps broken] succession. We are the descendants of those incendiary spokesmen for God in all their variety and diversity" (David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989] 15). The crucial issue in the question of succession is hermeneutical: have expositors since Ezra used exegesis as their bases for exposition? Early expositors do seem to have been concerned about perpetuating hermeneutical skills along with their recopying of the text. In fact, "part of the task of the later Sages was to teach and to assemble pupils who would be sufficiently well equipped with exegetical skill and knowledge of earlier ideas . . ." (Rowland, *Christian Origins* 49).

This essay argues that Ezra embodies an early and inspiring example for expositors of all ages. Scripture never explicitly affirms that Ezra was the first true expositor,<sup>6</sup> that Ezra's expository method has been followed by an "unbroken" succession of preachers,<sup>7</sup> or that Ezra gives a complete picture of what an expositor should be and do.

Rather than search for precedents or unbroken successions that cannot be proven, the significant lessons regarding the OT pattern of expository preaching should be sought in Ezra's example:<sup>8</sup> the book

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<sup>6</sup>"Since Ezra the scribe not only returned from Babylon with a knowledge of the ancient law, but also as head of an established retinue of levitical interpreters (Neh. 8:1-8), there is little support . . . that Ezra's work as a 'Shriftegelehrter' was a new activity. . . . Ezra inherited a venerable Israelite tradition of scribal and textual scholarship" (Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985] 37). Failing to distinguish exegesis from the product called an "exposition" results in much confusion. The former is a method of study; the latter is the public delivery of a message. Discussing details of sermon delivery is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>7</sup>When entertaining thoughts about establishing precedents and successions based on Scripture, one should learn from the misguided efforts of Christopher Columbus who also used a passage attributed to Ezra (2 Esdr 6:42) in an attempt to win support from Ferdinand and Isabella for his 1492 voyage (S. E. Morison, *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* [New York: New American Library, 1955] 19, 115). Speaking of Columbus' common misuse of Scripture, Fleming has written, "It is accordingly extremely difficult to demonstrate that he embraced a coherent and definable set of interpretive principles as opposed to a kind of middle-brow exegetical opportunism with which he attempted to aggrandize the significance of his experience" (John V. Fleming, "Christopher Columbus as a Scriptural Exe-gete," *Lutheran Quarterly* 5/2 [Summer 1991] 187).

<sup>8</sup>Does Ezra's *example* suggest that something might be lacking from the reader's own *commitment* and *practice* in Bible exposition? What does Ezra's example challenge one to ask of his own preaching? This writer uses Ezra the way that the writer of Hebrews uses the examples of faith. They did not have perfect faith; they had exemplary faith at certain times. Even William Perkins known for his exemplary emphasis "to followe good examples" guarded against exegetical abuse with his dictum, "As the examples of wicked men are every way to be eschewed, so *good mens* are to be followed." Perkins' sermons were so exegetical in nature that when published posthumously by his students, they served as commentaries. The method he used for setting apart the examples of good men from bad men was by applying the teaching of other and clearer biblical teaching regarding their behavior (William Perkins, *A Commentary on Hebrews 11* [n.p., 1609] 14). From the standpoint of

Ezra-Nehemiah<sup>9</sup> sets forth in the person of Ezra *an expositor's commitment* (Ezra 7:10) that leads him to perform *an expositor's task* (Neh 8:1-8).

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thematic intention, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about God's sovereign care, but by illustration they tell us about exemplary leaders (even listeners!) from many perspectives. Ezra is a model because he lives up to standards of what an ideal expositor should be and do based on other passages of Scripture and theological inference. The complexity of thematic intention and informational relevance are examined in Larry Jones and Linda Jones, "Multiple Levels of Information Relevance in Discourse," in *Discourse Studies in Mesoamerican Languages* (Summer Institute of Linguistics Publication 58; Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics and University of Texas, Arlington, 1979) 1:3-28.

<sup>9</sup>Ezra and Nehemiah in the Hebrew autograph formed a single OT book that set forth a theological exposé of postexilic history. Commentaries on Ezra-Nehemiah abound, but two of the best by evangelicals are F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) and H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985). Perhaps the best commentary available is by W. Rudolf, *Esra und Nehemia* (Handbuch zum Alten Testament; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949).

## I. THE EXPOSITOR'S COMMITMENT

Ezra was both a priest and a scribe, but he is remembered primarily as an "expositor of the Word of God for the community of the faithful."<sup>10</sup> As an expositor he models a commitment followed by men of God who have read the Scriptures and explained to others what God would have them believe and do in service for Him. Ezra had received a mandate, albeit indirectly, from Moses to read the law during the Feast of Booths (a mandate unquestionably relevant to all occasions), an occasion commemorating God's provision in the wilderness (Deut 31:11-12). According to Moses, the purpose for this reading was "in order that they [the people] may *hear* and *learn* and *fear* the Lord your God, and *be careful to observe* all the words of this law" (Deut 31:12b). To hear, learn, fear, and do what is written: this is the passion of expository preaching.

Israel was not willingly submissive to God's Word during the period between Moses and Ezra. Bright spots, such as Josiah's reform, were exceptional. Many of God's priests failed in their assignment to read and teach His Word. Besides, the people often disobeyed what teaching they had received. The culmination of this sad stewardship of God's revelation was Judah's seventy-year exile.

After the slavery in Babylonian exile, He restored them, leading them like sheep back to Zion. God used enemy nations to escort His people to and from exile to fulfil His covenant judgments and blessings. When a portion of the promised land had been repopulated by His people, the sacrificial system re-instituted, and the yearly cycle of feasts and sabbaths re-established, God used Ezra to call His people to a covenant renewal. This invitation to renew the relationship entailed a restatement of God's law, though in practice it would not completely replace that of the Persian provincial system.

Just as God had prepared and commissioned Moses to be the law *giver* of the first Exodus, He prepared and commissioned Ezra to be the law *restorer* for the second exodus<sup>11</sup> of the people of Israel (2

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<sup>10</sup>H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* 70.

<sup>11</sup>While it is easy to force correspondences between Moses and Ezra, "what is at least clear is that the mission represented . . . for Ezra . . . a new beginning, a replica of

Esdras<sup>12</sup> 14). The Bible clearly states that the king permitted Ezra to go assist his people in their homeland and even gave him the qualified help and needed financial support "because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (Ezra 7:6). But God's hand was upon Ezra singularly, "because (עֶזְרָא [kəzra]) Ezra *had* set his heart to study the law of YHWH, to practice, and to teach statute and ordinance in Israel" (7:10).<sup>13</sup>

In the eyes of men several of Ezra's other qualifications might have made him better suited for the task, but the passage says God chose Ezra because he had resolved<sup>14</sup> to study, practice, and teach the law, not because he had magisterial leadership ability or a commanding stature. His advanced training (priestly and scribal) and exposure to both Israel's and Persia's aristocracy, while quite impressive, seem not to have affected God's choice. In fact, even though the genealogy found in the preceding verses (7:1-5) establishes his venerable ancestry, and even though his immigration document (cf. 7:11-26, a decree) establishes his mission as sanctioned by the king of Persia, God selected Ezra because of his personal commitment to study, live out, and teach God's Word.

Ezra had and would continue to "set his heart" to the ministry of the Word. To set one's heart is to "direct his heart constantly

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the first Exodus to be followed, then as now, by the giving of the law" (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988] 139). Williamson attributes the clear correspondences to the fact that "the people will constantly have needed reassurance that they and their institutions indeed stood in direct line with those of pre-exilic Israel" (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* li). Ezra's reading and expositing God's Word were understood against the backdrop of Mosaic analogy.

<sup>12</sup>"Esdras" is transliterated from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name for "Ezra."

<sup>13</sup>Extrabiblical literature makes Ezra's threefold commitment a precedented ideal to which all scribes after Ezra must aspire (*Sir.* 38:24`39:11).

<sup>14</sup>All emphasis was laid upon Ezra's mission and upon his fitness for its accomplishment" (Batten, *The Books of Ezra-Nehemiah* [ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913] 306).

towards"<sup>15</sup> a goal. For Ezra, the commitment was both deep and long-term. Quite commonly "heart" (**בַּי**/**בְּבַי**, *leb/lebab*) is used to describe the very center of human life. Ezra, or anyone who would follow his example, directed the core of his being constantly toward the task of Bible exposition. To say that this function was "his *ministry*" is to miss the passage's emphasis. One might say that it was his life's all-consuming passion. Little else commanded his attention like the task that God had set before him. Ezra gave his best effort to study, practice, and teach God's law, each activity being observed *completely* and *in order*.

#### A. *Studying God's Word*

Ezra qualified for the mission because he had a deep desire to exposit<sup>16</sup> God's Torah, "i.e. to learn and interpret"<sup>17</sup> Genesis through Deuteronomy, particularly the legal portions although not excluding the narratives.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the Bible preserves no record of Ezra

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<sup>15</sup>Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958) 428. The author of 2 Chronicles uses the phrase to describe how fervently sinful men should seek God (cf. 2 Chr 12:14; 19:3; 20:33; 30:19). The term "heart" is best understood in a general sense as "the site of all thought, planning, reflection, explanation and ambition . . ." (Hans-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986] 145).

<sup>16</sup>Both the term **וַיִּדַע** (*daras*, "he inquired") employed here as well as the term **וַיִּבְרַר** (*paras*, "he made known") in Neh 8:8 undergo a significant shift in meaning from inquiring directly from God in an oracular sense in Exod 18:15 and Lev 24:12, respectively, to inquiring of God's law "as an entirely rational mode of explanation or exposition" (Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation* 245). This shift in meaning corresponds to the development of a need for exegesis of the revealed text.

<sup>17</sup>D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 101.

<sup>18</sup>Yamauchi lists the four major hypotheses and their proponents regarding the identity of "The Book of the Law of Moses" "which Ezra read (Neh. 8:2-15) to the assembled multitude for about five hours. Ranging from the minimal to the maximal they are: (1) *A collection of legal materials*: Rudolph Kittel, Gerhard von Rad, Martin Noth; (2) *The Priestly Code*: Abraham Kuenen, Bernhard Stade, W. H. Koster, Eduard Meyer, W. O. E. Oesterly, Adolphe Lods, Hans-J. Kraus; (3) *Deuteronomic Laws*: Laurence Browne, Raymond Bowman, M. F. Scott, Ulrich Kellermann; (4) *The*

spending the long and arduous hours laboring in God's Word. The details of his training as an understudy, perhaps beginning at a tender young age, are likewise unavailable to the modern reader. What the Bible depicts clearly in Ezra is a man resolved to study. His earlier priestly and scribal preparation, which must have been quite extensive, does not exhaust his desire to study more.

But a clear understanding of the message alone was not enough.<sup>19</sup>

### B. *Living out God's Word*

Ezra was not satisfied to be well-informed about God's law. In the very difficult moments that lay ahead, Ezra proved himself to be committed to living out<sup>20</sup> the ethical/theological principles he learned

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*Pentateuch*: Julius Wellhausen, Ernest Sellin, Hans Schaeder, Otto Eissfeldt, Wilhelm Rudolph, Kurt Galling, Sigmund Mowinckel, William F. Albright, John Bright, Frank Cross, and James Sanders" (cited in E. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990] 257, and taken from S. Mowinckel, *Studien zu dem Buche Ezra-Nehemiah III: Die Ezrageschichte und das Gesetz Moses* [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1965]). More recent objections to identifying Ezra's book of the law as the Pentateuch by C. Houtman ("Ezra and the Law," *OTS* 21 [1981] 91-115) on the grounds that legal citations in the book Ezra-Nehemiah do not come from the Pentateuch have received a cogent response from Williamson: "It may thus be suggested that an explanation lies in the methods which Ezra and others applied in the interpretation of the older law and its application to the new circumstances of their own day" (Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* 93).

<sup>19</sup>The term "study" (**וַיִּדְרֹשׁ** [*daras*]) is a word that generally means "to search," perhaps focusing on Ezra's quest for God's message. "The scholarly activity on the Torah centered on the conviction that God's revelation was deserving of the most careful study and, what is more, would yield to those who *searched carefully enough* the insights which would enable man to live according to the divine will" (Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* 52, emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup>Several alternative translations have been suggested. Michael Fishbane translates **וַיַּעַבְדֵם** (*la#asot*, "to do") as "to compose" (Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation* 36). Speaking of the authorial and/or editorial work of Ezra on the Scriptures, Meyers combines *la#asot* with **וַיִּלְמַד** (*lelammed*, "to teach") for a hendiadys translated "to teach effectively" (Jacob Meyers, *Ezra-Nehemiah* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1965] 58). However, the meaning "to perform or do" is well-

from his study. Ezra himself not only adhered to God's Word, but also expected those to whom he expounded it to do the same. Ezra's zeal, both for himself and for others, to do what he had learned from the Word of God required that he teach others.

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attested especially in contexts where the term describes an ethical response to the Word of God such as is found here in Ezra 7:10 (cf. also Deut 31:12b).

C. *Teaching* God's Word

In spite of many efforts to draw sharp distinctions between preaching and teaching in the Bible,<sup>21</sup> a great deal of overlap apparently exists with the two functions. In fact, the difference between them appears to be only quantitative, with preaching exhibiting a more hortatory type of delivery.<sup>22</sup>

Ezra's teaching was rooted in God's revealed will, as found in the first five books of the Bible. This may not seem like much to teach in comparison to the 66 books of the Bible that the church now possesses, but one must keep in mind that many of the major doctrines resident in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation appear in seed form in the first eleven chapters of Genesis.<sup>23</sup> Ezra had plenty<sup>24</sup> to read and expound from those chapters alone!

Both the contents and the ordering of Ezra's threefold commitment are an ongoing challenge to expositors of God's Word: is

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<sup>21</sup>A preference for taking the Hebrew word usually translated "teach" (דָּרַשׁ) in the piel stem to mean "to make (someone) accustomed (to something)" sidesteps the issue of rhetorical form by focusing on the recipients' new state of being rather than the act through which that state was attained (Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990] 401).

<sup>22</sup>This conclusion is based primarily on a seeming distinction between New Testament terms (e.g., κήρυγμα [*kerygma*] and διδασκαλία [*didache*]). At least three passages use the two terms somewhat interchangeably (i.e., Matt 4:23 and 9:35; Luke 4:15, 44; Acts 28:31). R. C. Worley argues convincingly that preaching and teaching were never sharply separated by the first Christians (R. C. Worley, *Preaching and Teaching in the Earliest Church* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967]).

<sup>23</sup>D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978).

<sup>24</sup>"Statute" (צוֹי [hōq]) and "ordinance" (מִשְׁפָּט [mispaṭ]) (Ezra 7:10) refer to very specific aspects of God's law, "the former referring to the basic provisions or stipulations of the law, the latter to their application in judicial cases" (Blenkin-sopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* 139). "But efforts to distinguish clearly between their connotations have not been entirely successful" (Jack P. Lewis, "צוֹי," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [ed. by R. Laird Harris *et al*; Chicago: Moody, 1980] 317). Clines views the two terms as a hendiadys for "the totality of the law" (Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* 101).

teaching without careful study possible? Is godly living possible without first knowing God's standards for living? Is teaching based on careful study possible without being lived out first in the life of the teacher? The admonition to "practice what you preach" is quite apropos here.

When each phase of Ezra's example is kept completely and ordered correctly, following his threefold commitment will prevent many expositional shortcomings: "Study is saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness."<sup>25</sup>

Theoretically speaking, the book Ezra-Nehemiah portrays God's sovereign power in fulfilling his covenant promises. It is but another link in the chain of God's story from paradise lost to paradise restored (viz., Genesis through Revelation). But within this chain the person Ezra offers expositors an example of ordered priority, for one day the people called upon him to read the Law of YHWH publicly.<sup>26</sup> This is one of the critical moments for which God prepared Ezra and upon which Ezra fixed his sights. Ezra, a man with a commitment to study, practice, and teach the law of YHWH, must now present the fruit of his labor. In Augustine's terminology he must offer his "sacrifice." In the simplest terms, he must read and "expose" the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

## II. THE EXPOSITOR'S TASK

One day approximately 42,360 people gathered at the square in front of the Water Gate, a site selected perhaps because of its proximity to the newly rebuilt temple. They approached Ezra and made their

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<sup>25</sup>Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979) 62.

<sup>26</sup>Of great significance is the fact that Ezra's reading and exposition introduces a revival (cf. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Quest for Renewal: Personal Revival in the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody, 1986] 135).

<sup>27</sup>So crucial is Ezra's threefold resolve that one author has said, "Ezra's actions in the rest of the book must be interpreted in light of this verse," i.e., Ezra 7:10 (Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah* 101).

request: bring "the scroll of the law of Moses" (Neh 8:1). Ezra brought the scroll, mounted the wooden platform (lit., "tower of wood")<sup>28</sup> and unrolled the scroll. In response, the people, many of whom may well have been standing already, stood in reverence, assuming a posture suitable to the occasion (v. 5). Ezra led in a benediction of praise,<sup>29</sup> to which the affirming response of the people was, "Amen, Amen" (v. 6).<sup>30</sup> Ezra then read the scroll, and with the assistance of a select group, probably understudies, explained the passage's meaning in whatever way was necessary, be it by translation or by interpretation (v. 8).<sup>31</sup> This is Bible exposition.

Of particular relevance to the present study is Ezra's proclamation of the Word of God: How does Ezra's threefold commitment to study, practice, and teach result in his treatment of the

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<sup>28</sup>The purpose for the platform may have been mere practicality, but McConville sees more: "The effect was to show that those who wielded authority in the community were themselves under the authority of God, and that therefore it was the word of God that regulated the whole life of the community" (J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985] 116).

<sup>29</sup>Perhaps "a brief thanksgiving for the law, such as are given in the Talmud for use before reading Scripture" (TB, *Berakot* 116) (D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* 184).

<sup>30</sup>The people's response was an affirmation to the benediction. At about the same period in Israel's history, this is the response given in a court case as the witnesses affirm the truth of the plaintiff's statement before the court official. The connection is simply that stating the facts accurately deserves an affirmative "Amen," i.e., "This is true." The court statement reads, "All my companions will testify for me, all who were reaping with me in the heat of the sun they will testify for me that this is true" (lit., "they will say, `Amen'") (Yavneh Yam Inscription, in Dennis Pardee, *Handbook of Hebrew Letters* [Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982] lines 10-11).

The people's role in Nehemiah 8, though much of it was ritual protocol, furnishes a good example for twentieth-century listeners. It has been frequently observed that though the number of good preachers has declined in recent times, so has the number of good listeners. Good listeners are also vital to an effective expository preaching process.

<sup>31</sup>The Aramaic form of the term as it appears in Ezra 4:18 should be rendered "translated," but "the basic meaning still remains, `to make/be made clear' (by revelation, explication or translation)" (V. P. Hamilton, "**וַיִּפְּרֹשׂ**," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [ed. by R. Laird Harris *et al.*; Chicago: Moody, 1980] 740).

Scriptures before the congregation? More specifically, how does his commitment find expression in his preaching?

#### A. *Read* the Book

Reading the scroll (Neh 8:8) would hardly seem to require comment, but this is where any discussion of expository preaching should begin. Well-intentioned expositors often read Scripture<sup>32</sup> as if the reading were qualitatively inferior or at least secondary to the sermon. Torrey's translation of Neh 8:8 rightly demonstrates that the exposition which follows Ezra's reading is but the handmaid of the reading itself: "And they read in the book of the law distinctly and gave the sense *so that the reading was understood*."<sup>33</sup>

In other words, Ezra and his assistants took great pains to achieve "exact pronunciations, intonation and phrasing, so as to make the units of the piece and its traditional sense readily comprehensible"<sup>34</sup> *before* they expounded the cited text. Interpretive comments served only to enhance the reading, not the other way around.

By implication, it is inevitable that the further the preacher moves away from reading the text, the greater the risk of adding superfluous, incorrect, and distracting comments. The extreme example occurs when the preacher uses no text whatsoever and the congregation is left to judge the truthfulness of the allegedly biblical message on the basis of its memory of Scripture. Placing the priority on reading is one safeguard against imposing extraneous ideas on the

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<sup>32</sup>For helpful suggestions on how to read Scripture properly, see David A. Dombek, "Reading the Word of God Aloud," in *The Preacher and Preaching* (ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986) 419-44, Bryan Chapell, "The Incarnate Voice: An Exhortation for Excellence in the Oral Reading of Scripture," *Presbyterion* 15:1 (Spring 1989) 42-57, and Thomas Edward McComiskey, *Reading Scripture in Public* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

<sup>33</sup>Charles C. Torrey, "The Ezra Story in Its Original Sequence," in *Ezra Studies* (New York: KTAV, 1970[rpt. of 1910 ed.]) 268, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup>Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation* 109.

text.

### B. *Exposit* the Book

After "reading distinctly" a portion of Scripture, Ezra and others<sup>35</sup> "gave the sense" (*lke <oc,§e m§ ekel*) and "expounded the recited text" (*' aqmb unybxw, wayyabiynu bammiqra@*) (Neh 8:8).<sup>36</sup> Forty-three thousand people require much explanation! Few other passages in either the OT or the NT depict expositional preaching in such detail for what it truly is, i.e., "exposing" the written Word of God to the community of faith so that the people hear with a view to learning, learn with a view to fearing, and fear with a view to practicing godliness, as Moses had instructed (Deut 31:12). In short, exposition assists the reading process whether the written Word is read individually or corporately, as was the case here. Ezra did not expose to God's people what was traditional or fashionable, the latest literary masterpiece from metro-Persia, or the musings of Father Abraham. He expounded clearly<sup>37</sup> only what he read in God's Word

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<sup>35</sup>Ezra was "head of an established retinue of levitical interpreters" (ibid., 37). Williamson offers a convincing argument for including Ezra in the interpretive or explanatory activity (H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* 290).

<sup>36</sup>Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation* 109. Both verbs are explicitly exegetical and indicate the addition of clarifications and interpretations to the text where intonation and phrasing and traditional meanings were not sufficient" (ibid.). Much early Jewish and early Christian interpretation was fanciful and allegorical, but the "Antioch school" of interpretation was not the first to espouse a "normal" reading of the Scriptures. Very early the Sadducees "in so far as we can reconstruct their beliefs represented a more literalistic approach to the interpretation of Scripture (*Ant.* 13.297) and their attitude may have been more widespread than we sometimes suppose" (Rowland, *Christian Origins* 47).

<sup>37</sup>The Puritans spoke of "opening" a passage of Scripture so as to make it clearly understandable. Some were inclined to make their sermons literary masterpieces. In response to such literary aspirations, the sage counsel of Elisha Yale offered to the young preachers he had trained in upstate New York is worth remembering: "Whatever attention you may see fit to give to your style and diction, let it be only with the holy view of making your sermons more effectual to the good of souls. Feed not the flock of God with sound and shadows and flowers instead of the substantial meat of the Word . . ." (from a plaque at the base of Elisha Yale's statue in

and based his exposition on what he had learned through careful study.

What is more, his application of the passage was both current and relevant. Although it is difficult to determine exactly what Ezra said in conjunction with the reading, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah models a reapplication of the law to a new situation. This is evident from its Pentateuchal citations which are not quoted verbatim.<sup>38</sup> The way they are modified reflects reapplications to the new situation of Ezra's post-exilic community much the same as the laws recorded in Deuteronomy are reapplications of the original law given at Sinai to the new situation on the plains of Moab.<sup>39</sup> Moses was the source of both the latter sets of laws.

But this is not where the teaching/preaching stopped. Ezra also had a ministry of teaching<sup>40</sup> among the heads of the households, the priests, and the Levites, i.e., the other teachers (Neh 8:13). This pattern of preaching to the masses as well as teaching smaller groups of leaders was not unlike Jesus as He expounded the law both in His Sermon on the Mount and in His more intimate discipling sessions with the twelve. Ezra did not stop short of doing his very best to make certain that his people understood and applied the written Word of God.<sup>41</sup>

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Gloversville, NY).

<sup>38</sup>Cf. C. Houtman, "Ezra and the Law," *OTS* 21 (1981) 91-115.

<sup>39</sup>Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* 93.

<sup>40</sup>"As a priest-scribe he became the model for a later class of religious professionals whose sole task was the study and exposition of Scripture (cf. Ezra 7:10)" (Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991] 236).

<sup>41</sup>Wolff's comments in this regard are both convicting and encouraging: "Of course it is quite possible to stop halfway in this laborious process. This is undoubtedly the danger that confronts us every day—the danger of all `scribes': the danger of straining at gnats and swallowing camels, of disputing about the letter and burying the treasure with which we have been entrusted. The work of explaining the text is often so laborious that the preaching of it can get lost in the process. And yet the hour always comes when the text itself drives us to preaching. And we are challenged too

While on the one hand Ezra's proclamation is not a Sunday sermon delivered to a local church, it does manifest a timeless and universal quality as regards the nature of exposition. Ezra models *an expositor's commitment studying, practicing godliness, and teaching* which leads him to perform *an expositor's task reading distinctly and explaining* the Scriptures so that his congregation may hear with a view to learning, learn with a view to fearing, and fear with a view to practicing godliness.

To the encouragement of expositors, God's people still repent and rejoice as they did in Ezra's day when a well-prepared teacher helps them understand Scripture.<sup>42</sup> Fellow expositors, set your heart to preach the Word.

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by the congregation, and by the need of men and women round about us. So then the silence must be broken, and research and enquiry must turn into a passing on to other people" (Hans Walter Wolff, *Old Testament and Christian Preaching* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986] 103).

<sup>42</sup>For an excellent study of Paul's philosophy of preaching, cf. George J. Zemek, "First Corinthians 2:1-5: Paul's Personal Paradigm for Preaching," in *New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent, Jr.* (ed. by Gary T. Meadors; Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991) 265-88.