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Editorial Office & Subscription Services:

SBTS Box 2388

2825 Lexington Rd.

Louisville, KY 40280

(800) 626-5525, x4413

Editorial E-Mail:

journaloffice@sbts.edu

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Editorial: Proclaim the Whole Counsel of God

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

Second Timothy 3:16 is one of the most foundational texts regarding an evangelical view of Scripture. In it, the apostle Paul reminds us that all Scripture is nothing less than God's own breathed-out Word, graciously given to us in order to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and thus able thoroughly to equip the man of God, and by extension the people of God, for every good work. Interestingly, however, what we often forget is that the Scripture to which Paul is referring in this text is the OT. No doubt it is legitimate to appeal to this text to argue for the inspiration of both the OT and NT. At the time Paul penned this letter, the NT canon was in the process of being written. But with that said, we must not lose sight of the fact that Paul viewed the OT as fully authoritative, sufficient to lead us to Christ Jesus, and the church neglects it to her peril.

Even though most of us would agree with what has been said, it is a sad fact that too many of our churches neglect the OT. Unfortunately, many among us have only a cursory knowledge of it. For the most part, we have been taught various stories and moral lessons from the OT, which serve to instruct us how and how not to live our Christian lives. But what we often lack is an understanding of how these OT stories first fit into the larger story of God's redemptive plan and purposes centered in Jesus Christ and, secondly, how they apply to us today. It is important to remember that Scripture does not come to

us all at once. Rather, God has graciously chosen to reveal himself progressively to us over time, along a redemptive-historical storyline, ultimately centered in Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 1:1-2), and our reading and application of Scripture must take this into consideration. Otherwise we will misread and misapply Scripture. Thus, in reading any text, including the OT, we not only exegete it in terms of its syntax, context, historical setting, and genre, but we must also understand that text in light of its place in God's unfolding plan, and, finally, where it is in light of the coming of Christ, that is, the entire canonical context. It is only when we do so that we learn to read Scripture according to its divine intention. But it is *this* point that is often neglected in our reading of Scripture and particularly the OT. That is why for many of us, the OT only serves as a book of illustrations and examples that has little to do with present-day Christian faith and practice.

In this Bible study edition of *SBJT*, we want to take a small step forward in remedying this problem by thinking through the book of Nehemiah—in terms of its context, message, and place in the canon of Scripture—as it, along with the entire OT, makes us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:15). While for many of us, Nehemiah has only served to illustrate lessons of leadership or give us incentive for our new building programs, our authors demonstrate that God has given us this book for more

reasons than this.

T. J. Betts begins our discussion of Nehemiah by first setting the historical background to the book—recounting the historical circumstances surrounding the fall of the northern kingdom, Israel, and then the fall and restoration of the southern kingdom, Judah. Obviously knowing the context of the book is the first step in grasping its message. Tiberius Rata continues our discussion by outlining a theological overview of the book, focusing predominantly on what Nehemiah has to teach us about God, God's people, and our enemies.

The next two articles by Peter Gentry and Stephen Dempster, respectively, help us in at least two ways. First, they help us grasp the message of the book by describing the historical and literary context of Nehemiah. But, secondly and more importantly, they wonderfully set the book within its larger canonical context so that we learn afresh how Nehemiah should be read and applied to us today, as those living in light of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, they help us see that Nehemiah is more than a mere story about a great man who saw himself as a leader and repairer of a broken wall many years ago. Instead, they rightly argue that to understand the book correctly, we must view Nehemiah as one who saw himself within the context of a divine plan for the world; indeed, one who saw himself as playing a small part in rebuilding the city of God. Yet this would eventually lead to a greater one to come—one who would not merely build a city, but one who would build a new community, a heavenly Jerusalem in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham of old, in his glorious redemptive work of which we are now the beneficiaries.

Nehemiah, then, when understood in light of the storyline of the entire Bible, has important relevance for us today as we live in light of the one to whom Nehemiah pointed, namely, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, Russell Fuller and Mark Dever round out our discussion of Nehemiah. Russell Fuller focuses on lessons we may learn from Ezra as a priest, scribe, and teacher, and Mark Dever gives us a sermon that beautifully illustrates how one may preach an entire book in one message with the goal of helping the people of God to grasp the “big picture” instead of the fragmentary pieces.

In all of these articles, it is my prayer that we will not only better understand the book of Nehemiah, an important book of the OT, but also that we will learn rightly how to divide the Word of truth, to proclaim the whole counsel of God, and to discover afresh how all of Scripture, whether OT or NT, leads us to our great and glorious Redeemer.

The Book of Nehemiah in Its Biblical and Historical Context

Terry J. Betts

Terry J. Betts is Assistant Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is a fourth generation Baptist minister and has pastored fourteen churches in Ohio and Indiana. Dr. Betts is the author of *Ezekiel The Priest: A Custodian Of Tôrâ* (Peter Lang, 2005).

One may only begin to understand the significance of the events in the book of Nehemiah when one looks at God's words to the children of Israel in Moab through his servant Moses just before the nation entered into the Promised Land. Moses foretold of exile and return in Deuteronomy. Moses said to the people,

All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you. They shall be a sign and a wonder against you and your offspring forever. Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish. They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the LORD your God has given you

(Deut 28:45-52).

And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul (Deut 28:65-66).

All the nations will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. Therefore, the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book, and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day' (Deut 29:24-28).

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will

gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers (Deut 30:1-5).¹

Moses foretold of judgment, exile, and restoration in Israel's future. In truth, the book of Nehemiah recounts what was already foretold by the Lord to Moses many years earlier thus underscoring the fact that the God of Israel is the sovereign judge of the nations, including Israel, as well as the God of amazing grace. The purpose of this article is to set the historical background to the book of Nehemiah by recounting the historical circumstances surrounding, first, the fall of Israel and, second, the fall and restoration of Judah.

The Fall of Israel

The first deportations took place in the eighth century at the hands of the Assyrians. Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel attacked Judah in an effort to coerce Judah into joining an anti-Assyrian coalition. However, Ahaz was determined not to become a part of the coalition. Instead, he sent a plea to the Assyrian king for help. At the request of Ahaz, Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria attacked Aram and Israel in 732 B.C. (cf. 2 Kgs 15:29; 16:5-9). Aram-Damascus was burnt to the ground, and the same might have happened to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, were it not for Pekah's assassination by Hoshea who then took the throne of Israel as a vassal of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser III took at least 13,520 people into Assyrian captivity.² Most of these deportees came out of the Transjordan (cf. 1 Chr 5:26).

Hoshea's allegiance to Assyria was short-lived, and he withheld tribute to

the Assyrians hoping that he could stand up to the Assyrians with the help of the Egyptians. Therefore, Shalmaneser V decided to deal with Israel's rebellion and laid siege to Samaria in 724 B.C. Samaria capitulated to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. without having received any evident help from Egypt.³ Shalmaneser V died near the time of the end of the siege, and his son, Sargon II, claimed the victory.⁴ Sargon boasted that he carried 27,290 Israelites into captivity, and he replaced them with deportees from other conquered regions (cf. 2 Kings 17:1-6).⁵ The northern tribes lost their national identity and for the most part appear to have intermingled with foreigners.

The foreign deportees who came into Samaria were from a variety of places such as Babylon, Cuthah (twenty miles northeast of Babylon), Avva (on the Orontes River in northern Syria), Hamath (north of Palestine), and Sepharvaim (near Hamath in upper Syria) (cf. 2 Kgs 17:24).⁶ These deportees brought into Samaria quite a mixture of languages, customs, and religious practices.⁷ When these new cults were brought into Samaria, the Lord God brought judgment upon them by sending lions to kill some of them. When Sargon II heard of this he sent an Israelite priest back to Bethel to teach these foreigners "how they should fear Yahweh" (2 Kgs 17:25-28).⁸ Nevertheless, they continued to make gods of their own and worshipped them alongside of the Lord God (2 Kgs 17:29-40). This lasted at least to 550 B.C. because the writer of 2 Kings says, "these nations feared Yahweh and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day" (2 Kgs 17:41).⁹ Ezra and Nehemiah give every indication that they

encountered these syncretistic religious practices among the Samaritans when the Jews returned to Judah. These religious practices help explain the seemingly harsh responses of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of the families of Israel to the people already settled in the land when the people asked if they could be permitted to join the Jews in the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 4:1-3). These polytheistic Samaritans might better be thought of as “Samaritans” because they should not be confused with the monotheistic Samaritans of Jesus’ day.¹⁰

In 701 B.C., the Lord God once again used the Assyrians to discipline his people for their sins. Sennacherib defeated the combined forces of Egypt and Judah at Eltekeh. Then he laid siege to several cities in Judah including Jerusalem. Sennacherib boasted of having taken forty-six cities in Judah and of having shut up Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage” in Jerusalem.¹¹ The city would have fallen were it not for God’s intervention, killing 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Sennacherib then returned home only to be assassinated by his sons (cf. 2 Kgs 19:35-37).¹²

The Last Days of Judah

In its last days of monarchy, Judah found itself in a precarious position with four superpowers of that day vying for power and determining the political landscape in which Judah found herself. These nations were Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Media.

The Assyrians reached their height of power in 663 B.C. under Asshurbanipal with the sacking of Thebes completing their conquest of Egypt.¹³ However, Asshurbanipal died in 627 B.C., and the Babylonians declared independence from Assyria under the leadership of

Nabopolassar in 626 B.C.¹⁴ It took Nabopolassar about ten years to establish control in Babylon, but then he began pushing north against the Assyrians. In 615 B.C., he attempted to take Asshur but was defeated. However, when the Assyrian army followed the retreating Babylonians south, it opened up the heartland of Assyria for an invasion by the Medes probably at the instigation of the Babylonians. Under Cyaxeres, the Medes destroyed Asshur in 614 B.C. Nabopolassar brought his army up to join them, and the Babylonians and Medes made a pact to join forces against the dwindling army of the Assyrians. This pact was later sealed by the marriage of Nabopolassar’s son Nebuchadnezzar to Cyaxeres’s daughter or granddaughter.¹⁵ In 612 B.C., Nahum’s words of prophecy came to pass as Ninevah was reduced to rubble by the combined forces of the Babylonians and the Medes. The Assyrians retreated back west to Haran where they were joined by a small Egyptian force, but the Babylonians drove them out in 610 B.C. The Assyrians and Egyptians retreated about fifty miles further west to Carchemish.

Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt decided to bring a much larger contingent of Egyptians to fight alongside the Assyrians because he feared the might and expansion of the Babylonians and Medes. On his way north to Carchemish, Neco was intercepted by Josiah of Judah at Megiddo in 609 B.C. Josiah wanted to prevent or delay Egypt’s ability to help the Assyrians who had brought such devastation upon Israel and Judah.¹⁶ Josiah disguised himself and fought in the battle, but archers mortally wounded him. His people took him back to Jerusalem to be buried, and Josiah’s son Jehoahaz became king (2 Kgs 23:28-31; 2 Chr 35:20-36:2). Along with the Assyrians,

Neco tried to take back Haran but was repulsed. On his way back to Egypt, he stopped in Jerusalem and took Jehoahaz captive and made Jehoiakim, Jehoahaz's brother, king of Judah.

The fighting between these two alliances continued until 605 B.C. when the Babylonians and Medes under the leadership of the crown prince of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, launched a surprise attack on Carchemish and decidedly defeated the Egyptians and Assyrians. The Assyrians ceased to exist as a force, but the Egyptians retreated and regrouped at Hamath on the Orontes River.¹⁷ Nebuchadnezzar pursued the fleeing Egyptians and defeated them again. At that time, Nebuchadnezzar's father died so he returned to Babylon to bury his father and take the throne of Babylon, allowing the badly decimated Egyptian army to return home.

Nevertheless, Babylon emerged as ruler over "the whole of the land of Hatti" as the Babylonians referred to all of Syria and Palestine including Judah.¹⁸ Before Nebuchadnezzar went back to Babylon, he made Jehoiakim swear allegiance to Babylon. It was somewhere near that time that Daniel and his companions were taken into Babylonian captivity (Dan 1:1-2).¹⁹ Jehoiakim remained loyal to Nebuchadnezzar for three years, but in 601 B.C. Jehoiakim decided to rebel. Nebuchadnezzar responded quickly with auxiliary troops (2 Kgs 24:1-7). The writer of Chronicles says that Nebuchadnezzar brought Jehoiakim into submission and bound him with shackles. He also carried many of the sacred utensils of the temple back with him to Babylon (2 Chr 36:6-7).²⁰ However, Nebuchadnezzar's main objective was the subjugation of Egypt, the objective he earlier was forced

to call to a halt because of the death of his father. Once again he met Neco in battle at Migdol on Egypt's border.²¹ Both sides suffered heavy casualties, and Nebuchadnezzar was forced to retreat back to Babylon.²² Jehoiakim saw this as another opportunity to withhold tribute from Nebuchadnezzar and pursue friendly relations with Neco.

Nebuchadnezzar took about two years to gather his forces, and in 598 B.C. his army began the march west to deal with the treachery of Judah.²³ As the Babylonians started their journey, Jehoiakim died, and his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin, became king of Judah.²⁴ After a month's siege, Jerusalem capitulated to the Babylonians.²⁵ According to 2 Kgs 24:14-16,

[Nebuchadnezzar] led away into exile all Jerusalem and all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. So he led Jehoiachin away into exile to Babylon; also the king's mother and the king's wives and his officials and the leading men of the land, he led away into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. All the men of valor, seven thousand, and the craftsmen and the smiths, one thousand, all strong and fit for war, and these the king of Babylon brought into exile to Babylon.²⁶

Jeremiah 52:28 indicates that only 3,023 captives were taken, but the smaller figures of Jeremiah probably only represent men of the most influential families.²⁷ Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, king in his place. Egypt could not come to Judah's aid because they were occupied with military activities in the south.²⁸

Contrary to Jeremiah's instruction, Zedekiah involved himself in plans

to rebel against Babylon, and with the promise of Egyptian support he withheld tribute from Nebuchadnezzar in 589 B.C. (cf. Jer 38:14-23). Nebuchadnezzar acted quickly by dividing his army, sending one part to the Mediterranean coast to meet the Egyptians and sending the other part to Jerusalem to begin a siege on the city. The Egyptians attempted to help Judah, but they were outnumbered forcing their withdrawal. In 588 B.C., the siege began, and Jerusalem fell in 587/586 B.C.²⁹ Zedekiah attempted to flee but was captured and forced to watch the execution of his sons before his eyes were gouged out. Zedekiah was taken into captivity along with the people who had deserted over to the Babylonians and those who were left in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:8-21). The Babylonian's system of deportation was different from that of the Assyrians: (1) The Babylonians did not resettle deportees from other conquered lands in areas from which they had deported people; the deportation was one-way. (2) The Babylonians appointed a local governor to oversee the land they had just laid waste.³⁰

Jewish Life in Exile

During the exile, there were basically three communities: those who fled to Egypt, those who remained in Judah, and those who were deported to Babylon.

The Community in Egypt

Jeremiah reported that those who fled to Egypt consisted of important military officers, members of the royal family, and Jews who had fled and recently returned after the appointment of a governor in Judah (Jer 43:1-7). They took Jeremiah with them against his will (2 Kgs 25:25-26; Jer 41:16-18). The people turned to a

syncretistic worship as stated by Jeremiah and supported by the Elephantine papyri. The Elephantine papyri tell of a Jewish military colony in Upper Egypt that was probably founded some time in the sixth century B.C. The papyri consist of personal letters and legal documents from the fifth century B.C. They even constructed a temple for their community.³¹ Historians and archaeologists know little else about the Jews who fled to Egypt.

The Community in Judah

Since we do not know what the population was in Judah before the siege, the number of casualties from the siege, or the total number of people who went into Babylonian captivity, it is impossible to know how many people remained in Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem. Ackroyd suggests, "It is reasonable to suppose that there was still quite a substantial population in Judah after 587."³² Albright says the remnant numbered no more than twenty thousand.³³ Nehemiah says that there was not a large population in Judah when he returned a little over one hundred years later (Neh 7:4). The archaeological evidence also seems to support this fact.³⁴ Moreover, those who were left behind were the poor—those who, for the most part, had not been in positions of leadership. They continued to have some sort of worship, but given the destruction of the temple and the deportation of many of the priests, it would have been much different than it was before.³⁵ Those who remained seem to have had a difficult existence.

The Community in Babylon

For the most part, the Jews in Babylonian exile appear to have had a peaceful if not prosperous existence. Some were

forced into a variety of forms of manual labor for the Babylonian government projects. But most were settled with their families not far from Babylon onto land that had been newly irrigated as a part of Nebuchadnezzar's scheme of public works. There they raised crops to help feed Babylon's growing population. Only the king's family and closest advisors suffered actual incarceration.³⁶ The people were settled in a number of communities such as the one Ezekiel mentions on the river Kebar near Nippur, sixty miles southeast of Babylon (Ezek 1:1-3; 3:15; cf. 2 Kgs 24:10-16; 25:8-12; Jer 52:28-34; Ezra 2:59; 8:17).³⁷ Those exiles that returned to Judah brought with them numerous livestock and were able to make contributions for the sacred services (Ezra 2:65-69; 8:26; Neh 7:67-72).³⁸

The prosperity of the Babylonian exiles may be a primary reason many chose to stay in Babylon rather than return to Judah when they were given the opportunity.³⁹ The Murushi Sons was a business and lending house in the fifth century B.C. Among their customers are listed sixty Jewish names from the time of Artaxerxes I and forty from the time of Darius II. They participated in a variety of business ventures.⁴⁰ There seems to have been no social or commercial barriers between the Jewish exiles and their Babylonian captors.⁴¹

The Jewish exiles experienced other changes also. For instance, they adopted a new calendar while they were in Babylon that still remains the basis for the Jewish calendar today. The changes to their calendar are evident in the postexilic writings.⁴² The exiles also were influenced by the dominant diplomatic and commercial language of that time. By the time the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they were using

the Aramaic language. However, while portions of the exilic and post-exilic writings contain Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4b-7:28; Jer 10:11), the majority of the writing in Scripture coming from this time period appears in Hebrew.⁴³ A number of later Judaism's customary practices such as praying three times a day and the rules and specific dates for fasting seem to have developed during this time. Furthermore, the practice of meeting in synagogues may have begun during the exile since they had no temple.⁴⁴ It was during the exile that the descendants of Abraham came to accept the designation "Jew," which remains today.⁴⁵ The greatest change concerns idolatry. Before the Babylonian exile, the Israelites were prone to worshipping idols, but being exiled into a land of idolatry seems to have cured them of the problem.

The Rise of the Persian Empire

By 650 B.C., a group of Persians took control of the southeastern section of the Zagros Mountains.⁴⁶ These kings traced their descent from an ancestor named Hakhamanish or, in Greek, Achaemenes. Therefore, historians often refer to them as the Achaemenians. Herodotus asserts that King Phraortes of Media forced Persia to become a vassal and that it remained one until Cyrus the Great became king of Persia (559-530 B.C.). Cyrus overthrew the Medes to the north in 550 B.C. Instead of making the Medes his slaves, he integrated them into Persian society and appointed many Medes into important positions in the government and military. As a result, the Medes came to view Cyrus as their legitimate king, and outsiders found it difficult to make a distinction between the Persians and Medes. The Greeks went so far as to use the two ethnic

designations interchangeably.⁴⁷ Unlike many of the powerful leaders that had preceded him throughout the ancient Near East, Cyrus learned that it was in his best interest to treat those he conquered and ruled with respect. Once total control in Media was established and he had successfully expanded into other territories, Cyrus turned his attention west toward Babylon.

Meanwhile in Babylon, when Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C., the empire began to erode under the leadership of his son Evil-merodach (Amel-Marduk). During his reign, he went against just about anything his father had done and is best known for having released Jehoiachin from prison after having been captive for thirty-seven years (2 Kgs 25:27-30). However, after two years on the throne, Neriglissar, his brother-in-law, assassinated him and took the throne, reigning over Babylonia from 560-556 B.C. The Babylonian empire continued to erode under the leadership of Neriglissar and his son Labashi-Marduk, who did not even last a year on the throne, probably because he was too young to rule.⁴⁸ Next to take the throne was Nabonidus (555-539 B.C.).⁴⁹

Nabonidus was unlike his Babylonian predecessors in at least two ways.⁵⁰ First, Nabonidus was particularly interested in antiquities. He uncovered a number of statues, monuments, and inscriptions of past kings and put them in a "museum" at his daughter's residence in Ur. Second, because of his mother's religious beliefs, he was more devoted to the moon god Sin than he was the sun god Marduk, the traditional god of the Babylonians.⁵¹ The leading priests in Babylon resented Nabonidus' elevation of Sin over Marduk, and when plague, famine, and high inflation struck Babylon proper,

Nabonidus interpreted the difficulties as punishments for the murmurings of those Babylonians who opposed him. Because of his increasing interest in antiquities and his growing disillusionment with the religious establishment in Babylon, he lost what little interest he had in overseeing the administration of the government and appointed his son Belshazzar co-regent in 549 B.C.⁵² Nabonidus moved to Tema, an oasis in the Arabian Desert just east of the Red Sea, and lived there the next ten years.⁵³

In 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great was ready to invade Babylonia. A major battle took place at Opis on the Tigris with a Babylonian defeat. Then Cyrus ordered the conquest of the city of Babylon, and it fell quickly in late October. Nabonidus came to lead the defense, but he was too late.⁵⁴ Daniel describes how Babylon fell while Belshazzar was having a feast (Daniel 5). The historian Xenophon corroborates Daniel saying the attack happened at a time when "all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long."⁵⁵ And Herodotus states, "The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses."⁵⁶ The Persians executed Belshazzar and imprisoned Nabonidus.

The Return of the Exiles

Cyrus's policy pertaining to conquered peoples allowed them to worship their own gods and establish some semblance of autonomy as long as they paid their taxes to the empire and remained loyal citizens. He encouraged people who had

been uprooted from their homelands and religions to return home and reestablish the worship of their gods with the blessing and support of his government. The Edict of Cyrus as recorded in Ezra 1:2-4 demonstrates this Persian policy. Shortly following this edict, a group of close to fifty thousand Jews returned to Judah under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (Ezra 2:64-65). Zerubbabel became their governor, while Joshua served as the high priest.

Cambyes II (530-522 B.C.) became king when his father Cyrus died from wounds inflicted in battle. While involved in a military campaign, Cambyes received word that someone had usurped the throne, but on his way back home to deal with the treachery he died.⁵⁷ Darius I (522-486 B.C.), one of Cambyes's officers dealt with the insurrection and became the next king of Persia. Cambyes must have been the king who supported the enemies of the returnees and put a stop to the reconstruction of the temple. However, Darius I upheld the Edict of Cyrus, and under his rule the Jews completed the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 515 B.C. (Ezra 4-6).⁵⁸ The next Persian king was Xerxes (biblical Ahasuerus, 486-465 B.C.). He is the Persian king to whom Esther was married.⁵⁹ He spent a great deal of effort in completing the palace at Susa and waging war on the Greeks.⁶⁰ He was assassinated in his bed chamber in 465 B.C. by an influential courtier named Artabanus.⁶¹

Artaxerxes I followed Xerxes (464-424 B.C.). Artaxerxes was the third son of Xerxes and Amestris, his queen. His older brothers were Darius and Hystaspes. His father's assassin convinced Artaxerxes that his oldest brother Darius had murdered his father.⁶² Therefore, the eighteen year

old Artaxerxes plotted and killed Darius after a number of months.⁶³ Artabanus then attempted to kill Artaxerxes, but Artaxerxes killed him first. Then Artaxerxes defeated his other older brother who was serving as a satrap in Bactria to the east near the Hindu Kush Mountains and became the king of Persia.⁶⁴ He was nicknamed Longimanus. Plutarch says, "The first Artaxerxes, among the kings of Persia the most remarkable for a gentle and noble spirit, was surnamed the Long-handed, his right hand being longer than his left, and was the son of Xerxes."⁶⁵

Nehemiah the Royal Cupbearer

Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes I (Neh 1:1; 2:1), and it was in his seventh year on the throne that Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458/457 B.C. according to the traditional view (Ezra 7:7).⁶⁶ Yamauchi cites various sources indicating what traits Nehemiah had as a royal cupbearer:

He would have been well trained in court etiquette (compare Dan 1:4, 13, 15; Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.230). He would certainly have known how to select the wines to set before the king. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Qamma 92b) states: "The wine belongs to the master but credit for it is due to his cupbearer." He would have been a convivial companion with a willingness to lend an ear at all times. Robert North is reminded of Saki, the companion of Omar Khayyam, who served wine to him and listened to his discourses. Nehemiah would have been a man of great influence as one with the closest access to the king, and one who could well determine who got to see the king (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.3.8-9). Above all Nehemiah would have enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king. The great need for trustworthy attendants is underscored by the intrigues that were endemic to the Achaemenid court.⁶⁷

At least four of the Persian kings had been murdered, and at least a half dozen of them reached the throne by way of some conspiracy.⁶⁸ Therefore, a most trusted individual had to fill the position of royal cupbearer.

Nehemiah the Governor of Judah

In 460 B.C., Egypt revolted against the Persians with the help of the Greeks from Athens. They defeated and killed the Persian satrap who happened to be Artaxerxes' uncle and gained control of most of Lower Egypt in the north by 462 B.C. In 459 B.C., the Athenians sent two hundred ships to Egypt and helped the Egyptians capture Memphis, the administrative center of the delta region. In 456 B.C., the Persians responded by sending Megabyzus, the satrap of Syria, with a large fleet and army to Egypt. By the end of eighteen months he was able to trap the Athenian fleet, capture Inarus, the leader of the revolt, and restore Persian rule in the region. Megabyzus had promised to spare the life of Inarus, but at the instigation of Amestris, the mother of Artaxerxes, he was impaled. Megabyzus was so angered by the deed that he revolted against the king from 449-446 B.C. but then was reconciled with him.⁶⁹

The instability in the region may account for the reason Artaxerxes was in favor of Ezra's reforms and Nehemiah's appointment to be the governor of Judah. The province of Judah was much smaller than the nation of Judah had been, but Artaxerxes probably thought he could use some loyal supporters in the area given the instability in that region of the empire.⁷⁰ Ezra's commission to administer the Torah to his people was in line with Persian policy. The Persians hoped it would bring order to the people and

pacify their religious concerns. Nehemiah was a perfect choice to go to Judah given his loyalty to the king. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445/444 B.C. Artaxerxes needed someone he could trust in the area, and he appreciated Nehemiah's service. Artaxerxes gives this impression when he wanted to know when Nehemiah could return to him (Neh 2:6).

As governor, Nehemiah faced an economic crisis (Neh 5). Non-land owners were short of food, landowners had to mortgage their properties, many were forced to borrow money at extremely high interest rates, and some were compelled to sell their children into slavery. While the Persian kings were kind when it came to matters of faith and local administration, they were quite severe when it came to money and taxation. Their economic policies led to inflationary conditions where the rich got richer, the middle-class became poor, and the poor became poorer. The economic conditions Nehemiah faced were prevalent throughout the Persian Empire.⁷¹ As governor, Nehemiah was in a position to enjoy the spoils that Persian aristocrats enjoyed at the expense of the people under them, but he refused to do so. Instead he lent money and grain to those in need without interest and did not take of the royal food allotted to him as an appointed governor of the king (Neh 5:10, 14). Most governors became very prosperous in their positions at the expense of the people (Neh 5:15), but by his example and leadership Nehemiah helped his people in a time of dire need and withstood any temptation to take advantage of them (Neh 5:17).

Conclusion

The events leading up to the exile, the exile itself, and the return all point to

God's sovereignty and grace. The Lord God is not only the God of Israel, but he is the God of the nations. Kings and leaders plan their courses of action, but it is the Lord who raises them up and brings them down for his own glory and purposes. God has always been and always will be faithful to his word and to his people.

ENDNOTES

¹All quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995).

²J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 283-84 (hereafter referred to as *ANET*).

³While the vast majority of scholars believe the fall of Samaria was in 722 B.C., Rodger C. Young argues for a date of 723 B.C. ("When Was Samaria Captured? The Need for Precision in Biblical Chronologies," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 [2004]: 577-95).

⁴A. T. Olmstead, "The Fall of Samaria," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 21 (1904-1905): 170-82.

⁵*ANET*, 284-87.

⁶Thomas Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 139.

⁷Eugene Merrill, *A Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 401. Concerning the Assyrian practice of imposing foreign cults on newly acquired lands like Israel see Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 105-10.

⁸For an extra-biblical parallel of this edict, see Shalom Paul, "Sargon's Administrative Diction in II Kings 17:27," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 73-74.

⁹Concerning the date of the writing of 1 and 2 Kings, see Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 228-30.

¹⁰Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 267.

¹¹*ANET*, 287-89.

¹²Concerning Sennacherib's assassination, see Simo Parpola, "The Murderer of Sennacherib," in *Death in Mesopotamia*, ed. Bendt Alster (*Recontre assyriologique internationale* 26; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 171-82.

¹³A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1923.; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), 440-52.

¹⁴Nabopolassar founded what is known as the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire. Bill T. Arnold argues that the use of "Chaldean" may be misleading because there is no "unambiguous evidence" that Nabopolassar's dynasty was ethnically Chaldean. Biblical and classical writers use the term synonymously with "Babylonian" with no ethnic significance ("Babylonians" in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994], 61).

¹⁵William H. Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2003), 279.

¹⁶For discussions concerning Josiah's motives, see Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1992), 448; and A. Malamat, "Josiah's Bid for Armageddon: The Background of the Judean-Egyptian Encounter in 609 B.C.," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 5 (1973): 267-78.

- ¹⁷Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 152.
- ¹⁸Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 401.
- ¹⁹See D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings, 626-556 B. C.* (London: British Museum, 1956); and idem, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London: Tyndale, 1956), 16-18.
- ²⁰Wiseman suggests that the reason Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Judah is not mentioned in the Babylonian records is because Nebuchadnezzar's main objective was to deal with the Egyptians (*Chronicles*, 31).
- ²¹Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 160.
- ²²Wiseman, *Chronicles*, 131.
- ²³*Ibid.*, 31, 70.
- ²⁴According to 2 Chr 36:9 in the MT, he was eight years old; yet according to 2 Kgs 24:8 and the LXX, he was eighteen years old. The Babylonian records indicate that in 592 B.C. Jehoiachin had five sons, that is five years after he went into Babylonian exile. Therefore, he must have been eighteen years old when he took the throne of Judah. See Wiseman, *Chronicles*, 220.
- ²⁵A. Malamat, "Last Kings," *Israel Exploration Journal* 18 (1968): 144.
- ²⁶Having been from a priestly family, Ezekiel was taken into captivity at this time.
- ²⁷Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Neemiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (vol. 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 567.
- ²⁸Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 460-62.
- ²⁹It is difficult to know with certainty which year Jerusalem fell because historians are not sure which dating system was being used in Judah. See A. Malamat, "The Last Years of the Kingdom of Judah," in *World History of the Jewish People*, vol. 4, part 1, *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History*, eds. A. Malamat and I. Ephal (Jerusalem: Massada Press, 1979), 218-20.
- ³⁰Kaiser, *History of Israel*, 405; Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 483.
- ³¹See B. Porten, "Elephantine Papyri," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:445-55; B. Porten and J. C. Greenfield, *Jews of Elephantine and Aramaeans of Syene* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1974); R. K. Harrison, "Elephantine Papyri," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-82), 2:58-61.
- ³²Peter R. Ackroyd, *Israel Under Babylon and Persia* (London: Oxford University, 1970), 9.
- ³³William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper, 1963), 87.
- ³⁴S. Weinberg, "Postexilic Palestine: An Archaeological Report," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities* 4 (1971): 78-97.
- ³⁵For various suggestions concerning the nature of the Israelite cult in Judah at this time, see Ackroyd, *Israel Under Babylon and Persia*, 27-28; and Solomon Zeitlin, "The Origin of the Synagogue," in *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology, and Architecture*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York: Ktav, 1975), 14-26.
- ³⁶James C. Newsome, *By the Waters of Babylon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 70.
- ³⁷Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 159.
- ³⁸Yamauchi, *Ezra-Neemiah*, 569.
- ³⁹M. D. Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora: Jews in Nippur in the Fifth Century BC," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 (1974): 6-12.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 6-12. See also Hermann V. Hilprecht and Albert T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murashu Sons of Nippur Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes I (464-425 B.C.)*, Babylonian Expedition 9 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1898).
- ⁴¹Yamauchi, *Ezra-Neemiah*, 569.
- ⁴²Kaiser, *History of Israel*, 412-13.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, 413.
- ⁴⁴Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*, 289.
- ⁴⁵Kendell H. Easley, *The Illustrated Guide to Biblical History* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 127.
- ⁴⁶Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 164.
- ⁴⁷Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*, 289-97.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 285.
- ⁴⁹See Sidney Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts Relating to the Capture and Downfall of Babylon* (London: Methuen, 1924).
- ⁵⁰See Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556-539 BC* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989).
- ⁵¹Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 88.
- ⁵²ANET, 313-14.
- ⁵³Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 164-65.
- ⁵⁴A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Baby-*

- Ionian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975), 109-11.
- ⁵⁵Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 7.5.15.
- ⁵⁶Herodotus, 1.191.
- ⁵⁷Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 125-26.
- ⁵⁸See Hag 1:1, 15; 2:10; Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1.
- ⁵⁹Robert Dick Wilson has shown that "Ahasuerus" is the proper Hebrew rendering of the Greek "Xerxes" (*A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody, 1959], 69, n. 25).
- ⁶⁰For a complete discussion of Xerxes, see Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 187-239.
- ⁶¹*Ibid.*, 248.
- ⁶²Ctesias, *Persica*, 29-30.
- ⁶³Diodorus, *The Eleventh Book of Diodorus*, 11.69.1-5.
- ⁶⁴Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 168-69.
- ⁶⁵Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 1.1.
- ⁶⁶For arguments concerning the chronological order of Ezra and Nehemiah see F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 5-9 and Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," 583-86.
- ⁶⁷Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 259-60.
- ⁶⁸I. Gershevitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran II: The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 227.
- ⁶⁹Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," 571.
- ⁷⁰John M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 128.
- ⁷¹See M. Dandamyev for conditions described in Babylon that are similar to that which Nehemiah describes in Jerusalem ("Achaemenid Babylonia," in *Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. I. M. Diakonoff [Moscow: Nauka, 1969], 309).

God as Restorer: A Theological Overview of the Book of Nehemiah

Tiberius Rata

Tiberius Rata is Associate Professor of Old Testament Studies at Grace Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana. Prior to this he was Assistant Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. A native of Romania, Dr. Rata has served as a pastor in California and Alabama, and has authored several scholarly articles.

Introduction

The Bible is a book about God. God reveals himself to us through the Scriptures in many ways, and the different books of the Bible show God's grace and grandeur, his multi-faceted character and mercy, his redeeming and restoring love. While the book of Nehemiah primarily portrays God as the One who restores his people to him and to their land, it also portrays the complexity of God's nature and works. The book of Nehemiah teaches us about God's people, their obedience, their faithfulness, and their struggles. On the other hand, the book of Nehemiah also reveals the evil hearts and plans of the unfaithful who rebel against God and try to derail the plans of his people.

After being in the Babylonian exile for seventy years, the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland. Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire gave the edict that the Israelites could return to their own land and even rebuild their temple, the center of their religious life. Nehemiah is one of the leaders of the returning Israelites. The book is divided in two parts: Chapters 1-6 deal with God's restoration of the people, while chapters 7-13 deal with God's reformation of the restored people.¹

What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God?

In the book of Nehemiah God first reveals himself as Creator (1:5). In his opening prayer, Nehemiah prays to "the

God of heaven." The expression "God of heaven" occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and in each instance it refers to Yahweh.² Breneman suggests that "the phrase 'God of heaven' was commonly used in the Persian Empire even by the Persians in speaking of their god."³ The expression points to God's creative power as well as to his awe-inspiring character. He is also the covenant God who both makes and preserves the covenant with his people. God also hears the prayers of his people (1:6, 11; 2:4) and he is the one who forgives their sin (1:7).⁴ God is also a God who gives laws and instruction (1:7-8). Although he is loving and merciful, God is holy, righteous, and just, and he must judge and punish those who do not keep his laws and commandments (1:8b).⁵ Nehemiah knows that God is the God who restores and redeems his people (1:9-10).⁶ By this time Nehemiah is set to go and work towards the rebuilding of Jerusalem, so subsequently he concludes his prayer by appealing to God's mercy and compassion as he prepares for an audience with the king. According to Ezra 4:21, Artaxerxes commanded the ceasing of work in Jerusalem, so Nehemiah knows that humanly speaking his chances are slim. By appealing to God's power, mercy, and compassion, he recognizes that Yahweh showed compassion to the patriarchs (2 Kgs 13:23) and he showed compassion to his people after he liberated them from Egypt (Exod 33:19).

In chapter 2, the phrase "the good hand

of my God was upon me,” points to a God who blesses, protects, and provides (2:8; 2:18).⁷ “If this expression derived from the secular sphere in the sense of royal bounty (1 Kgs 10:13; Esth 1:7; 2:18), then its use here will be of particular significance: what appears at one level to be the bountiful grant of the Persian king turns out to be merely a channel through which the bounty of the King of kings reaches his people.”⁸ God is also the God who calls and inspires one to do ministry. Nehemiah knows that Yahweh is the One who called him to do something for his people (2:12). “Nehemiah’s spiritual need was direction from God. Even the valued few men he had as colleagues were not told everything . . . he did not chatter irresponsibly even to people who shared his ideals.”⁹ Nehemiah also knows that God is the One who will give his people success (2:20). Therefore, Nehemiah does not retaliate when encountering opposition, but rather he expresses confidence in Yahweh, the One who will make them prosper. In the midst of opposition Nehemiah is not paralyzed; rather, he gets organized. “We will arise, and we will build” is Nehemiah’s resolve. “The mention of the king’s authority would be far more impressive to Sanballat than the grace of God,”¹⁰ but Nehemiah appeals to God’s sovereignty and grace rather than the king’s scepter.

After chapter 3 describes the unparalleled teamwork approach under Nehemiah’s leadership, the beginning of chapter 4 focuses on the ongoing opposition led by Sanballat and Tobiah. But Nehemiah’s God is presented as one who hears the prayer of the faithful who are mocked and despised (4:4). “The whole prayer is reminiscent of such Psalms as 44, 74, and 79, and in particular of the situation

which Hezekiah faced when threatened by Sennacherib.”¹¹ Nehemiah encourages the people by pointing to God’s character and past acts in history (4:14). This is not the first time God’s honor was at stake, but he always emerges victorious. “The language of Nehemiah (“Don’t be afraid”) is reminiscent of words of reassurance and victory from other leaders in Scripture (cf. Exod 14:13; Num 14:9; Deut 20:3; 31:6; Josh 10:25).”¹² In his sovereignty, God also frustrates the enemy’s plan, and this is known by both the enemy and the faithful (4:15). Nehemiah ascribes the credit “to God, who had ‘frustrated their plan’—a parallel to the confusion and despair into which God had often cast his people’s enemies of old (Exod 15:14-16; 23:27-28; Deut 2:25; 11:25, etc.).”¹³

Nehemiah’s enemies continue to try and discourage the faithful from doing the work of reconstruction but Nehemiah understands that God is the one who calls and sends them to do the work (6:12). If Nehemiah had run, he would have shown a lack of trust in the God who called him. If he had entered the temple to save his life, he would have broken the Mosaic law.¹⁴ The fact that he does neither of those things shows Nehemiah’s strength of character and purity of heart. Nehemiah appeals to God’s faithfulness and asks him to “remember” his enemies and their work (6:14). Nehemiah knows that God is the One who rewards both the righteous and the wicked, so he leaves the vengeance to God.¹⁵ Nehemiah 6:15 does not merely sound a note of victory, but it also gives us great historical information. The reconstruction of the wall was done in only fifty-two days and the work was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul.¹⁶ The subsequent verses are quick to point out that the work was done “with the help

of our God” and that God’s enemies and the surrounding nations realized this fact (6:16). Blenkinsopp suggests that perhaps “the writer draws on the theme, familiar from hymns and prophetic sermons, of the nations being forced to acknowledge the hand of God in the fortunes of Israel (e.g., Ps 118:23; 126:2).”¹⁷

Even though chapters 7-13 focus on the reformation of the people, God still plays the most important role, because He is the One who causes not just the restoration but also the reformation of the people. While chapters 1-6 focus on the physical restoration of Jerusalem, chapters 7-13 focus on the spiritual reformation of the people. Nehemiah recognizes again (as in 2:12) that God is the One who inspired him (“My God put it into my heart”) to lead the people into both a physical reconstruction and a spiritual reformation (7:5). “Doubtless he had earnestly pondered the grave problem of this great empty space enclosed with walls; then the solution comes to him, as to many earnest souls in ancient times and modern, by inspiration.”¹⁸ This census, unlike the one in 1 Chronicles 21, is approved by God.

The Law of God is central in the reformation of the people. The people’s reaction to the reading of the law is worship.¹⁹ As Ezra concludes the reading of the Law he blesses the LORD, “the great God” (8:6). This title given to God is unusual and it does not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament.²⁰ This great God needs to be worshiped, and the act of worship follows the revelation of God through his Law. After they read the Law and worship, they read some more while the Levites help clarify the meaning of the Law (8:8). Even though the people knew the Law as the Law of Moses, the book of Nehemiah makes it clear that God is the author of

the Law (8:14). Moses was merely God’s humble instrument through whom he revealed himself.²¹

The understanding of God who reveals himself and the worship of this great God are only part of the reformation process. The confession of sin is also a most crucial element in the people’s reformation (9:1-3). After the people confess their sins they are exhorted by the Levites to “Stand up and bless the LORD” (9:5).²² Verse 5 starts a prayer rich in theology that can be divided accordingly: (1) God as Creator (9:6); (2) God as Covenant Maker (9:7-8); (3) God as Deliverer (9:9-11); (4) God as Sustainer (9:12-21); and (5) God as Land Giver (9:22-31). In contrast with the false, time-bound idols, God is “from everlasting to everlasting” (9:5).²³ While the idols’ names are worthless, God’s name is glorious and exalted (9:5b). God is the One who created the heaven and the earth. The merism “heaven and earth” of Genesis 1 is used here to point to the fact that God created everything.²⁴ God is not a lame-duck, powerless by-stander who merely started a theistic evolutionary process. God created and remains involved in his creation. He is the only one who sustains his creation (9:6). The verb employed here and translated “preserve” is the Hebrew verb *hiāyah* which means “to live, to sustain life, to preserve life.” Verse 6 concludes by affirming that the creation’s proper response to its Creator and Sustainer is worship.²⁵

God’s greatness is affirmed in his choosing and leading Abraham. Abraham is not the main character in the cosmic and redemptive stage of history. God is the One who is great. He is the One who chose Abraham. He is the One who brought him to the Promised Land and the One who changed, not just his name, but also his

life (9:7). God is the Covenant God who sets the terms and conditions of the covenant with Abraham. The end of verse 7 emphasizes again God's faithfulness. He is the Covenant Maker, and he is also the Covenant Sustainer. Why? Because that is his character, his nature; he is righteous.

The exodus event is revisited in order to continue God's exaltation. The narrative presents Him as the God who sees the affliction of the oppressed (9:9). Nehemiah's God did not just create the heavens and the earth, but he is also close to his people, sees their plight, and hears their cry. In order to free his people from slavery, God "performed signs and wonders."²⁶ As a result God's name was exalted and, thus, his reputation was magnified (9:10).²⁷ God's miracles did not end at the shore of the Red Sea (9:11), but continued through the wilderness period. God does not just deliver his people from Egypt, he also guides them through the wilderness. God guides and provides his people pillars of cloud and fire (9:12). Yet, God's guidance is best seen, not in the pillars of cloud and fire, but in the Law he has given through his servant Moses (9:13). The pillars disappear but God's Word will stand forever. God also calls his people to rest and sanctification by observing God's "holy Sabbath" (9:14). God is portrayed as the One who provided bread and water for his people during their wilderness wandering (9:15). The expression "bread from heaven" occurs twice in the Old Testament. The first time it occurs is in Exod 16:4 where God promises the people that he will feed them even while they are in the wilderness. Nehemiah 9:15 is the only other place this expression occurs, and it is a historical look at God's fulfillment of his promise.

Even though the Israelites responded to

God's guidance and providence by rebelling against him and his servants (9:16), God still forgave them (9:17). God's graciousness and compassion are contrasted with the faithlessness of the people. Furthermore, God is presented as being slow to anger and abounding in covenantal love.²⁸ Not only did God not forsake his people (9:17), but he also continued providing them with guidance through the pillars of cloud and fire (9:19).²⁹ All this was possible because of God's great compassion (9:19).³⁰ Besides the physical provisions of bread and water, God also provided spiritually for his people (9:20). The people can receive and understand God's instruction through his Spirit.³¹ God is the One who gave them victory in battle (9:22), prosperity in numbers, and inheritance of the Promised Land (9:23-24). The expression "numerous as the stars of heaven" is a direct reference to the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:2; 15:5). "This entire scene has the design and look of a covenant renewal ceremony (Exod 34)."³²

While God is a loving and merciful God, he is also holy, righteous, and just, and he must punish sin. He is the God who judges sin (9:27). Like tardy tenants who had not paid their rent, the Israelites were evicted from their land by God, the righteous landlord. Even so, because God is a God of great compassion (9:27, 28, 31), he rescued them from the hand of their oppressors (9:28), patiently instructing and guiding them (9:29).

The expression "now therefore" in 9:32 points to a transition in Nehemiah's prayer. Until now, Nehemiah's prayer was a historical reminder of God's goodness displayed from the time of the covenant made with Abraham to the exilic period. Now Nehemiah includes himself in the

prayer by using the adverb “now,” thus pointing to the present restoration period to which he belongs. The God to which Nehemiah is praying is the same “great, mighty, and awesome” God who is faithful to the covenant and who loves people with a covenantal love. The fact that Nehemiah can call God “our God” points to the intimacy God desires with those who love and obey him (9:32). Nehemiah recognizes God’s justice and fairness and confesses that God acted justly in his judgment of a rebellious people (9:33).³³ After Nehemiah institutes radical reforms among the people (chapters 12-13), the book ends with Nehemiah praying that God will remember the defilement of the unfaithful and the good work he has done in the process of restoration (13:14, 22, 29, 31). Breneman affirms that “the book of Nehemiah begins with prayer and closes with prayer. For lasting results, ministry can never be separated from prayer.”³⁴

What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God’s people and the unfaithful?

While the book of Nehemiah is first and foremost about God, the book also gives us insight about God’s people and their enemies.³⁵ The first verse of the book tells us the crucial part Nehemiah plays in the book.³⁶ In the first person, he tells of what he went through after he found out the state of affairs back home in Jerusalem. While working for the Persian king Artaxerxes, Nehemiah is made aware of the grave state of Jerusalem (1:2-3). Nehemiah sees the sad state of affairs and combines his tears with prayer and fasting. The man of God both sees and *feels* the need for reconstruction. Nehemiah is sensitive and spiritually astute (1:4). From the beginning of the book we see

that Nehemiah is a man of prayer and fasting.³⁷ This first recorded prayer in the book of Nehemiah begins with a confession of sin (1:4-7). Nehemiah knows who God is and addresses him accordingly as the Creator God (1:5). Nehemiah also knows that God’s judgment was brought about because of the people’s disobedience to the covenant God made with Moses. Nehemiah shows the marks of a true leader in that he includes himself and his father’s house among those who have sinned and brought about the Babylonian exile (1:6-7). After he confesses personal and corporate sin, Nehemiah goes on to plea for God’s help (1:8-11). Verse 8 points to the fact that the man of God knows “what says the LORD.”³⁸ Nehemiah knows the Law of the LORD given through his servant Moses. Nehemiah’s knowledge of theology does not make him puffed up; rather he has a spirit of humility and knows that he and his compatriots are just servants of the LORD (1:10). The end of chapter 1 tells us that Nehemiah’s status at the Persian court was “the cupbearer to the king” (1:11). Williamson states that “royal cupbearers in antiquity, in addition to their skill in selecting and serving wine and their duty in tasting it as proof against poison, were also expected to be convivial and tactful companions to the king.”³⁹ Thus, chapter 1 informs us that Nehemiah leaves a very respected, high-paying position, in order to rebuild Jerusalem and reform its people.

Nehemiah’s life is bathed in prayer (2:4). Brown affirms that Nehemiah’s prayer emphasizes the necessity of prayer, describes the immediacy of prayer, portrays the intimacy of prayer, demonstrates the confidence of prayer, and proves the effectiveness of prayer.⁴⁰ Nehemiah shows respect for his ancestors when he refers

to Jerusalem as “the place of my fathers’ tombs” (2:5). His prayer shows that the man of God is a man of vision. He sees Jerusalem not for what it is, but for what it can become (2:6). And even though he also respects the king’s authority, he recognizes that God’s provision and protection are what will give success (2:8). Even though God is with Nehemiah, human opposition still exists. However, in the midst of opposition Nehemiah’s motivation comes to the surface. He was starting the work of reconstruction because he was seeking “the welfare of the sons of Israel” (2:10). Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite stand in stark contrast with Nehemiah, and they are displeased that someone cares for God’s people (2:10).⁴¹ Nevertheless, like a good leader, Nehemiah assesses the damage (2:11-17a), and then takes the initiative of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, encouraging his Jewish brothers to join him in the reconstruction project (2:17b-18a). The people are persuaded by Nehemiah’s testimony and, thus, they start the work of rebuilding (2:18b). Even though opposition is still present and God’s enemies mock and despise God’s people (2:19), Nehemiah is confident in God’s providence and is assured that the God who called him to do the work will also give him success. Furthermore, Nehemiah refuses to compromise, denying his opponents a share of the land and legacy (2:20). Blenkinsopp clarifies that “the denial of a ‘share’ corresponds to a traditional formula denoting political dissociation (cf. 2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kgs 12:16), while ‘claim’ stands for the legal right to exercise jurisdiction.”⁴²

Chapter 3 is an excellent example of teamwork in which God’s people gather together to do the work of reconstruction. “The list of those engaged in the

rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem moves section by section round the wall in a counter-clockwise direction, making a full circuit from and to the Sheep Gate (3:1-32).”⁴³ The chapter also shows the great leadership skills of Nehemiah who organizes the reconstruction of forty-five sections of Jerusalem’s wall.⁴⁴ The high priest Eliashib leads by example and is mentioned first (3:1).⁴⁵ Fensham suggests that “Nehemiah wanted to show that he received the cooperation of the high priest and thus also that of the other priests.”⁴⁶ The Sheep Gate is mentioned first and receives priority probably because “sheep destined for sacrifice usually were brought in there to the market.”⁴⁷ The fact that the men from Jericho joined the work of reconstruction (3:2) indicates that these men viewed no distance too long to travel if they accomplished what they set out to do. Besides Jericho, Tekoa (3:5, 27), Gibeon, Mizpah (3:7), Zanoah (3:13), Beth-hacherem (3:14), Beth-zur (3:16), and Keilah (3:17) are also mentioned. People differed not just in their geographical provenance, but also in their professions and trades. Thus, goldsmiths (3:8, 31), perfumers (3:8), high ranking officials (3:9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17), Levites (3:17), priests (3:22), temple servants (3:26), and merchants (3:32) submitted to Nehemiah’s leadership and did manual labor in order for the reconstruction to take place. In contrast with all these who exemplify humility and teamwork stand the “nobles of Tekoa” who “did not support the work” of the reconstruction.⁴⁸ Williamson states that the unwillingness of the leaders of the Tekoites to serve should not be in any way surprising. “The return of the exiles from Babylon at any time is bound to have caused tensions with those who had remained in the land.”⁴⁹

Sanballat, Tobiah, and their supporters continued to oppose the reconstruction (4:1ff). For the second time in the book we are told that Nehemiah and the faithful are mocked by their enemies. Sanballat is singled out as one who gets very angry when hearing the good news of the progress of reconstruction. The idea that whenever something good happens someone will not be pleased is a good principle to remember when doing God's work. The anger of his heart is exteriorized through mocking words that question the strength of the people ("What are these feeble Jews doing?"),⁵⁰ their resolve to rebuild the wall ("Are they going to restore it for themselves?"), and their religious zeal ("Can they offer sacrifices?") (4:2). Even though Tobiah joins the tirade of mocking and discouraging words, Nehemiah turns and appeals to the God that called him to do the work (4:3-4). Nehemiah's prayer is not normative but descriptive (4:4-5). Christians today may not use this prayer as a blueprint to pray against those who oppose them. Rather, Jesus' principles laid out in Matthew 5:38-48, as well as the entire NT, should be used as our guidelines for dealing with our enemies.

Despite overt opposition and insults, the work of the faithful continued and is rewarded because "the people had a heart to work" (4:6). The anger of the unfaithful (4:7) leads them to conspire/plot against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance (to create confusion) in it (4:8).⁵¹ And because piety is no substitute for hard work, the faithful react both by praying and by planning (4:9). However, even though they have faith in God, pray, and plan, the faithful still become discouraged (4:10).⁵² "We can imagine the people singing this lament as they worked on the wall."⁵³ McConville believes that the lament in

4:10 was "a kind of chorus chanted during the work. Despite its rather negative tone it may actually have had the function of keeping the men going—not unlike the 'spirituals' which encouraged enslaved laborers of more recent times."⁵⁴ Discouraging words turn into threatening words from the unfaithful (4:11), but instead of becoming paralyzed, the faithful continue to be organized (4:12-13). Nehemiah's leadership skills come to the surface again as he encourages the people by pointing not to their self-esteem, but by reminding them of Yahweh's greatness and majesty (4:14).⁵⁵ Being encouraged by Nehemiah's words the workers return to work while the unfaithful realize that God was fighting against them (4:15-19). The faithful understand that the cause they are fighting is God's cause, and they recognize his principal part in the war of words or swords.⁵⁶ Nehemiah leads by example. The work of reconstruction continued (4:21) while Nehemiah persevered in encouraging the people, planning the work, and working side by side with his brothers (4:22-23).

Chapter 5 points to internal problems stemming from injustice, oppression, and economic hardship.⁵⁷ While his enemies were angry in the face of good things, Nehemiah is angered in the face of injustice (5:6). Nehemiah confronts the sin of the nobles and rulers (5:7-8) and outlines steps for correction (5:9-11). Those who were in the wrong obey Nehemiah's words and move to make proper restitution (5:12-13a). Only after obedience and restitution take place, can the people praise the LORD (5:13b). Unlike his predecessors, Nehemiah continues to lead by example, and even though he was appointed governor, he did not operate with a "that's-not-in-my-

job-description mentality.” Rather, with humility, Nehemiah himself worked on the wall (5:14-16). Yamauchi observes that “Nehemiah’s behavior as governor was guided by principles of service rather than by opportunism.”⁵⁸

Nehemiah confronted both external and internal problems. After dealing with the internal problems of injustice and oppression in chapter 5, Nehemiah faces external dangers again in chapter 6. Those who opposed the work of reconstruction continued their resistance by conspiring to harm Nehemiah, but because God’s hand is still upon him, Nehemiah discerned that the enemy’s call to a meeting is only a trap (6:1-2). Fensham observes that “Nehemiah suspected foul play. It is possible that he had received certain information which uncovered their plot; perhaps both sides made use of informers.”⁵⁹ And while the enemy sent four requests for a meeting, every time Nehemiah turned down their invitation because his priorities were in order (6:3-4), and his priority now was the reconstruction of the wall. In this episode Nehemiah displays wisdom in discerning and replying, and persistence in doing the work. His enemies resort to lying (6:5), but even though Nehemiah is accused of trying to overturn the Persian monarchy (6:6-7), Nehemiah again discerns the enemy’s lies (6:8). Nehemiah recognizes that he might become weakened by all the external threats and so he prays that God will strengthen him (6:9).

The enemy’s plan to deter Nehemiah continues when Tobiah and Sanballat bribe a priest by the name of Shemaiah son of Delaiah.⁶⁰ Nehemiah’s discernment is again commendable because he understands that Shemaiah was hired to scare him into sinning (6:12-13). “The strategy to discredit the leader is a subtle one and

is common today.”⁶¹ Nehemiah prays a short imprecatory prayer through which he leaves the vengeance to God (6:14). Until now Nehemiah was portrayed as the leader who saw the need for reconstruction, felt the need, prayed to God about the need, and organized people to meet the need. Now the task of rebuilding the wall is completed, which Neh 6:15 tells us was completed in fifty-two days. The speed with which the reconstruction of the wall was accomplished points to God’s guidance and grace, and to Nehemiah’s leadership skills. Even the unfaithful see that God’s hand was at work (6:16), although they do not repent of their rebellion but continue their work of intimidation (6:17-19).

Chapter 7 begins the second part of the book, which focuses on the reformation of the people.⁶² Nehemiah’s leadership skills come to the forefront again as he appoints people to do the different tasks needed around Jerusalem (7:1). Hanani (1:2) is singled out as a faithful and God-fearing man (7:2).⁶³ Nehemiah proves again to be a great organizer, delegating work at the temple (7:1) and at the city gates (7:2-3), and planning the repopulation of Jerusalem (7:4). No task is too menial for Nehemiah if God is the One inspiring him. To accomplish the task of city repopulation God guides Nehemiah to gather the leadership of the city and to take a census (7:5-72). Williamson affirms that “the purpose of the gathering was to draw up a census of the population, on the basis of which an equitable decision could be taken as to who should be moved into the city.”⁶⁴

In unity, the faithful gather, asking Ezra, the great priest and teacher of the Law, to read from the Law of God given to the people through God’s servant Moses.

Even though the reading took about six hours, the people were attentive because their reformation can only be attained as they respond with obedience to God's revelation (8:1-5). After Ezra blessed the LORD, the people respond by worshipping God (8:6).⁶⁵ Thirteen Levites interpret the Law, one of the many tasks of the Levites outlined in the Mosaic Law and practiced at the temple (Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 17:7-9; 35:3; Neh 8:7-8). The people respond to the hearing and understanding of God's word by weeping. Their tears were most likely tears of repentance. "The reading of the law and its explanation to the people had its effect. They became aware of their sins and wept."⁶⁶ Both Nehemiah and Ezra encourage the people to rejoice and, in the middle of their rejoicing, also to remember those who are too poor to feast (8:9-10). The fact that the people understood the Law first led them to repentance, and then the tears turned into joy as they celebrated the understanding of God's words to them (8:11-12).

The people's reformation continues with a time of prayer and fasting (9:1). The sackcloth and dirt represented the general sign for mourning, and the subsequent verses indicate that their prayer was one of confession and repentance of sin. The people who entered into a covenant renewal with Yahweh stress purity and, thus, separate themselves from those outside of the community of faith.⁶⁷ The covenant renewal will take place only after the Israelites have confessed and repented of their sins (9:2). The covenant renewal ceremonies continued for days and they involved the reading of the Law, confession of sin, and worship of Yahweh (9:3). The prayer that follows (9:6-37) is introduced by the exhortation, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever" (9:5b).

The prayer is aimed at God's exaltation for his past redemptive acts in history.⁶⁸ The prayer expresses the people's faith in the God who made a covenant with their father Abraham, the One who redeemed them from Egyptian slavery, but also the One who justly punished them for their rebellion (9:6-21). Nehemiah 9:38 describes a covenant renewal between the Israelites and Yahweh. "The force of the agreement is attested by the fact of its being set in writing and sealed as a guarantee of its authenticity and to preserve against subsequent tampering."⁶⁹ The people continue their resolve to be true to God's law and to stop the practice of intermarrying with Gentiles (10:28-39).⁷⁰

The faithful gather for a special ceremony for the dedication of the temple (12:27-30), which involved the ritual of purification. Williamson suggests that this ritual "may have involved washing of self and of clothes, ritual sprinkling, the sacrifice of sin-offering, fasting, and abstinence from sexual intercourse; cf. Exod 19:10, 14-15; Lev 16:28; Num 8:5-8, 19."⁷¹ As a remarkable leader, Nehemiah leads in the organization of the processions and dedication service and in the delegation of responsibilities at the temple (12:31-47).

The reading of God's Law continues to produce change in the life of the people and they continue to separate themselves from those outside the Israelite community of faith (13:1-3). After a trip to the Persian court, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and immediately takes a firm stand against Tobiah who defiled the temple by his mere presence there and orders that the rooms be cleansed (13:4-9). Fensham argues that it was "an act of desecration to bring into a sacred chamber a profane person such as Tobiah."⁷² Nehemiah reor-

ganizes the Levites and reinstitutes the tithes that seem to have been forgotten during Nehemiah's absence (13:10-14).

The book of Nehemiah ends by pointing to the great leadership skills of Nehemiah. A godly leader confronts sin. Nehemiah confronts those who have forsaken the fourth commandment that set aside the Sabbath for rest and worship, and he demands that the Levites purify themselves and "sanctify the Sabbath day" (13:15-22). Lastly, Nehemiah confronts those who married pagan women (13:23-31) reminding them that Solomon's downfall was brought about by the foreign women who turned his heart away from the LORD (1 Kgs 11:1-9).⁷³

Conclusion

The book of Nehemiah shows us the beauty and greatness of the God who creates, sustains, makes covenants with humans, and restores his people to a genuine relationship with him. In God's economy there are great servant-leaders like Nehemiah who accept God's call and work in his "vineyard," and there are those who oppose the work. Just as in the time of Nehemiah, God calls people today who will do the work of the ministry in the midst of opposition and ridicule.

<i>What he does</i>	<i>His motivation</i>
Prays for his people 1:4	Because God preserves his covenant 1:5
Plans for his people 2:6-8	Because God inspires him 2:12
Perseveres against enemies for his people 4:9, 23	Because God perverts the enemies' plans 4:15, 20
Pleads for unity among his people 5:10-11	Because God is pleased with unity 5:9, 13
Perceives falsehood and remains faithful 6:2, 8, 12	Because God proclaims his name among the nations 6:16

Chart 1: Nehemiah as servant-leader

ENDNOTES

¹See Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 518-22.

²Gen 24:3; 7; 2 Chr 36:23; Ezra 1:2; Neh 1:4, 5; 2:4, 20; and Jonah 1:9.

³Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (New American Commentary 10; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 171.

⁴See Solomon's prayer in 2 Chr 6:40. Both Solomon and Nehemiah appeal to a God who sees and hears.

⁵Nehemiah's prayer is rooted in God's Torah. Nehemiah 1:8-9 is a paraphrase of Deut 30:1-5.

⁶This is a not a new idea, unique with Nehemiah. The tripartite sin-judgment-restoration motif is found throughout the prophetic material, especially the Minor Prophets.

⁷The phrase "the hand of the LORD his God was on him" also occurs in Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18.

⁸H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Word Biblical Commentary 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 93.

⁹Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 54.

¹⁰Loring W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Books of Ezra and*

- Nehemiah* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 204.
- ¹¹Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 217. Also, see 2 Kgs 19:14-19.
- ¹²Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 198.
- ¹³Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 227.
- ¹⁴See Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 212.
- ¹⁵Deut 32:35; Ps 94:1; Rom 12:19.
- ¹⁶While most scholars agree that Elul corresponds to August-September, some suggest that an October date is more likely. For an in-depth discussion regarding chronology see R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1956).
- ¹⁷Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 273.
- ¹⁸Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 264.
- ¹⁹See Leslie Allen, "'For He is Good . . .': Worship in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of John T. Willis*, ed. M. Patrick Graham (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 15-34.
- ²⁰The title *hā'elohim hāgādōl* does not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament. However, the form *hā'el hāgādōl* can be found in Neh 1:5; 9:32; Jer 32:18; and Dan 9:4.
- ²¹Nehemiah 9:3 mentions the Book of the Law of the LORD, again pointing to the divine provenance of the Law.
- ²²See L. J. Liebreich, "The Impact of Nehemiah 9:5-37 on the Liturgy of the Synagogue," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 227-237.
- ²³See F. C. Fensham, "Neh 9 and Pss 105, 106, and 136: Post-Exilic Historical Traditions in Poetic Form," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 9 (1981): 35-51.
- ²⁴For an in-depth look on the use of merism in the Hebrew Bible see Joze Krasovec, "Merism: Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew," *Biblica* 64, no. 2 (1983): 231-39.
- ²⁵See Frederick C. Holmgren, "Faithful Abraham and the 'amānā Covenant: Nehemiah 9,6-10,1" in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104, no. 2 (1992): 249-254.
- ²⁶The expression "signs and wonders" appears frequently in Deuteronomy in Moses' homilies that focus on God's delivering his people from Egypt (See Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; and 34:11). For an excellent treatment of the Exodus see John J. Davis, *Moses and the gods of Egypt* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).
- ²⁷In the Ancient Near East someone's name was equivalent to his/her reputation.
- ²⁸The chain of attributes "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness" also appears in Exod 34:6; Ps 103:8; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2.
- ²⁹God's promise of not forsaking his people is also mentioned in Deut 31:6; 31:8; and 1 Kgs 6:13.
- ³⁰Three times in the book of Nehemiah the noun "compassion" is modified by the adjective "great." The same expression, "great compassion," is found describing God in Isa 54:7 and Dan 9:18.
- ³¹Some Greek versions have "holy spirit."
- ³²Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 240.
- ³³Nehemiah confesses the fact that God is just both at the beginning (9:8) and the end of the prayer (9:33).
- ³⁴Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 275-76.
- ³⁵In this article Nehemiah and those who are doing the reconstruction are presented as God's people, while Sanballat, Tobiah, and those who oppose the reconstruction will be presented as the unfaithful. See David C. Kraemer, "On the Relationship of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 59 (1993): 73-92.
- ³⁶In the Hebrew Bible the book of Ezra-Nehemiah appears as a single book. The fact that both books have first person narratives in them suggests that both Ezra and Nehemiah have written the books that bear their names, with some editor/compiler putting the two together in a single book.
- ³⁷All great men and women of the Bible and of church history were men and women of prayer and fasting.
- ³⁸Dr. Robert Smith, preaching professor at Beeson Divinity School suggests that before one stands up and declares, "Thus says the LORD," one must know *what* the LORD says.
- ³⁹Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 174.
- ⁴⁰Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, 47-48.
- ⁴¹See W. C. Van Wyk and A. P. B. Breytenbach, "The Nature of Conflict in Ezra-Nehemiah," *Hervormde*

- Teologiese Studies* 57, nos. 3-4 (2001): 1254-63.
- ⁴²Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 226.
- ⁴³Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 198.
- ⁴⁴Ten gates are included in the reconstruction project (Neh 3:1, 3, 6, 13-15, 26, 28-29, 31).
- ⁴⁵Ezra 10:6; Neh 3:20-21.
- ⁴⁶Charles F. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 173.
- ⁴⁷Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 186.
- ⁴⁸The Hebrew reads "their nobles did not bring their necks in the service of the LORD."
- ⁴⁹Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 204.
- ⁵⁰The word "Jews" here might be used as an ethnic slur aimed at insulting the people's national heritage.
- ⁵¹The number of enemies increase and now includes the Ashdodites.
- ⁵²Verse 10 contains a lament "indicative of the despair of melancholy" (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 226).
- ⁵³Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 196.
- ⁵⁴J. Gordon McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 91.
- ⁵⁵Nehemiah's leadership skills are also seen in the fact that he correctly assesses the situation ("When I saw their fear"), thus seeing the need for encouragement ("Do not be afraid").
- ⁵⁶The idea that God will fight for them is also present in Exod 14:14; Deut 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh 10:14, 42; and 23:10.
- ⁵⁷There seems to be no support in this chapter for today's "prosperity gospel" euphoria created by those who only preach and teach the Bible selectively.
- ⁵⁸Edwin Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehe-miah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (vol. 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 710.
- ⁵⁹Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 200. While Fensham may be correct, it is also possible that God helped Nehemiah discern the imminent danger.
- ⁶⁰First Chronicles mentions that Delaiah was a priest; thus Shemaiah was also a priest who had access to the temple where he suggests that Nehemiah seek refuge.
- ⁶¹Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 212.
- ⁶²Chapters 1-6 focus on the reconstruction of the wall while chapters 7-13 focus on the reformation of the people.
- ⁶³Hanani (7:2) is a shortened form of Hananiah (1:2).
- ⁶⁴Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 271.
- ⁶⁵The verbs "to worship" and "to bow down" are sometimes used together (Gen 24:26, 28; Exod 4:31; 12:27; 2 Chr 29:29).
- ⁶⁶Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 218.
- ⁶⁷See Saul Olyan, "Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 35, no. 1 (2004): 1-16.
- ⁶⁸See the previous section above, "What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God?"
- ⁶⁹Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 332.
- ⁷⁰Nehemiah 10:30-39 outlines the stipulations/obligations of the covenant. For more on the issue of "intermarriage" see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (vol. 1; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 747-51.
- ⁷¹Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 373.
- ⁷²Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 261.
- ⁷³Fensham suggests that Nehemiah received permission from the Persian court and that is why he was able to strike some of the men and pull out their hair (ibid., 267). Williamson is probably correct when he suggests that this incident was "localized and restricted," Nehemiah being "provoked by the children's language into a sudden and violent outburst" (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 398-399).

Nehemiah 12: Restoring the City of God or How to Preach a List of Names

Peter J. Gentry

Peter J. Gentry is Professor of Old Testament Interpretation and Director of the Hexapla Institute at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served on the faculty of Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College and also taught at the University of Toronto, Heritage Theological Seminary, and Tyndale Seminary. Dr. Gentry is the author of many articles and book reviews and is currently preparing a critical text of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs for the Göttingen Septuagint.

Introduction

During the last forty years I have heard many sermons on Nehemiah. Although the church has neglected the Old Testament in general, the Book of Nehemiah was not excluded by this practical Marcionism. Probably the attention it received was due to the fact that this is a part of the Old Testament that the average preacher or teacher felt could be easily understood. The book was eminently practical and applications were immediate, whether in terms of aiding and abetting a church building program, or finding principles to inspire a church in spiritual disrepair to work together in the face of various kinds of opposition from within and without and accomplish great things for God. Some have focused on leadership tips. I have not, however, heard a single sermon on Nehemiah 12. Its dry and dusty lists of unpronounceable names remained as opaque to understanding as other parts of the Old Testament and utterly irrelevant for the Christian church, unless one were to see a parallel between it and lists of charter members duly recorded and encased in the cornerstone of a church edifice: "Built to the Glory of God 1964."

Such an approach, however, belies our claims for biblical inspiration and inerrancy and reveals, in practical terms, a low view of scripture. "Every word of God is perfect," says Agur (Prov 30:5), and Nehemiah 12 is no exception. It is a powerful word from the Lord, especially for the church today. After briefly reviewing the

historical and literary context of chapter 12 and devoting some attention to its contents, this brief study will seek to identify its message by correlating the chapter to the book of Nehemiah as a whole and to the entire flow of biblical theology.

Outline of Nehemiah 12

- A. A New Generation of Leaders 12:1-26
 - 1. Priests in the Homecoming Generation 12:1-7
 - 2. Levites in the Homecoming Generation 12:8-9
 - 3. High Priestly Line After the Exile 12:10-11
 - 4. A New Generation of Priests 12:12-21
 - 5. A New Generation of Levites 12:22-25a
 - 6. A New Generation of Gatekeepers 12:25b-26
- B. Re-Dedication of the City of God to Worship 12:27-13:3
 - 1. Preparation of the Priests & Levites 12:27-32
 - 2. Procession A 12:33-37
 - 3. Procession B (Antiphonal Choir) 12:38-42
 - 4. Dedication Ceremony 12:40-43
 - 5. Support of the Service of God 12:44-47
 - 6. Exclusion of Foreigners 13:1-3

Chronology

- 538 B.C. Decree of Cyrus the Persian permitting return from exile. Return under Sheshbazzar,

	Zerubbabel, and Jeshua (high priest)
537	Altar rebuilt
536	Work on temple begun
520	Work on temple resumed
516	Temple completed and dedicated
458	Return under Ezra, the priest and scribe ¹
445-432	Nehemiah, governor of Judah
Later	Return of Nehemiah

Historical Context

At the exodus from Egypt, God created Israel as a nation and the people willingly entered into an agreement, a covenant relationship, when the Law/Torah was given at Sinai. For loyalty and obedience there were blessings in the land, and for disobedience there were curses—ultimately exile. Subsequent history showed immediate and repeated violation of the covenant by the people of God.

They rebelled against the Kingship of God by disobeying his guidelines for a right relationship with him and for right relationships with others that showed dignity, honesty, love, and respect. Instead of following the ways set down in the covenant, they attempted to grab the good life by means of extortion, by injustices of all sorts, by oppression of the poor and powerless, and by violence. Now the lifestyle of the people contradicted the meaning of their services in the temple and their worship became hollow and hypocritical. They defiled the temple by many corrupt and evil practices. For all of this—and not until they were repeatedly warned over the years by the prophets—the judgment of God fell upon them.

In a series of three separate attacks, made in 605, 597, and 587 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar II, King of Babylon, conquered

Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple, and carried the people away into exile. For seventy years they were in Babylon under the discipline and punishment of God. But after judgement came restoration. (It is wonderful that the last word of the Old Testament is restoration rather than judgement.) In 538 B.C., Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, gave the decree which permitted the Jews to return to Judah and Jerusalem.

There were several stages to the return. Right away in 538 B.C. a large number returned under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, the high priest as detailed in Ezra 1-2 and Nehemiah 7. First they rebuilt the altar in 537 and then laid the foundation for the temple in 536. Later, in 520, after the work was stalled for some time due to opposition, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah stirred up the people to finish the temple led by Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest.

Some eighty years after the first return, another group returned under the leadership of Ezra, priest and scribe (cf. Ezra 8). From 445-332, Nehemiah was made governor of Judah by Artaxerxes I (Neh 5:14), and under his leadership the city walls were rebuilt in fifty-two days.

Literary Context

Nehemiah is a book about re-building and restoring the city of God. While chapters 1-6 focus on restoring the city in physical terms, chapters 7-13 focus on restoring the city as a group of people devoted to the service and worship of their God. Chapters 7 and 11 deal with repopulating Judah and Jerusalem respectively. Next, 8-10 are concerned with a return to Torah (the word of God) and the worship of God (ch. 8), to repentance and

confession of sin (ch. 9), and to renewal of covenant commitment (ch. 10). Chapter 11 refers five times to Jerusalem as the Holy City. The emphasis is upon a city once more devoted to God and his service. Israel will fulfill God's purpose expressed at Sinai that they become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6). Nehemiah 12 is therefore climactic in its position in the book as it focuses on the renewal of leadership and the dedication of the walls, i.e., the city, to the worship of God.

Dieter Böhler shows that the chapters of Nehemiah are arranged in chiastic, concentric circles with the reading and teaching of the word of God and a return to worship at the center:²

according to the standards established by King David. The exclusion of foreigners, an aspect of maintaining purity in worship is addressed in 13:1-3. Thus, when all the parts are put together, the central focus is on restoring the city of God as a place devoted to the worship of God.

While a number of difficulties exist in historical matters and aspects of the transmission of the text, the main points are clear. The first half of chapter 12 is organized as follows:

Homecomers' Generation of Priests	12:1-7
Homecomers' Generation of Levites	12:8-9

City Walls:	Neh 1-6			Neh 12:27-13:3
Repopulation:		Neh 7		Neh 11
Torah/Worship			Neh 8-10	

This concentric structure focusing on the word of God and worship matches the same emphasis in the climactic chapter 12.

Details of Chapter 12

The chapter is divided roughly into two parts (see outline above). The first half provides a series of lists of names which represents passing the torch to a new generation of spiritual leaders: priests, Levites, and gatekeepers. The second half depicts a ceremony of celebration and dedication: Two choirs march around on top of the walls and meet at the temple to give praise and thanks to God for a city whose walls are restored and to dedicate the city to the service and worship of God. Nehemiah 12:44-47 deals with establishing stewards for the storerooms where the offerings and tithes were stored, the support of the priests, Levites, and gatekeepers, and the maintenance of worship

Chronology: High Priestly Line After Exile	12:10-11
Later Generation of Priests Chronology: Leaders of Priests & Levites Recorded	12:12-21 12:22-23
Later Generation of Levites & Gatekeepers	12:24-25

A chronological framework is supplied by the family line of the high priest given in 12:10-11 and further information on the high priests in 12:22-23. The genealogy in 12:10-11 locates the lists in 12:1-9 in the time of the first return. Nehemiah 12:22-23 provides a list of high priests from the time of the second return and afterwards and notes when the lists of priests and Levites were recorded. This additional information can be used to determine the chronology of the lists in 12:12-21 and 24-25. Thus the family line of the high priest is an anchor for the lists of names.

Jeshua, or Joshua as he is called in the books of Haggai and Zechariah, was the high priest at the time of the first return when the altar and temple were rebuilt. Eliashib was high priest in 445 B.C., because, according to 3:1, 20-21, he helped to build part of the wall with Nehemiah and had a house in Jerusalem at the time. This leaves Joiakim between Jeshua and Eliashib. In 12:10, however, Joiada and Jonathan are listed after Eliashib, but 12:22 lists Joiada and Johanan. This discrepancy may be resolved by noting that according to 12:10-11 and 13:28, Joiada was the son of Eliashib and Jonathan the son of Joiada. According to 12:23, Johanan was also a son of Eliashib and therefore an uncle of Jonathan.³ It may be that both sons of Eliashib held office as high priest before moving to Jonathan in the next generation. Thus the family line in 12:10-11 gives only the bare backbone of the genealogy and does not list all who were high priests.

The family line may go down to about 400 or perhaps even 330 depending upon how one interprets Darius the Persian in 12:23. There were three kings by the name of Darius: Darius I (Hystaspes), 522-486; Darius II (Nothus), 423-405; and Darius III (Codomannus), 335-330 B.C.⁴ If Darius I is meant, then v. 22 is saying that priests were recorded by family heads in the time of Darius I and Levites by family heads later in the time of Eliashib to Jaddua. Darius may be designated “the Persian” to differentiate him from Darius the Mede (Dan 5:31).⁵ On the other hand, the verse may be saying that the lists of priests were recorded in the time of Darius II or III.⁶

The remaining lists compare and contrast lists of priests and Levites from the generation of the first return with lists of priests, Levites, and gatekeepers from a subsequent generation (i.e., during the

time of Joiakim, the next high priest for the priests and during the time of Eliashib to Jaddua for the Levites). The lists in 10:2-8 and 10:9-13 show the priests and Levites for Nehemiah’s generation. These latter lists may be subsequent to the later generation of priests in 12:12-21 and prior to the Levites in 12:24-25.⁷

When one compares the lists of priests in 12:1-7 and 12:12-21, the correspondence is closer than appears in our present Hebrew text, since problems have occurred in the course of textual transmission (see Table 1, next page). The family of Hattush seems to be missing in the subsequent generation and either Mijamin has no family leader in the second list, or Piltai is leader for both the families of Mijamin and Maadiah. The main point is that there is continuity and, therefore, legitimacy and purity in qualified leadership for the next generation.

First Chronicles 24:6-18 gives a list of twenty-four divisions of priests as organized in the time of King David. The priests were essentially farmers. An organization of twenty-four divisions allowed each division to go to Jerusalem and minister for only two weeks and work on their farms the rest of the year. In this way the temple worship was always provided with priests who were supported from their own labor as well as from the offerings. The relation between the lists in Nehemiah 12 and 1 Chronicles 24 is debated,⁸ but the main point is that the organization established by David is, by and large, intact, and the returned exiles have again succeeded in maintaining continuity in leadership in worship.

	Homecomers' Generation		Later Generation	Nehemiah's Generation
	12:1b-7a	12:12-21	12:12-21	10:2-8
1	Seraiah	Seraiah	Meraiah	Seraiah
2	Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Hananiah	Azariah
3	Ezra	Ezra	Meshullam	Jeremiah
4	Amariah	Amariah	Jehohanan	Pashhur*
5	Malluch	Malluchi ⁹	Jonathan	Amariah
6	Hattush			Malkijah*
7	Shecaniah	Shebaniah ¹⁰	Joseph	Hattush
8	Rehum	Harim ¹¹	Adna	Shebaniah
9	Meremoth	Meriaoth ¹²	Helkai	Malluch
10	Iddo	Iddi ¹³	Zechariah	Harim
11	Ginnethoi ¹⁴	Ginnethon	Meshullam	Meremoth
12	Abijah	Abijah	Zicri	Obadiah*
13	Mijamin	Minjamin ¹⁵	?	Daniel*
14	Maadiah	Moadiah ¹⁶	Piltai	Ginnethon
15	Bilgah	Bilgah	Shammua	Baruch*
16	Shemaiah	Shemaiah	Jehonathan	Meshullam
17 and	Joiarib	Joiarib	Mattenai	Abijah
18	Jedaiah	Jedaiah	Uzzi	Mijamin
19	Sallu	Sallai ¹⁷	Kallai	Maaziah
20	Amok	Amok	Eber	Bilgai
21	Hilkiah	Hilkiah	Hashabiah	Shemaiah
22	Jedaiah	Jedaiah	Nethanel	

Table 1

The lists of Levites are not given in as much detail as those of the priests. What we are given are the leaders of the worship choirs arranged as a lead choir and an antiphonal or responsive choir. This arrangement goes back to the time of King David who was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14), because he was the first man to rule over God's people as king and at the same time understand the priority of worship. This is what God had intended for Adam at the start. Genesis 1 depicts humanity made in the divine image to rule as king under God, and Genesis 2 shows that the first priority in this task is worship as God places Adam as a king-priest in a garden sanctuary.¹⁸

The fact that some names in a subsequent generation of Levites are the same as those in an earlier generation shows that, in these famous families that led in worship, sons were named after fathers. Similarly, American historians 1000 years from now may have difficulties distinguishing two presidents who are both named George Bush. The Levites played musical instruments and led in songs of praise and thanksgiving according to 12:27-29. Again the main point is continuity in qualified worship leaders. Men named after their fathers are faithfully carrying on the work of a previous generation of leaders.

The verse division between vv. 24 and 25 presents a problem. Verse 24

should be translated as follows: “And the leaders of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, Jeshua son of Kadmiel, and their associates opposite them (to give praise and thanks according to the command of David, the man of God, worship group corresponding to worship group), namely Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, and Obadiah.” Thus Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua led the main choir, and Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, and Obadiah the antiphonal choir. In this way vv. 24-25a better match vv. 8-9. Meshullam, Talmon, and Akkub, then, begin the list of gatekeepers in v. 25b.

A list of gatekeepers is not given in 12:1-9 for the homecomers’ generation, but v. 25b lists them for a subsequent generation. We can find the list for the homecomers’ generation in Ezra 2:42. Here again, famous names like Akkub and Talmon are being passed on to sons who maintained the family tradition. The gatekeepers were a vital part of the worship of God because they closed the city gates for commerce and trade on the Sabbath (see 13:15-22) and so ensured a focus on worship.

The central message of the first half of chapter 12 is clear. The city of God cannot be devoted to worship unless there are spiritual leaders who will lead the people to worship God.

The second half of chapter 12 depicts a ceremony of celebration and dedication. Verses 27-32 describe the Levitical leaders of worship being called and assembled in Jerusalem from the outlying areas and villages around the city where they lived. They prepared themselves for worship by purifying themselves and the people.

Next, the ceremony of dedication is described in three stages. Nehemiah assembles two choirs according to the

model of lead and response choir. The two choirs are incorporated into two processions whose itineraries are detailed. Each of the two processions begins at the dung gate on the south western side of the city wall and proceed in opposite directions around the wall until they meet at the temple. The third stage is then a service of celebration, worship, and dedication held at the temple.

The description of the first two stages, the two processions, is arranged in a chiasmic or A-B-B-A pattern of Procession-A (31b-36), Itinerary-B (37), Itinerary-B (38-40a), Procession-A (41-42). The two processions are also arranged symmetrically as follows:¹⁹

- (1) Thanksgiving Choir (vv. 31 and 38)
- (2) A Prominent Lay Leader: Hoshaiah (v. 32) and Nehemiah (vv. 38, 40)
- (3) Half of the Lay Leaders (vv. 32 and 40)²⁰
- (4) Seven Priests with Trumpets²¹ (vv. 33-35a and 41)
- (5) A Worship Director/Leader: Zechariah (v. 35b) and Izrahiah (v. 42b)
- (6) Eight Levitical Musicians (vv. 36 and 42)

Ezra the Priest went in front of the first procession while Nehemiah the governor went behind the second (vv. 36 and 38). There is thus beauty, order, and symbolic meaning to a carefully prepared service of celebration, dedication, and worship. Nothing is casual here. In the second half of Nehemiah 12, the theme of continuity, legitimacy, and purity in leadership is being maintained, for we see that Zechariah can trace his ancestry all the way back to Asaph, one of the key worship leaders in the time of King David and author of eleven canonical Psalms (73-83).

As the two choirs/processions marched

around on top of the wall, one going one way, one going the other, both meeting at the temple, they were symbolically claiming these logs and stones, these gates and walls for the Lord God. In fact, they were dedicating the entire city once again for the service and worship of God. The service at the temple involved sacrifices, celebration (rejoicing), and dedication, supported by songs of thanks using musical instruments (cymbals, lutes, and lyres).

Nehemiah 12 and the Flow of Biblical Theology

The word “dedication” in Hebrew involves initiating or using something for the first time as well as devoting it to a particular purpose or use. Nonetheless, the full meaning of dedicating the city of God can only be understood within the larger story of biblical theology. Only the barest bones of this can now be sketched out to try and locate Nehemiah 12 within it.

In the beginning God created humanity in his image (Gen 1:26-28). The divine image entails a covenant relationship between us and the creator God on the one hand, and between us and the creation on the other. The relationship with God is to be characterised by love, trust, and above all obedience, and is summed up by sonship. Our relationship with the creation involves implementing the divine rule in the world and is summed up by kingship and servanthood. In short, God is establishing his kingdom through covenant.

Genesis 2 proceeds to show how mankind is to go about implementing the divine rule in the world. The garden of Eden is presented not only as a center of blessing in the world, but also as a divine sanctuary, the point where the divine

presence was experienced and enjoyed in a close and immediate way. What the narrative is saying is this: Man is created in the world and given dominion over it, but he is immediately abstracted from the world and placed directly in the divine presence.²² This tells us how the royal rule is to be exercised. Mankind was to control the world, not primarily by immersing himself in the tasks of ordering it, but by recognizing that there was a system of priorities by which all of life was to be regulated. If he were rightly related to his Creator, then he would rightly respond to creation. Included in the covenant was an ordering of male/female relationships and family life so that part of responding rightly to creation was true humanness defined in proper ways of treating each other. The kingdom of God is thus fostered through maintaining the priority of worship.

After the fall in Genesis 3, God made a new start with Noah. But this, too, ends up in chaos and loss at Babel. Another new start is made with Abram and his family. The call of Abram in Genesis 12 picks up the threads of Genesis 1 and 2. Note in particular that the first of the six promises in 12:1-2 is that God will make of Abram a great nation (*gôy*); the last is that through him all the clans (*mishpachôt*) of the earth will be blessed.

These two Hebrew words, nation and clan, are chosen and used with great purpose and meaning. The basic meaning of *gôy* is an *organized* community of people having *governmental, political, and social structure*. By definition a *gôy* is a group governed by a king.²³ This contrasts with the fact that the other nations are simply termed clans (*mishpachah*). The word refers to an amorphous kin group larger than an extended family and smaller than a tribe,

with no particular governmental leadership or structure. The language in the text emphasizes that Abram and his family will become a kingdom, the kingdom of God, while the other people groups which we normally think of as great nations will not amount to anything lasting in the grand scheme of things.

When Abram's family becomes a nation and gains possession of Canaan, the city of Zion conquered by King David subsumes earlier expressions of the kingdom of God. Zion is the city where God lives in the midst of his people as king. The city is to be characterized by right relationships with God as well as by social justice, i.e., treating each other in a truly human way and being good stewards of the earth's resources.

The city of God is celebrated not only in the Psalms (e.g., 46 and 87) but also in Isaiah. The prophet's expansive and grand vision begins with the earthly Zion in the old creation where the city of faithfulness/truth has become a prostitute, a whore (Isa 1:21), and ends with Zion in the new creation, a covenant community whose hallmark is social justice. Glimpses of this future Zion are given in Isaiah 2 and 4. It is furthered in the oracles to the foreign nations in Isaiah 13-27 which are divided into three cycles of five. The last five in Isaiah 23-27 summarize the kingdoms of this world raised in pride and rebellion against the Creator as the city of man in contrast to the future city of God. Four times it refers to the city of man (24:12; 25:2 [2x]; 27:10) and once to the city of God (26:1), matching the five sections in each of the three division. It is here that Isaiah achieves an extremely high peak in his vision of the future with the banquet on the mountain in chapter 25 where death and tears are gone and the song celebra-

ting the strong city of God in chapter 26.

Zechariah the prophet, a near contemporary of Nehemiah, borrows directly from Isaiah's vision and sees the harlot city restored as the city of truth (Zechariah 8). And the first priority of the city of God is worship. This is why Nehemiah 12 has so many references to what was prescribed by King David or traces roots back to Asaph. It is because King David is a model of what God intended for Adam in extending the divine rule; he is an Adamic figure in seeing the priority of worship in the kingdom or city of God.

Nehemiah 12 and the Church Today

In order to apply the truths of Nehemiah 12 to our lives we must ask first where we are in the history of the irruption of God's kingdom into this world. This grand story can only be sketched in the briefest of terms.

Daniel 9 shows that the return from exile for God's people will require not seventy years but seventy weeks of years. It is one thing to bring his people out of Babylon, but how do you get Babylon out of the people? It will take much longer than seventy years. The prophets portray this return from exile using the language of the exodus: God will bring about a new exodus which will deal effectively with sin and its consequences (Dan 9:27). Mark 1:1-3 shows that this new exodus begins with the first coming of Jesus Christ when he announces the beginning of the gospel applying Isa 40:3 to the story of John and Jesus. The quotation from Isaiah is announcing a future salvation using the language of the exodus (which included the journey through the desert). According to Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4, the return from exile is over at the second coming of Christ when the trump of God is sounded.

This is a direct reference to Isa 27:12-13 where the trumpet is sounded to bring all the exiles home. It will be clear, too, by this point in Isaiah that the exiles include the Gentiles in the one people of God (see Isa 19:25). We are then in the period of the already and not yet, when God has begun the new exodus but has not completed the gathering of the exiles.

We are now in a position to apply Nehemiah 12. The chapter brings the focus of the book to a climax. The city of God is to be restored and key to this is (1) maintaining continuity, legitimacy, and purity in leadership and (2) getting back to the priority of true worship, focused on the hearing and understanding of God's word.

Just as the world was created by the word of God, so Israel was constituted as the people of God by the hearing of his word at Sinai. Israel's subsequent worship entailed traveling to Jerusalem three times a year. In essence, they were reenacting Sinai as they gathered to hear his Torah at the yearly festivals. In the New Testament, Christians gather around Christ to hear his word. This is at least Matthew's picture of the church in Matt 28:16-20. Thus the reading and teaching of God's word in Christ are at the heart of Christian worship. This is how the city of God is advanced.

Our own denomination has suffered from a failure to raise up a new generation of church leaders. Years of liberalism have taken a toll. When senior leaders die, finding good and godly replacements in the age bracket from 35-55 is problematic. We have done little to stem the tide of biblical illiteracy in our churches as our worship is not focused by our musicians and preachers on the word of God. Musical styles and oratory are more highly

valued than biblical content. Nehemiah 12 is a powerful word from the Lord for the church today, if we are to be faithful as agents in renewing the city of God.

ENDNOTES

¹Debate exists as to whether Ezra preceded Nehemiah or not. For a brief discussion, see E. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 502-514. The traditional view of the chronology (Ezra preceded Nehemiah) is adopted here.

²Adapted somewhat from D. Böhler, "On the Relationship Between Textual and Literary Criticism: The Two Recensions of the Book of Ezra: Ezra-Neh (MT) and 1 Esdras (LXX)," in *The Earliest Text of the Hebrew Bible: The Relationship Between the Masoretic Text and the Hebrew Base of the Septuagint Reconsidered*, ed. Adrian Schenker (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 52; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2003), 35-50.

³See H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Word Biblical Commentary 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 363.

⁴E. M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 129.

⁵See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 364-365.

⁶See D. Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 11; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 123-124, 143-146. The matter is controversial and not unimportant; nonetheless, the interpretation given here is not affected greatly either way. The only priests listed in chapter 12 are all from the time of Darius I or before.

⁷Asterisks in Table 1 mark names that are unique, i.e., not from the homecomers' generation or from the later generation.

⁸See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 361-62.

⁹Malluchi is due to dittography of *yod*.

¹⁰Confusion of *beth* and *kaph*.

¹¹Transposition of *het* and *resh*.

¹²Clearly the name is the same; palaeographic confusion of *yod* and *mem* is possible.

¹³Confusion of *yod* and *waw*. Iddo is correct.

¹⁴Confusion of *yod* and final *nun*. Many MSS have Ginnethon; cf. 10:7(6) and 12:16.

¹⁵Assimilation of *nun* in Mijamin is normal.

¹⁶Difference in vocalisation.

¹⁷Confusion of *yod* and *waw*. Sallu is correct.

¹⁸See W. J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 24-25; and Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399-404.

¹⁹Adapted from Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 371.

²⁰"People" in v. 38 refers to community officials and not to the common people, see D. Barthélemy et al., *Critique Textuelle de l'Ancien Testament*, 1, Josué, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 50/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 574.

²¹The Hebrew word employed here is "definitely a trumpet made of beaten or hammered silver (Nu. 10:2) about a cubit long (40 cm.) with a narrow body and a broad, bell-shaped end (Josephus, *Ant.* iii. 12.6)" J. Braun, *Music in Ancient*

Israel/Palestine (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 14.

²²See W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 35-36.

²³See D. I. Block, "The Foundations of National Identity: A Study in Ancient Northwest Semitic Perceptions" (Ph.D. diss., University of Liverpool, 1981), 120, 493-509.

The Place of Nehemiah in the Canon of Scripture: Wise Builder

Stephen G. Dempster

Stephen G. Dempster is Professor of Religious Studies at Atlantic Baptist University in New Brunswick, Canada, where he teaches Old Testament, Ancient Near Eastern History, and Hebrew. He has published a number of scholarly articles and is the author of *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (IVP, 2003) in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series.

A neglected portion of the Old Testament in the contemporary church, the post-exilic books are often considered to be produced in the era in which a sterile Judaism emerged with its emphasis on laws and rules to the neglect of a relationship with God.¹ One of these books is Nehemiah. It largely consists of the memoirs of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah, an official in the Persian court, and includes various records such as long lists² and letters³ as well as first person accounts of events at the time.⁴ Thus it is not the most exciting material to read, particularly when compared to the fast paced narrative of the books of Samuel, the cries of emotion in the psalms, and the denunciations of the prophets. Nonetheless, a close reading of this text, especially in its historical and canonical context, will pay hermeneutical dividends. It is surprising how inspiring this material is with its honest account of trials and struggles, shot through with personal prayers,⁵ whether in the midst of conflict or reflection. Although it is a book, which contains diverse literary material, it focuses on the preeminence of a word from God to regulate not only personal but national life.⁶ It is a book, which begins with prayer and ends with prayer,⁷ and yet is incredibly practical. The old saying “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” is not a contradiction in this book, for Nehemiah is a person of prayer *and* action. At the same time, his literary account essentially concludes the history of the Old Testament period and

in some versions it concludes the Hebrew Bible, contributing to a final narrative framework for the entire scripture.⁸ Thus, hermeneutically, whether from a historical perspective or a literary perspective, a conclusion is significant, as it reveals the final situation of the historical period or the last thoughts of a writer.

In order to understand the significance of any literary work, knowledge of its context is crucial. Whether that text is the statement “No Classes Tomorrow,” the verse “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone,”⁹ the speeches of Job and his friends, or an entire book like Ecclesiastes—all these texts depend on a context for meaning. The first statement means one thing when written on the board by the teacher at the front of a class as an announcement for the next day. It means something quite different when she uses it in her lecture on political science as she expounds the philosophy of Karl Marx. The verse from Psalm 91 has one meaning when understood in the context of ultimate trust in God—the context of the psalm; when it is dislocated from its context, it is used by Satan to encourage the opposite—presumption. Without the narrative context of Job 1-2 and 42:7-17, readers could never know who was in the right in Job’s argument with his friends and probably would reach conclusions quite different from those presented in the final form of the book. It has been quite

common for radical scholars to interpret the book of Ecclesiastes in a manner that disregards its canonical context, understanding it as an exercise in skepticism. Read outside its canonical framework, this may be a possible interpretation, but read inside its canonical context, such an understanding is ruled out. One reads thus with a hermeneutic of charity, trying to understand the whole as a unity rather than as contradiction.¹⁰ Consequently cynical statements are relativized and not to be taken absolutely. The old adage that “a text without a context becomes a pretext” is partially true. There is no text without a context and if the text is not understood within its proper context, it will be misunderstood.

Even a superficial reading of the book of Nehemiah will indicate that it is a book about building—about building the walls of the city of Jerusalem.¹¹ But what is the significance of this person, who leaves his prestigious position in the Persian court to be involved in a building project far away in his homeland? Shorn of its canonical context the book of Nehemiah might be understood as simply an attempt to assuage guilt for one person’s lack of involvement in the nationalistic aspirations of his people. Or it could be understood as a narrow, petty nationalism, with its stress on genealogies, race purity, and uncompromising rigor.¹²

To come to an understanding of the significance of the message of this book, the message within its local context will be briefly summarized and then the context will be gradually widened to see the significance of the message against the larger background of the biblical story line. In some ways this can be viewed as an exercise in photography. First a “close up” will be taken as the hermeneutical

camera zooms in, then the camera will zoom out somewhat to capture more of the post-exilic background, zooming out even more to capture the background of the Old Testament, and finally capturing the image of Nehemiah against the panoramic background of the entire Christian Bible.

The “Close Up”—Nehemiah

A study of the book of Nehemiah reveals that it is virtually a diary or autobiography for a period of about thirteen years. As such it is almost unique in the Old Testament.¹³ He recorded events that largely took place in Jerusalem about a century after his people had returned from exile when Babylon fell to the Persians.¹⁴ Consequently he was a Jew living in exile, who had risen to a prestigious position in the Persian palace. He was the king’s cupbearer, a person entrusted with the responsibility to serve the king wine, ensuring that he would not be assassinated with poisoned drinks.¹⁵ As such, he was a trusted official, who had direct access to the king, even in private moments of intimacy.¹⁶

When he first introduces himself, he is in the royal palace in the capital city of Persia.¹⁷ He hears the news that the people in his homeland have experienced a crisis. These fellow Jews, the first generation to return from exile almost a century earlier, have seen their city walls smashed and their gates burned with fire. As a result they are a defenseless people living in Jerusalem, subject to the depredations of any would be pillagers and marauders.¹⁸ This news shocks Nehemiah and his first reaction is the immobility of grief. But this grief leads him to fast and pray for the city and its people and his resultant prayer essentially opens the book.¹⁹ His

prayer reflects some of the features of a lament psalm. He begins with a description of God's power and his grace in the past to his people with whom he is in covenant (1:5). There follows, in succession, a petition for help in the present (v. 6a); a confession of sin (vv. 6b-7); a recollection of prophecy indicating that sin will lead to exile but confession in exile will lead to restoration (vv. 8-9); a reminder of the identity of the people of Israel (v. 10); and a resumption of the request for help in the present with a specific request to give Nehemiah favor in the presence of "this man"—whose identity is explained by the next parenthetical statement in which Nehemiah indicates his profession, "I was the king's cupbearer" (v. 11b). It is clear from the outset that the fate of Jerusalem and its people, while important in Nehemiah's mind, are subordinate to the significance their demise portends—a rupture in a relationship with the Creator God.

The next time we hear of Nehemiah in his memoirs, four months have passed by, and he is in the presence of the king (2:1). It is clear that this day has been singled out, for it is the day his prayer will be answered. The cupbearer's downcast look arrests the attention of the king and he asks Nehemiah about his depression. Before Nehemiah answers, he sends his famous "arrow prayer" (2:4b), the brevity of which stands in stark contrast to the lengthy prayer of chapter 1, but just the same, it is answered. Nehemiah pours out his soul to the king, and the king sends him on an official mission with permission to rebuild the walls.²⁰ This project will be Nehemiah's main activity. Centuries later he will be remembered primarily as the builder of the walls of Jerusalem.²¹

With supplies and official letters in hand, Nehemiah heads an entourage to Jerusalem, and soon begins implementing his plans to build. When the building begins, hostile officials in the neighbourhood led by local officials of the empire, Sanballat of Samaria, Tobiah of Ammon, and Geshem of Edom, are not pleased and send a warning that such building implies rebellion and sedition. Nehemiah's response to them at the end of chapter 2 in this first occasion of adversity builds upon his petition at the end of chapter 1. In the latter chapter he asked that God would prosper him in the presence of "this man" (the king), and in the former chapter he states that God will prosper his people in the face of opposition (1:11; 2:20).

The theme of building continues in chapter 3, which contains a detailed description of the construction of the walls and the persons responsible. Beginning with the priests who set the example, this chapter is a lingering description, meticulously indicating the various sites of repair and the people involved. Workers from all spheres of life are concerned, whether they are perfume makers or goldsmiths,²² daughters or sons.²³ The efforts are spearheaded by leaders of the various districts of Jerusalem and Judah who had supported the work.²⁴ The list is probably exhaustive even including those not willing to work.²⁵

The next few chapters (4-6) describe external and internal opposition to the building project. The external opposition came in the form of taunts and a threat of armed attack and was warded off with faith and armed vigilance on the part of the workers (Nehemiah 4). The internal opposition arose from the growing hunger of people building walls instead of looking after their crops, and economic

oppression in the form of interest and debt slavery (Nehemiah 5). This oppressive situation is addressed immediately by Nehemiah with his passion for justice. Finally, there is a combination of external and internal opposition as the enemies of Jerusalem tempt Nehemiah to take counsel with them outside Jerusalem just before the securing of the gates and a fifth columnist within Jerusalem, a prophet, seeks to intimidate the Jewish leader and tarnish his reputation (Nehemiah 6). Nehemiah does not yield to the temptation to leave the “great work” he is doing to palaver with the enemy, nor is he intimidated by a false prophet.

The next chapters (7-12) focus on the “building” of the people behind the walls and culminate with a grand description of the people upon the walls, dedicating, not only the walls, but also probably themselves to God as well. Chapter 7 recalls the numbers of Israelites who had returned from exile, ensuring that post-exilic Israel is in continuity with pre-exilic Israel, and it also shows, not only the importance of city walls, but also the reason for the importance of those walls—the protection of the people. Chapters 8-10 shift the vision to a rebuilding of the people. The law of God comes into focus, and there is national repentance followed by a renewal of the covenant, complete with signatories. Finally, the walls are dedicated after the population of the city increases and the priests and Levites are listed. This dedication of the walls functions almost as a type of climax to the book. Various individuals are organized into two groups and led by Levitical choirs, and they ascend the walls at different places, approach each other, descend and praise God in the temple precincts. The sound of joy resonates throughout the

countryside.²⁶

Unfortunately, chapter 13 represents an anti-climax, indicating that Nehemiah’s departure for the Persian capital after twelve years of leadership in Jerusalem, resulted in a collapse of the walls once again—only this time they were spiritual walls. The majority of this sad chapter is devoted to Nehemiah’s second visit and his attempts to rebuild these spiritual walls: the priesthood and temple were to be kept pure, tithes were to be given, the Sabbath was to be kept, and intermarriage with the pagan populace was to cease—for it was such a practice that had led Solomon to sin. Thus the last picture of Nehemiah is like the first: A person involved in the life of his people and a person at prayer, though now probably a bit more exasperated and desperate. “Remember me with favor, O my God!” are his last words. It is far easier to build physical walls than spiritual ones.

Clearly the book is about Nehemiah, about his concern for his people, for the city of Jerusalem, and above all for God and his purposes for history, which are linked to his Word, his people, and their city. Nehemiah is regarded as the wall builder of Jerusalem, and this is the theme that resonates in the book. But his story is not only about building the physical walls of Jerusalem for physical protection, it is also a story of building spiritual walls around the people with the Word of God and thus building up the people as well. Unfortunately, we learn that physical walls alone cannot withstand the contaminating forces on the outside and, on this note, the book ends. But probably one of the other lessons is that Nehemiah will need more than his presence and the law of God to stem the tide of contaminating forces, for they originate within hearts

inside the walls as well those outside. Nevertheless, Nehemiah persists in the work of building, reforming, and praying to the end.

Zooming Out *Nehemiah in the Context of the Post-Exilic Period*

In the most ancient versions of the Bible, the book of Nehemiah has been combined with Ezra to form one volume.²⁷ This was not just done artificially as there are significant verbal and thematic links in both of the texts, the most prominent one being the repetition of Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 7. This text is the genealogical record of the families that returned from the exile who could prove their lineage, and it stresses the continuity of post-exilic Israel with pre-exilic Israel. This had the effect of combining the books into a structural unity, stressing the importance of the people of God.²⁸

The unity at least shows that the book of Nehemiah is understood in continuity with the reforms of Ezra whose ministry probably preceded and overlapped with Nehemiah.²⁹ The two books read together focus respectively on the return of the exiles,³⁰ the rebuilding of the temple and the city under Zerubbabel,³¹ the renewed promulgation of the law of God under Ezra,³² and the rebuilding of the walls under Nehemiah and his reforms.³³ Thus the theme of building gradually moves out from the centre: the temple, city and people, and the walls.

Many of the exiles returned expecting to see something of the glory days of a final salvation in which their city would become the focus of world peace and glory predicted by the pre-exilic prophets.³⁴ But instead they experienced hardship. They soon gave up building the temple because

of discouragement, opposition, economic problems and preoccupation with other concerns.³⁵ This led to a cessation of building the temple and, consequently, Haggai and Zechariah were raised up as prophets to address this problem. When the temple was finally built, discouragement did not cease as many were disheartened by its relatively modest appearance when compared to its predecessor.³⁶ In the ensuing years, faith became attenuated, intermarriage was practiced with the surrounding peoples, and the Torah was not observed. A delegation led by Ezra the scribe arrived from Babylon and sought to bring about reform in accordance with the Torah.³⁷ The reforms probably had an immediate effect but were not lasting. Even the distinguished Ezra, almost like a new Moses, was not able to bring about lasting change. This does not reveal a problem with the venerable scribe, but with the human heart.³⁸ The last recorded act in the book that bears Ezra's name is the institution of a policy of mass divorce to deal with the adulteration of the people's faith through intermarriage.³⁹ Then for a time it seems the people started to build the walls of the city, but they are torn down by zealous opponents of the Jews—local officials appointed by the Persians, concerned that their own power might diminish. False accusations of sedition were made against the Jews for the building of the walls, which then resulted in official authorization to halt the construction. Nehemiah then makes his appearance to rebuild the walls. The reconstruction is as much about walling out external pagan influences as it is about providing protection for the inhabitants. Nonetheless, the ending of Nehemiah is similar to Ezra. The building of the walls of the city, and the building of the wall of the

law are insufficient to change the human heart. "At the conclusion to Nehemiah, the period ends on a note of profound disappointment, with the community wracked by divisions . . . [T]he Ezra-Nehemiah period ends with a frank admission . . . of the failure of an experiment and with the community divided."⁴⁰ What is needed is one greater than Ezra and one greater than Nehemiah. But on the positive side, it is clear that when the walls are finally dedicated, they are consecrated to the Lord. This indicates that God's holiness is not restricted to the temple precincts but has spread to the outer boundaries of the city: "When the walls are finished, they too are consecrated indicating that they were considered a part of the rebuilt 'Holy City'."⁴¹

Nehemiah in the Context of the Old Testament

As the vision of the hermeneutical lens is enlarged to encompass the entire Old Testament, the themes of building, homeland, exile, and failure to keep the law take on deeper significance. The first human community was given the task of developing the world for the glory of God but failed to keep God's word and was banished from its garden temple—the garden of Eden, where the life-giving presence of God was experienced. As exiles they embodied the new human condition living in alienation from their Creator in search of their true home. They were a family in search of a place but never able to find it. With fresh blood on his hands, their son Cain is cursed with a vagabond existence, but rebels against this by trying to establish a settled existence.⁴² He becomes the builder of the first city and it is an act of autonomy. "Cain has built a city. For God's Eden he sub-

stitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself."⁴³ He names the city "Enoch" after his son, which means "dedication" or "initiation," thus indicating a parody of Eden, the holy "city."

The last story of the introduction to the Old Testament found in Genesis 1-11 is a similar act of autonomy. The post-flood community is engaged in building a tower and city to reach the heavens to magnify their own name.⁴⁴ It is given the name "Babel," and it too is a parody of Eden, for its name originally meant "Gateway to God." But the divine verdict is that it is the gateway to chaos. That chaos comes soon in the form of linguistic confusion and physical dispersion. As this preface to the Bible (Genesis 1-11) closes, the human community is in exile both physically and spiritually. Humanity is in search of its home but the doorway has been barred.

The rest of the biblical story line is a story of grace in which God calls out an old couple from their home and sends them into exile in order to find their true home, the land of Israel, the real Eden. When Abram and Sarai obey the Lord by leaving their homeland, they enter their new home by constantly building altars and calling upon God.⁴⁵ This is like the claiming of unexplored territory for a country by raising a flag over it.⁴⁶ This new land will be humanity's true home, and this family will be the means by which creation blessing will come again to all the dispersed nations of the earth.⁴⁷ Israel's election is thus fundamentally missiological. Israel leaves home to make a home for others.

As the biblical narrative pushes forward, the reader learns more about this couple and their new home. Together they participate in the creation of a miraculous

new family, which will be the beginnings of a great nation. When their descendants have to leave the land for Egypt, they are forced into oppressive building projects, building store cities for the Pharaohs.⁴⁸ The cities of Egypt are places of oppression and disorder, the result of tyrannical rule. The Israelites are delivered from this society and go home where they are to engage in building a society of shalom. On the way they enter into a covenant at Sinai, where they are to keep obligations and thus be a royal priesthood, with the responsibility of mediating the world to God and God to the world.⁴⁹ The great concern here is that God would be the center of this society as demonstrated in the building of a portable sanctuary that would later become the more permanent dwelling made by Solomon and centered in Jerusalem, the city of Shalom. "Jerusalem, the city of God, is the abode of peace. In her the *shalom* of Yahweh reigns."⁵⁰ The sanctuary was made in a seven-act sequence paralleling the seven-day creation,⁵¹ and the more permanent temple was made in seven years.⁵² It was this building that would not only be the theological center of the world, but also the center of the Hebrew Bible. Both geography and literature are subordinated to theology.⁵³ This was not only to be a place of blessing for Israel but for all the nations.⁵⁴ It symbolized the restoration of Eden, but was intended to bring Eden to the world.

The hymnody of ancient Israel emphasized this salvific function for Jerusalem. It was regarded as the "joy of the whole earth."⁵⁵ The people of one generation were to recount its greatness by walking around the city, counting its towers, and describing its ramparts so that future generations would know the certainty

of the presence and security of God.⁵⁶ In times of distress, the people of Jerusalem were to realize that God was in their midst, an absolute security and present help in times of trouble.⁵⁷ The yearning for the temple was like the homesickness of the soul and was only satisfied with being in the presence of God in the city.⁵⁸ It was here that the people of God could fill their tankards from the water of life in the shadow of the wings of the cherubim, which hovered over the ark in the temple—a veritable new Eden.⁵⁹ Consequently the Lord loves the gates of Zion⁶⁰ since Zion will become the mother of a new humanity.⁶¹ And it is here where the throne of the Lord is found from which the divine rule would some day extend to the entire earth.⁶²

But just as the first couple were banished from Eden because of their sin, the people of Israel were banished from the holy land because of their unholiness in violating the covenant made with them. The narrative from Joshua through Kings documents a moral slide which was arrested time after time by God's grace. When the people repented, judges were sent as deliverers, but each time a judge died, the people continued their erring ways. Kingship was a disaster from the beginning, and Saul led the people further into disobedience. God's grace was extended to the house of David in the form of an everlasting covenant which would guarantee a ruler that would some day bring blessing to the earth once again, but that ruler seemed nowhere in sight.⁶³ It certainly was not David, nor any of his sons. The last hope seemed to be Josiah until he perished on the battlefield, the victim of a well-aimed Egyptian arrow.⁶⁴

The final blow came in 587 B.C. Both temple and city were dismantled by the

Babylonian armies in an act of judgment, and most of the surviving population was deported.⁶⁵ Exile became a fact of life. In exile the people repented and were called to remember the city as the sign of life. Consequently, if they forgot Jerusalem, they were to curse themselves in the following manner: "If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither! May my tongue remain stuck to my palate if I do not keep you in mind, if I do not count Jerusalem the greatest of my joys."⁶⁶ Without Jerusalem there was no reason to sing. The future seemed bleak, but God's mercy did not end. He promised after the judgment to restore the city and its people, to once again make Jerusalem the joy of all the earth. Its buildings and walls were to be rebuilt and God would call her "Hephzibah" (all my delight is in her), and the land would be "Beulah" (married).⁶⁷ The prophets had prophesied a new action of God, a new covenant in which Israel would receive a heart to do the will of God,⁶⁸ and a new spirit to empower it to walk in the Torah.⁶⁹ Israel would have a new Davidic shepherd who would permanently be with them to help them. And, as a result of his actions,⁷⁰ Jerusalem, the city of God, forgiven and restored, would become exalted again as a beacon of light to the nations.⁷¹ God would make it another wonder of the world, with ruby studded gates, and walls made of precious stones.⁷² In contrast to Babel, it would grow to be the largest mountain and the center of spiritual and cultural unity, growing to fill the entire earth,⁷³ bringing about the knowledge of God throughout the earth as the waters cover the sea.⁷⁴ But a reading between the lines suggests that there might be modest beginnings. A repentant people would be called upon to rebuild the ancient ruins

and be called the "Repairer of Broken Walls."⁷⁵

The first act of this exaltation happened in 539 B.C. and was modest. When the city of Babylon fell to the Persians, the new world ruler, Cyrus, allowed the exiled Jews to return home, proclaiming an edict that amounted to a salvific act.⁷⁶ Many of the exiles returned, expecting to see the last days, the exaltation of Zion, and the salvation of the earth. But what they experienced was hardship, and that has already been described to some extent. Prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah reminded the people of the future vision and, in the time when the city did not have walls, assured the people that the Lord would be a protecting wall of fire.⁷⁷ The temple was eventually built and the city prospered somewhat, but the walls, which were finally built, were torn down, exposing the people to both physical and spiritual danger. In this context appeared Nehemiah, who undoubtedly viewed himself in the tradition of "the repairer of broken walls" whose calling was not just practical but eschatological. Given his understanding of the future of Jerusalem and the identity of the people of God, he asked forgiveness so that God would restore his people and make his name dwell among them again.⁷⁸

It is clear that Nehemiah was thinking about this "big picture." The national confession that takes place in chapter 9 is a recitation of the history of Israel from the past to the present and it is a history describing the acts of creation, election, covenant, exodus, and the period of the judges and kings. This history depicts Israel as a stubborn and rebellious people who continue to exist only because of God's mercy. Even in the present, God's mercy is needed as the people are

described as essentially exiles living in bondage in their own land. Nehemiah's reforms must be understood in this light. He saw himself and his people within the context of a divine plan for the world. He was not merely a repairer of any broken walls. But this was seen as part of an eschatological calling for the building of the city of God. The dedication of the walls of the city makes it the true "Enoch" and not the parody of Eden that Cain built.⁷⁹ Nehemiah's actions, while having practical significance for a little Jewish province within the vast Persian Empire, were part of a divine plan in which Judah and Jerusalem would play a central part in world salvation. Klaus Koch has argued that his was a pre-eschatological step of God's eschatological plan.⁸⁰ But perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is an eschatological "baby" step forward. To use New Testament terms, his wall-building activity was a down payment of the wall-building activity to come in which Jerusalem's borders would some day extend to the entire earth and every human wall of separation and division would be torn down.⁸¹

It is interesting that Nehemiah has a different literary function in the canonical order of the Christian Old Testament compared to the order in the Jewish Bible. In the former, which was influenced heavily by the Septuagint, Nehemiah is placed with all the other historical books in chronological order after Chronicles and Ezra, which are then followed by the poetic books and concluded with the prophets. In the Hebrew Bible which was probably the Bible of Jesus, there is a narrative cast given to the whole, as a narrative begins the Bible (Genesis-Kings), is interrupted by a type of poetic commentary (the Latter Prophets and the

Poetic Writings), and is resumed by narrative in which Ezra and Nehemiah are placed near the end.⁸² While the "failures" of these two reformers show the need for a continuation of the story, Nehemiah's modest efforts are signs of hope for the walls of salvation to come. One thinks of the saying that it is better to be a failure in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to be a success in a cause that will ultimately fail. This ultimate success may be indicated literarily in one sequence of the Jewish canon, which concludes with Chronicles rather than Ezra-Nehemiah, reversing the natural chronological order. The Chronicler highlights the coming of the one that is needed who is greater than Ezra and Nehemiah, who will be able to make lasting reforms—David's greater son. It begins its history with nine chapters of genealogy that lead up to David's history. When David arrives, history begins. And even when the historical David dies, the Davidic hope still lives.

Nehemiah in the Context of the New Testament

In the New Testament the revelation that occurs in Jesus Christ radically changes things. His message is that the long night of exile is over. As the new David, he is the goal of Israel's genealogical history,⁸³ and he himself incarnates the divine presence in the midst of humanity.⁸⁴ His selection of twelve apostles is a deliberate act to represent the calling out of a new Israel.⁸⁵ As N. T. Wright remarks, "[T]he call of the twelve said, in language far easier to read than Greek or Aramaic, that this was where YHWH was at last restoring his people Israel."⁸⁶ When he goes to the old Jerusalem, he realizes its need for reform, cleansing its temple and driving out those who have compromised

its goal as being a place of prayer for all peoples.⁸⁷ He establishes a new covenant with his own blood, which his people are enabled to keep as the result of the giving of His Holy Spirit. Like Nehemiah, he is engaged in building, engaged in building a new community whose walls will never be torn down—even by the gates of hell itself.⁸⁸ With his death, the veil of the temple is ripped to indicate not only that the wall of separation between a Holy God and sinful people has been erased, but also to indicate the release of the Holy into the world.⁸⁹ Jesus prophesies that the walls of literal Jerusalem will be torn down as an act of judgment on a sinful people, but this may also indicate that the walls of the city of God transcend any one locale and will extend beyond Jerusalem to encompass the entire earth.⁹⁰ To Sanballat's Samaritan descendant, the woman at the well, he claims that the true place of worship will be neither Jerusalem nor Gerizim, but everywhere that people worship in spirit and in truth.⁹¹ Jesus describes himself as the new temple, and he is constantly dining with outcasts and sinners indicating that God's life-blessing power has left the limits of the physical temple and gone out into the world. The Holy Spirit now resides in every believer as Jesus later says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."⁹²

In Jerusalem, Pentecost reverses Babel. The Gateway to God has truly been built as people from diverse linguistic backgrounds hear the Word of God in their own language. Peter and Paul soon realize that the walls between Judaism and the outside world have been broken down as the Holy Spirit is equally given to Jews

and Gentiles alike.⁹³ The gospel now recognizes no line of separation between people groups. In fact at the Jerusalem council it was declared that the gospel being accepted among the Gentiles was proof positive that the Davidic kingdom was being restored and rebuilt so that God could bring salvation to every one.⁹⁴ Thus among believers there is not only no distinction between Jew nor Greek, but none between Barbarian and Scythian, slave and free, male and female; all are one in Christ Jesus.⁹⁵ This is the true Jerusalem, which is the mother of every believer.⁹⁶ Thus believers themselves are regarded as miniature temples,⁹⁷ containing the priceless treasure of the Holy Spirit, or as living stones, who together comprise the building of the city and temple together.⁹⁸

The narrative of the Acts of the Apostles indicates the movement of the life-giving Spirit from Jerusalem to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth, which was anticipated modestly in Nehemiah's dedication of the walls of Jerusalem. This heralds a time in which the city of God will descend from heaven and its walls will be a stunning display of magnificence and size. In the words of the Apocalypse, which are worth citing in full, there is a complete description:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things

has passed away.” . . . One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. . . . The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia [1500 miles] in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. . . . I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev 21:1-4, 9-12, 15-18, 22-27 NIV).

This city is a complete cube, fifteen hundred miles long and fifteen hundred miles wide with its fifteen

hundred mile high walls being 216 feet thick. It is absolutely stunning as it dazzles with the radiance of precious stones; its cube-like structure makes it one gigantic holy of holies. The dimensions of this new Jerusalem are clearly symbolic, as the dimensions of the entire country of Israel were but a fraction of this size. It seems that these measurements are probably a symbolic description for the entire earth.⁹⁹ It is now a place of unlimited access to the presence of God, and its huge walls ensure that it is absolutely impervious to evil.

Nehemiah, as he was faithful to God in his time, fighting one discouragement after another, in faith believing, lifting one stone upon another, instituting his reforms and breathing his prayers, lived in anticipation of this great day. But in his wildest dreams he probably could not imagine this picture, as scripture says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”(1 Cor 2:9 NIV). Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah, was a wise builder.¹⁰⁰

ENDNOTES

¹This is the legacy of scholars like Julius Wellhausen with his developmental conception of Israelite religion in which the more elevated, pristine relationship with God descended into a quagmire of rules and regulations. See his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1983) and the cautionary comments about such legalism by John Eaton, *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press

International, 1980).

²Neh 7, 11-12.

³Neh 6:6-7; cf. 2:7-9; 6:17, 19.

⁴Neh 2, 4-6, 13.

⁵Neh 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4-5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5-38; 13:14, 31b.

⁶Neh 8-10, 13.

⁷Neh 1:4-11; 13:31b.

⁸See Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. (New Studies in Biblical Theology 15; Leicester: Apollos, 2003) and David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

⁹Ps 91:11-12.

¹⁰See M. Halbertal (*People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997] 27-32) for a discussion of the hermeneutical implications of canonical context. See also Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 73-82.

¹¹The verb "to build" occurs twenty-four times in this short book.

¹²Fleming James, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 457.

¹³Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 456. There are examples of autobiographical literature in the wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes) and in some sections of the prophets (see, e.g., certain sections of Jeremiah).

¹⁴539 B.C. The date for Nehemiah's memoirs probably spanned a thirteen-year period beginning in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (probably Artaxerxes I, 445 B.C.).

Thus Nehemiah's work probably overlapped with Ezra's, which began earlier. There are some significant problems in the dating of the relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah. For a discussion see S. Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah," *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*, ed. Keith R. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 317-328; B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 624-638; R. Klein, "Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:731-742. The Hebrew tradition binds Ezra and Nehemiah into one book with Ezra coming first. This suggests the chronological priority of Ezra.

¹⁵Some believe that he was a eunuch as well but this is probably based on a corruption in the Greek manuscript tradition. See particularly LXX (B). The terms "wine pourer" (*oinochoos*) and "eunuch" (*eunouchos*) are easily confused in Greek.

¹⁶This is probably the significance of the comment that Nehemiah was able to approach the king in the presence of the queen (Neh 2:6).

¹⁷Neh 1:1.

¹⁸This attack upon their city is probably best understood as recent and is therefore to be understood as reflecting events associated with Ezra 4:7-23. An order had been issued by Artaxerxes, spurred on by hostile officials in the area of Judah, to halt the building of the walls of Jerusalem. The officials, backed by the decree of the king, "enthusiastically" went about their work.

¹⁹Neh 1:4-11a.

²⁰Nehemiah is most likely appointed as a governor with authority over the independent province of Judah.

²¹Jesus ben Sirach: "Nehemiah, glowing is his memory, who raised up our ruins and healed our breaches and set up doors and bars" (49:13). Josephus: "Then after performing many other splendid and praiseworthy public services, Nehemiah died at an advanced age. He was a man of kind and just nature and most anxious to serve his countrymen; and he left the walls of Jerusalem as his eternal monument" (*Antiquities* XI, V:7).

²²Neh 3:8.

²³Neh 3:12.

²⁴Neh 3:9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18.

²⁵Neh 3:5.

²⁶Neh 12:27-43.

²⁷In most ancient manuscripts and traditions, Nehemiah has been made part of a larger work, added to the book of Ezra to form one book. The two books were viewed as one. Origen and Jerome were the first to refer to them as two separate books, First and Second Ezra. This made its way into the Vulgate and from here into a Hebrew text dated around 1450, from which it entered into most printed manuscripts of the Bible. See S. Talmon, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in R. Alter and F. Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 357.

²⁸For other important conceptual links between the two texts see W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 311-22.

²⁹There are problems, of course, with

this way of understanding the ministries of both Ezra and Nehemiah, but this understanding makes the best sense of some serious difficulties. See Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 456-458; and John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 391-402.

³⁰Ezra 1-2.

³¹Ezra 3-6.

³²Ezra 7-10.

³³Neh 1-13.

³⁴E.g., Isa 2:1-5; 4:1-6; 11:1-9, 60; Jer 3:15-18.

³⁵Ezra 3:12-13; 4:1-6; Hag; 1:4-7; 2:19.

³⁶Hag 2:2-3; Zech 4:10.

³⁷Ezra 7.

³⁸Along with many others, Bright argues that this would mean that Ezra's massive reforms failed—an unthinkable option. As Kidner wisely observes, it was not Ezra that failed, it was the Law. See D. Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 152-53.

³⁹Ezra 10.

⁴⁰Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, 322.

⁴¹R. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 186.

⁴²Gen 4:12-17.

⁴³J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (trans. Dennis Pardee; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 5.

⁴⁴Gen 11:1-9.

⁴⁵Gen 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9; cf. 26:25; 35:7.

⁴⁶G. Beale, "Eden, the Temple and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 14-15.

⁴⁷Gen 12:1-3.

⁴⁸Exod 1.

⁴⁹Exod 19:5-6.

⁵⁰See H. J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. K. Crim; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 82.

⁵¹Exod 25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12.

⁵²I Kgs 6:37-38.

⁵³For the importance of the temple and its significance, see O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (trans. T. Hallet; New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 113-76. For the temple as the literary center of the Hebrew Bible, see J. Miller, *The Origins of the Bible: Rethinking Canon History* (New York: Paulist, 1994).

⁵⁴I Kgs 8:40-43.

⁵⁵Ps 48:2.

⁵⁶Ps 48:12-14.

⁵⁷Ps 46:1-5.

⁵⁸Pss 42, 43, 84.

⁵⁹Ps 36:7-8.

⁶⁰Ps 87:2.

⁶¹Ps 87:5-7.

⁶²Ps 132:13-14.

⁶³2 Sam 7.

⁶⁴2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chr 25:23.

⁶⁵2 Kgs 25.

⁶⁶Ps 137:5-6 NJB.

⁶⁷Isa 62:4

⁶⁸Jer 31:31-33.

⁶⁹Ezek 36:26-27.

⁷⁰Jer 23:5; 30:9; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-5; Hos 3:5.

⁷¹Isa 60.

⁷²Isa 54:12.

⁷³Isa 2:1-5; 11:9; Dan. 2:35, 44.

⁷⁴Isa 11:9.

⁷⁵Isa 58:12; cf. Mic 7:11.

⁷⁶Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chr 36:22-23; cf. Isa 44:28; 45:1.

⁷⁷Zech 2:4.

⁷⁸Neh 1:8-9.

⁷⁹Note the word for "dedication" of the city walls is the same word for "Enoch" (Neh 12:27).

⁸⁰Cited in Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 187.

⁸¹Ibid., 187.

⁸²For the significance of this see further Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*.

⁸³Matt 1:1-17.

⁸⁴John 1:14.

⁸⁵Matt 10:1-6.

⁸⁶N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 431.

⁸⁷Matt 21:12-14. On the significance of the temple cleansing, see particularly Steven Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions of Judgment and Restoration* (Society for New Testament Monograph Series 117; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁸⁸Matt 16:18-19.

⁸⁹Matt 27:51.

⁹⁰Matt 24.

⁹¹John 4:21-24.

⁹²John 7:37-38.

⁹³Acts 10, 15.

⁹⁴Acts 15:15-17.

⁹⁵Gal 3:28.

⁹⁶Gal 4:26; cf. Ps 87.

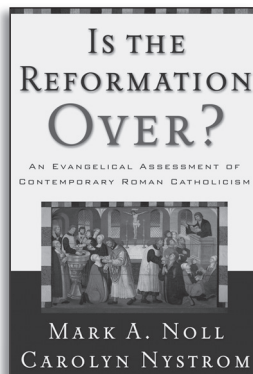
⁹⁷1 Cor 3:16; 6:19.

⁹⁸1 Pet 2:5.

⁹⁹Beale, "Eden," 25.

¹⁰⁰Matt 7:24-25.

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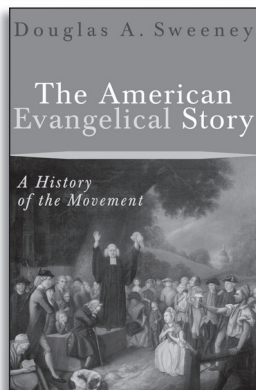


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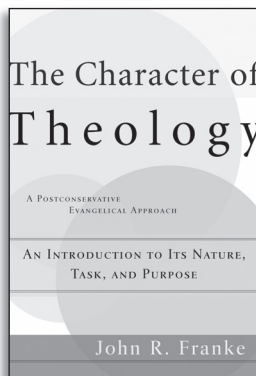


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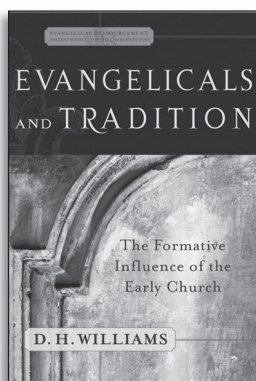


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Ezra: The Teacher of God's Word and Agent of Revival

Russell T. Fuller

Russell T. Fuller is Associate Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He received his Ph.D. at Hebrew Union College. Dr. Fuller was previously Assistant Professor of Bible and Bible Languages at Mid-Continent College in Mayfield, Kentucky, and has served as an interim pastor in Ohio and Kentucky. He has written a number of journal and dictionary articles and is the author of *Invitation to Biblical Hebrew* (Kregel, forthcoming, 2005).

Introduction

When the exiles returned from Babylon in 539 B.C., Israel (including the remnants of the northern kingdom and Judah) was spiritually stronger than it was a generation earlier when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. Idolatry, the act of treason that brought God's judgment, was now burned out of the Israelite soul. The initial leadership of the exiles, including Zerubbabel, Haggai, and Zechariah, further strengthened Israel spiritually by rebuilding the temple and restoring Israel's worship. As time passed, however, Israel's devotion to God declined and waned. Once again, Israel began foreshadowing a path that, unless arrested, would lead back to idolatry, as it did with the Jewish remnant in Egypt (Jer 44:24-30).¹ Approximately, eighty years after Cyrus's decree for the Jews to return from Babylon, God called Israel back to her covenantal obligations by a new generation of leaders: Malachi, the prophet, Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the priest and scribe.

When arriving in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., about sixty years after the completion of the temple, Ezra found the spiritual condition of the people deplorable. Externally, there was opposition of every sort, both political and religious. Internally, the people were worldly and largely ignorant of God's word. Most problematic, of course, the people were intermarrying with foreigners and adopting their lifestyle. Israel was again on course to experience the judgment of God.

To pull Israel back from impending apostasy and to revive them spiritually, God sent Ezra from Babylon to Israel. Serving in the dual offices of priest and scribe, Ezra, by the good hand of God, taught the people the word of God, thereby bringing revival to Israel.

Ezra: The Teacher of God's Word Priest

As part of their mediatorial office, priests were custodians and teachers of the word of God.² Moses entrusted his great work, the law (the Pentateuch), to the priests (Deut 31:10) and commanded that they teach it to Israel (Deut 33:10). As caretakers they preserved the law, and every seven years at the feast of booths, they would bring out the law to read it to the people (Deut 31:9-13). Along with this reading of the law there came priestly instruction and application (Lev 10:10-11). At times, Moses and the priests "co-taught" the law of God to the people (Deut 27:9-10). By directly applying God's word to the people, the priests judged the people according to the law of Moses (Deut 17:8-13; 21:5; 2 Chr 19:5-11). During times of God's blessing in the national life of Israel, the priests faithfully taught the law to the people and even to the king, as in the case of Jehoiada's instruction of Jehoash, who remained faithful to God only under Jehoiada's instruction (2 Kgs 12:2; 17:24-33). During times of spiritual decline, however, the priests spurned the law, as did Eli's sons and, to an extent,

Eli himself (1 Sam 2:12-17, 22-36). There was, of course, often a cause-and-effect relationship: As the priests faithfully proclaimed God's word, the people were faithful to the Lord God. When they failed in their responsibility, the nation suffered spiritually. Though they did not always live up to their calling, the priests, along with the prophets, were to be the backbone of religious instruction in Israel.

Ezra, in contrast to many priests before him, faithfully performed his teaching responsibilities. First, he set his heart to study the law of the Lord (Ezra 7:10). The faithful proclamation of God's word takes effort and diligent study. Ezra, a workman that was not ashamed, exemplified this in his ministry. Indeed, this ardent desire to study God's word indicated, at least partially, God's call on his life. Ezra went beyond just a desire to study—he also set his heart to do God's word. Ezra's study was not an academic exercise, nor was it an exercise in creativity and novelty in dealing with the text, but it was a sanctified study that causes one to tremble reverently at God's word (Ezra 9:4) and that generates the fear of God in the soul (Deut 17:19). His study was unto obedience, and, as is true of all godly study of God's word, it was unto holiness, for truth always leads to holiness. His study would be vain without obedience—a faith without works. His godly study and obedience resulted in outward acts of faith: seeing God's good hand in his own life, praying for guidance and protection, and praising God for His acts of mercy and deliverance (Ezra 7:6, 27-28). Finally, Ezra set his mind to teach in Israel the decree and the statute, an awesome responsibility, stimulating an even greater desire to study God's word because souls are at stake. To Ezra and to every God-called minister, the ministry

is a solemn call to sanctified study and reverent obedience.

Scribe

Ezra's role of scribe weaves seamlessly with his role as priest. The priests, as the custodians of the law, were obligated to keep the manuscripts of the law from corruption, including physical deterioration, and to provide new copies when older manuscripts became worn and brittle. Many priests, therefore, became scribes as a part of their sacred duty.

Ezra excelled as a scribe. Scripture declares that as a scribe he was "quick in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6), that is, a highly skilled, expertly trained scribe. As such, he mastered the contents and meaning of Scripture. Undoubtedly, like many scribes of the past, Ezra memorized the entire Old Testament. Though the Scriptures emphasize his knowledge of the law of Moses, he also demonstrates knowledge of the book of Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1), quotes from a Psalm (Ezra 3:11; Ps 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 108:1; 131:1), and recounts biblical history from Genesis to his day (Nehemiah 9). In the Old Testament, scribes are usually associated with the royal court (2 Sam 8:17), though once a scribe is associated with a prophet, namely, Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah. In many ways, however, Ezra was more like a New Testament scribe—or, stated more accurately, post-Old Testament scribes were more like Ezra than the Old Testament scribes of the royal court. Ezra is the great scribe of the Old Testament, as Moses is its great prophet, and as David is its great psalmist and king.

Because he lived at the end of the Old Testament era, Ezra's role as scribe took on even greater significance. With him and his generation, the Old Testament canon

closed—or in the words of the Rabbis, “the spirit of prophesy departed Israel.”³ At the close of Old Testament revelation, God raised up and prepared Ezra as the final priest and scribe of the Old Testament. Ezra’s role as the final “editor” of Scripture, therefore, is not merely tradition, but is virtually demanded by the context of Scriptures. Indeed, the Rabbis viewed him as the final scribe of all Scripture: “Moses received the law from Sinai, and he delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets they delivered it to the men of the Great Synagogue.”⁴ The men of the Great Synagogue consisted of Ezra, its leader, and a hundred and twenty spiritual leaders of the exile. As the final priest and scribe of the Old Testament, Ezra was both curator and expert of the Old Testament, its text and its interpretation.

Interpreting the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, however, involves more issues than a typical English text. Ancient Hebrew texts, unlike English texts (but similar to modern Arabic texts), are written with few vowel indicators. For instance, a word without written vowels, such as “mss” may be read or interpreted as miss, mass, mess, moss, or muss. Context decides—hopefully. Furthermore, ancient Hebrew texts are without punctuation. The grouping of words within sentences, the grouping of sentences within paragraphs, or the grouping of paragraphs within larger literary units is frequently a matter of interpretation. Once these issues are addressed and settled, the Hebrew text of the Old Testament can be interpreted similar to an English text.

Ezra, to be sure, had to deal with these issues, but there were other issues as well. The Jews were now less comfortable with Hebrew because during and after the exile

they spoke Aramaic, the Semitic language spoken throughout the Middle East until the spread of Arabic with the rise of Islam. Moreover, the people seemed ignorant of the word of God, which, being time-consuming and expensive to copy, was not readily available. Finally, the people, especially the leaders, appeared lax, even disinterested, in the word of God (Ezra 9:2). Some leaders even resisted Ezra’s reforms and God’s word (Ezra 10:15).

In spite of all these issues and resistance to his efforts, Ezra set his heart to teach the people. About fifteen years after Ezra returned to Israel and after Nehemiah returned in 444 B.C., the people gathered to hear Ezra read and proclaim the word of God, “They (Ezra and the leaders) read in the scroll, in the law of God, (which was) explained, and (they) gave insight, and they gave understanding in the reading” (Neh 8:8). Ezra, with the men of the Great Synagogue, gave insight and exposition as they read the law of God. This exposition of the law probably included an Aramaic interpretation since many would understand the Aramaic exposition better than the reading of the Hebrew text (Neh 13:24). Perhaps, as the Rabbis assert, this was the first targumic (an Aramaic paraphrase of the Old Testament) interpretation of the text.⁵ If so, this interpretation or explanation was probably a literal translation and exposition of the Pentateuch similar to Targum Onqelos of the Pentateuch, the “official” Jewish Targum of the Pentateuch dated to the early centuries of the Christian era. The second half of Neh 8:8 refers to Ezra and his men furnishing “insight and giving understanding *in the reading*.” This may refer to general exposition, but it certainly refers to the vocalizing of a Hebrew text without written vowels. Without vocal-

izing the implied vowels, a Hebrew text (without vowels) cannot be read, cannot have “understanding.” In addition, in his reading, Ezra would group words (similar to the Masoretic accents⁶) and sections of text, thus providing “punctuation” to the sacred text and bringing more “understanding” to the text.

This “understanding” or teaching of Ezra has probably been preserved, at least partially, by his successors: the Sopherim, Naqdanim, and finally the Masoretes. The Rabbis teach that Ezra created a traditional teaching or understanding of the text—“Has not Rabbi Iqā said in the name of Rabbi Hananel who had it from Rab: What is meant by the text, (Neh 8:8) ‘And they read in the book, in the law of God, with an interpretation, and they gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading? And they read in the book, in the law’: this indicates the Bible; ‘with an interpretation’: this indicates the targum (interpretation); ‘and they gave the sense’: this indicates the verse stops; ‘and caused them to understand the reading’: this indicates the accentuation, or according to another version, the masoretic notes.”⁷ Ezra and the men of the Great Synagogue handed down their “understanding” to the Sopherim, scribes who, according to the Rabbis, “counted the letters of the Torah.”⁸ The Naqdanim, also scribes, were expert in vocalizing the text. The work of both the Sopherim and the Naqdanim was finally handed down to the Masoretes, whose work is *the* Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Aaron ben Asher, the last and greatest Masorete, claimed that the text he was handing down—its consonants, vocalization, and the grouping of words and sections—went back to the Sopherim, Ezra and the wise men (Great Synagogue), and the prophets.⁹ Ben Asher’s crowning

work, the Masoretic text furnishes the traditional understanding of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and is the basis of all Rabbinic Bibles and scholarly editions of the Hebrew Old Testament.

The Masoretic tradition, which claims to preserve Ezra’s tradition, has been confirmed, at least in part, by modern inquiry. Modern scholars have found evidence of early accent systems¹⁰ (word grouping system) in a Septuagint manuscript, John Rylands Greek Papyrus 458 (dated to the second century B.C.), where words are grouped, similar to the Masoretic accentual tradition, for reading in the Synagogue.¹¹ Of course, the Pentateuch of the Septuagint, dating some three hundred years before Christ, indicates a textual and vocalization tradition similar to the Masoretes. Moreover, the Dead Sea Scrolls, many dating to the first century before Christ, show that vocalization and word groupings, very similar to the Masoretic tradition, were current, and indeed dominate, over a thousand years before the Masoretes.¹² How far back the Masoretic tradition goes, no one knows for sure; however, evidence demonstrates that the text, vocalization, and accentuation (word groupings) go back centuries before Christ, perhaps even to Ezra, as the Rabbis and Aaron ben Asher claim. Even if the vocalization and word groupings of the Masoretes do not go back to Ezra, they represent a very ancient rabbinic interpretation of Scripture, a valuable resource for syntax, exegesis, and historical interpretation.

Excursus on Masoretic Accentuation

Examples of Traditional Grouping

Practical examples of this instruction abound, often reflected in modern trans-

lations and commentaries. The following examples illustrate word groupings—which words should be grouped together and which words should be separated.

Ruth 2:14

Two renderings of the Hebrew are possible. The direct discourse may begin (1) after the third word in the Hebrew, or (2) after the fifth word in Hebrew. The Masoretic tradition affirms the second rendering.

(1) And Boaz said to her,
“At meal time approach here and eat
of the bread.”

(2) And Boaz said to her *at meal
time*,
“Approach here and eat of the
bread.”

Genesis 11:4

The issue here is the modification of nouns. Does the clause—“whose top is in the heavens”—modify the words, “city and tower,” or just the word, “tower”?

And they said, “Come, let us build
for us a city and a tower whose top is
in the heavens” (REB, NAB, NJB).

And they said, “Come, let us build
for us a city, and a tower whose top
is in the heavens” (NRSV, NJPS,
NASB, NIV).

In the first option, the clause—“whose top is in the heavens”—modifies both city and tower. Three translations, REB, NAB, and NJB, seem to follow or to allow this interpretation. In the second option, the modifying phrase modifies only the tower, not the city. The Masoretes agree with the second option.

Deuteronomy 11:13b

To love the Lord your God and to
serve Him with all your heart and
with all your soul.

To love the Lord your God,
and to serve Him with all your heart
and with all your soul (NRSV).

In the first option, the modifying phrases—“with all your heart and with all your soul”—qualify both infinitive clauses “to love the Lord your God and to serve Him.” In the second option, the modifying phrase qualifies only “to serve Him,” not “to love the Lord your God.” The NRSV, by placing the comma after “God,” follows the second option. The Masoretes, by contrast, accept the first option.

1 Samuel 3:3

Most modern Bibles translate this verse similar to the New American Standard Bible:

And the lamp of God had not yet
gone out, and Samuel was lying
down in the temple of the Lord
where the ark of God *was* (NASB).

And the lamp of God had not yet
gone out—now Samuel was lying
down—in the temple of the Lord
where the ark of God *was* (Masoretic
Text).

The Masoretes view the clause, “now Samuel was lying down,” as a parenthetical statement. Most modern translations, however, give the erroneous sense of Samuel sleeping in the Tabernacle proper or the holy of holies. Targum Jonathan also supports the Masoretic understanding: “Now the wick in the sanctuary of the Lord had not yet gone out, now Samuel was lying in the court of the Levites, and a voice was heard from the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was.”

***Traditional Understanding and
Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia***

The editors of *Biblia Hebraica Stutt-*

gartensia (*BHS*) often disagree with the Masoretic understanding of a passage—this is particularly true in poetical sections of *BHS*. The editors indicate their disagreements by their arrangement of paragraphs, verses, and words in the *BHS* text. Such arrangements are frequently confusing, often based on emendation and speculation.

Genesis 2:4

The *BHS* (Otto Eissfeldt, editor of *Genesis* in *BHS*; also NJPS, NRSV, REB, NAB, NJB, and NIV) starts a new paragraph at Gen 2:4b. This view often presupposes two creation accounts, with a second creation account of verse 2:4b beginning with a temporal clause, as its presumed Mesopotamian original (*Enuma Elish*).¹³ The Masoretes, on the other hand, start the new paragraph at the beginning of verse four. This is consistent, of course, with all the other occurrences in *Genesis* of *tôledôt* (“offspring,” “generation”), which always begins new sections, never ending them. These new sections beginning with *tôledôt* usually present main characters and their “offspring.” *Genesis* 2:4 presents Adam and Eve as the “offspring” of heaven and earth. The exegetical tradition of the Masoretes follows clear grammatical usage and meaning, not imaged or presumed borrowings.

This is the story of the heavens and the earth when they were created.
[New section at Gen 2:4b] When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens (REB, following *BHS*).

[New Section beginning at Gen 2:4]
This is the story (“generation”) of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens (Masoretic text).

Psalms 25:1-2

BHS takes the first word (in Hebrew) of v. 2 and places it last in v. 1. The NAB, following *BHS*, then inserts a verb (“I wait”) to smooth out the grammatical problem created by their own emendations.

(1) I wait for you, O Lord
I lift up my soul (2) to my God.
In you I trust; do not let me be disgraced;
Do not let my enemies gloat over me (NAB, following *BHS*).

(1) David's: To you, Lord, my soul I lift.

(2) My God, in you I trust, let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exalt with respect to me (Masoretic Text).

The *BHS* emends these verses to an assumed acrostic pattern, forcing other artificial changes throughout this psalm. It is surely better to see many acrostic psalms as partial and general than to concoct new verses to match *BHS*'s ideal patterns.

Psalms 5:2-6

BHS shifts clauses to form new verses. These changes are reflected in REB and the NJB.

(2) Listen to my cry for help,
my king and my God!
To you I pray, (3) Yahweh.
at daybreak you hear my voice;
At daybreak I lay my case before you
and fix my eyes on you.
(4) You are not a God who takes
pleasure in evil, no sinner can be
your guest.
(5) Boasters cannot stand their
ground
Under your gaze
You hate evil-doers,
(6) liars you destroy;
the violent and deceitful
Yahweh detests (NJB).

(2) Give attention to the voice of
my cry, my king and my God.
For to you I pray

(3) Lord, in the morning you hear
my voice
in the morning I arrange (my
words) to you and I will watch.
(4) For you are not a God who
takes pleasure in evil
evil cannot sojourn with you
(5) Boasters cannot station them-
selves before you;
you hate all workers of iniquity
(6) You destroy liars
murders and deceitful men the
Lord abhors (Masoretic Text, vv. 3-7).

The differences between these renderings are substantial. For instance, the second part of v. 6, “you hate all workers of iniquity,” in the Masoretic Text seems to relate why boasters cannot stand before the Lord. The *BHS* and *NJB* make this part of the verse (6b) the beginning of the next verse that expresses the Lord’s disfavor with the wicked.

There are, of course, other differences between the *BHS* (along with some modern translations) and the Masoretic Text—as in the vocalization of words, for instance.¹⁴ On occasion, *BHS*’s suggestions are based on sound textual support—especially when there is a clear mistake of the copyist, which is easily rectified by other copies of the Masoretic Texts—but frequently *BHS*’s suggestions are speculative, based on imagination or weak textual witnesses.

Conclusion of Excursus

The tradition of the Masoretes, heirs of a long and distinguished tradition that perhaps reaches back to the great scribe himself, Ezra, is a far more reliable guide to the text and interpretation of the Old Testament. Indeed, the current revisers of the *BHS* (Quinta) must agree, at least somewhat, since their new edition will arrange the text according to the Masoretic accents (word groupings).

Careful interpreters and grammar-

ians of Scripture, to be sure, have always noticed and respected this tradition. All ancient translations follow it to one degree or another—as is essentially true of modern translations as well. The medieval Jewish commentators and grammarians, such as Rashi, Eben Ezra,¹⁵ and Ibn Barun,¹⁶ appealed to it. The Buxtorfs, the great reformed scholars of rabbinic literature and of the Masoretes, honored it. Similarly, modern commentators and grammarians, such as H. Ewald,¹⁷ J. A. Alexander,¹⁸ E. J. Young,¹⁹ Paul Joüon,²⁰ and scores of others, are keenly aware of it. New Testament commentators also have noticed that the Apostles often follow this tradition.²¹ Such a time-honored tradition has been the resting place of saints for centuries. It is particularly helpful in our restless age of hermeneutical novelty, with its seemingly endless approaches and its dubious—and often dangerous—results.

Ezra: The Agent of Revival

Ezra’s instruction resulted in revival. In the Old Testament, revivals often lasted only while a righteous king lived, such as Hezekiah or Josiah. At other times, revivals lasted for generations, such as during and after New Testament times and the reformation. Not of human or natural origin, revival is the work of the Spirit of God upon the hearts of men through the word of God that transforms the people of God from a lax spiritual condition to a careful, attentive spiritual condition. It always results from the preaching and proclaiming of the word of God, rendering the soul repentant, holy, humble, and full of faith. The fruit of the Spirit is the result of revival.

The good hand of God—the Spirit of God—was upon the ministry of Ezra.

God had given Ezra grace in the eyes of Artaxerxes and his powerful subordinates (Ezra 7:28), who supplied vital resources for Ezra and the people on their trip from Babylon to Jerusalem and for their work in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:12-24). Moreover, Artaxerxes granted Ezra authority to govern the magistrates and judges within the Judean province, thus allowing Ezra to enforce the law of Moses in the nation (Ezra 7:25-26). This authority, of course, was not the reason for revival, though the Spirit of God granted this authority to overcome the political opposition that Ezra faced. Political authority, while it may assist revival, is never the source or cause of revival. Ezra did not legislate revival; his ministry resulted in revival.

The means that the Holy Spirit used to revive his people in Ezra's ministry was the word of God. Indeed, it was the word of God as read and preached by Ezra, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit attending Ezra's exposition and moving in the hearts of the people, that brought revival—the gospel (the word of God) is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). In fact, the Holy Spirit's work preceded Ezra's preaching by preparing and moving the people's heart to ask Ezra to read and preach the word the God (Neh 8:1). The word fell on the soil of hearts carefully prepared by the Holy Spirit and, undoubtedly, by the many prayers of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra's revival bore full fruit, strengthening the nation spiritually and preserving the nation from apostasy and idolatry. The people began to obey God's word, keeping the feast of booths to an extent not seen since the days of Joshua (Neh 8:17), repenting and confessing sin (Nehemiah 9), covenanting not to marry non-Israelites, supporting the worship of God (Nehemiah 10), and restoring the

tithe and the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13). The people were now as spiritually strong as at any time in Israel's history. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Ezra, the teacher of the law of God and the agent of revival, the joy of the Lord was now the strength of Israel.

Conclusion

Speaking of Old Testament events, the Apostles tell us that these events are examples for our instruction (1 Cor 10:6; 2 Pet 2:6) and that the Old Testament prophets were serving the church in their writings (1 Pet 1:12). So Ezra, the great scribe of Scripture, serves the church today, instructing us by the books of Scripture that he authored, by the godly example that he set, and by the Old Testament that he edited. May God, by His good hand, grant His people revival now through the teacher of His word and through His agent of revival—Ezra.

ENDNOTES

¹The Elephantine Aramaic texts from Egypt dated to the Persian period (400-300 B.C.) describe an idolatrous Jewish remnant that intermarried with the Egyptian population. For a brief summary of this Jewish community and its similarity to Jeremiah's Egyptian remnant, see Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 435-436. B. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968).

²For an excellent study on the priests' role as custodians and teachers of the law, see T. J. Betts, *Ezekiel the Priest: A Custodian of Tôrâ* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 17-45.

³*b. [Talmud Babylonia] Sanhedrin 11a.* Josephus similarly states, “It is true our history has been written since Artaxerxes very particularly but has not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.” *Against Apion* 1, 8.

⁴*Pirque Avoth 1:1* (Mishnah). Also, *b. Baba Bathra 14b-16a* asserts that Ezra authored the books of Ezra and Chronicles. *b. Megillah 16a* claims that the “aged Baruch” discipled Ezra, and *b. Sanhedrin 21b* declares that Ezra would have received the law at Sinai if he had preceded Moses historically! For the Great Synagogue, see Daniel Sperber, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 629-631.

⁵*b. Megillah 3a.* See note 7. Edwin Yamauchi claims that the Rabbinic assertion is anachronistic, “But the Talmudic comment is clearly anachronistic as we have no evidence of targums from such an early date” (Edwin Yamauchi, “Ezra-Nehe-miah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein [vol. 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 725). The earliest extant written targum is dated around 150-100 B.C. This, however, does not make the rabbinic claim “anachronistic.” The current lack of evidence for the existence of a written targum during the time of Ezra does not make the rabbinic claim “anachronistic.” Indeed, this “targum” of Ezra may have been oral, perhaps the basis of all later targums.

⁶For the Masoretic accent system,

see William Wickes, *Two Treatises on the Accentuation of the Old Testament*, (New York: Ktav, 1970); and James D. Price, *The Syntax of Masoretic Accents in the Hebrew Bible*, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

⁷*b. Megillah 3a.* Compare similarly, *b. Nedarim 37b, y.* (Talmud Jerusalmi) *Megillah 4:1 74d*, Genesis Rabbah 36.8 (In the last two citations, the clause in Neh 8:8 “and they gave the sense” is connected with the accents). In *b. Nedarim 37b* the same quotation is found as in *b. Megillah 3a* with a discussion concerning compensation on the Sabbath for teaching the accents. Such compensation was acceptable because “the accents are also Biblical.” A similar Rabbinic view is expressed by Rabbi Shefatiah in the name of Rabbi Johanan: “If one reads the Scripture without a melody (as indicated by chanting the accents) or repeats the Mishnah without a tune, of him Scripture says, (Ezek 20:25) ‘Wherefore I gave them also statues that were not good’” (*b. Megillah 32a*). Rabbinic tradition sees the accentuation as given, or at least implied, by the biblical author—Raba made this exposition: “What was written in Scripture, (Eccl 12:9) ‘And besides that Koheleth was wise, he also taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs? He also taught the people knowledge’ implies that he taught it with notes of accentuation and illustrated it by simile” (*b. Erubin 21b*). Commenting on *b. Berakot 62a*, Rashi says that hand movements corresponded to the singing of the accents.

⁸*b. Qiddushin 30a.*

⁹Wickes, *Two Treatises*, 5. Aaron ben Asher, *Dikdukei Ha-Te’amim*, ed. Baer and Strack (Leipzig, 1879), xvi, 1.

¹⁰Of course, when referring to the accents, one must distinguish carefully between the accent *signs* and the accents as orally preserved and sung. The accents as orally handed down may come from Ezra; the accent signs, preserving the oral tradition, come from a much later period.

¹¹C. H. Roberts, *Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester, 1936), 28; E. J. Revell, *The Oldest Evidence for the Hebrew Accent System* (Bulletin of John Rylands Library LIV, 1971), 214-222.

¹²Kyoungwon Choi, “Evidence of Word Groupings and Pausal Forms in 1QIsa” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 2004). Revell, *Oldest Evidence*, 214-215.

¹³Jon D. Levenson in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. A Berlin and M. Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13, 15. Levenson, with many others, sees Gen 2:4a as “an editorial linkage between the two creation accounts” (*ibid.*, 15).

¹⁴Like most modern translations, the TNIV, on occasion, emends the Masoretic Text—the consonants, vowels, and word groupings—without justification. See, for instance, Psalm 12:6 and compare it with the NIV’s rendering of the verse, which follows the Masoretic Text.

¹⁵Eben Ezra, the great medieval rabbinic commentator, states, “Any interpretation which is not in accor-

dance with the arrangement of the accents, thou shalt not consent to it, nor listen to it" (Price, *Syntax of Masoretic Accents*, 9).

¹⁶Pinchas Wechter, *Ibn Barun's Arabic Works on Hebrew Grammar and Lexicography* (Philadelphia: The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1964), 29.

¹⁷Ewald says, "By further consideration and investigation in this way, there will always be found a beautiful harmony between the accentuation and the syntax, so that each may afford explanation and support to the other. Whether we start with the syntax, and come to understand it without knowing anything yet of the accentuation (as the author once actually did), or proceed from the latter to the former, accurate investigation will always lead to the same result, so that he who has a correct understanding of the syntax, has already nearly mastered the accentuation also, and he who understands the latter will always find himself more easily at home in the former. But this is, at the same time, the highest praise that can be given to the accentuation." H. Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament* (trans. James Kennedy; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1891), §366.

¹⁸J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991), 193.

¹⁹E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 5.

²⁰Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka (2 vols; Roma: Pontificio Istituto

Biblico, 1991), §15, especially 15k.

²¹For example, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 101.

The Message of Nehemiah: Rebuilding¹

Mark Dever

Mark Dever serves as Senior Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. He is the Executive Director of 9Marks Ministries and has taught at a number of seminaries, including Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois; and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Dever is the author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2004) and the book from which this sermon is taken, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Crossway, forthcoming, 2006).

Assert Yourself

Well, I got it again:

“Dear Mr. Dever,
“Your career isn’t just about money, is it?
“I didn’t think so. It’s about something deeper.
“Something so central to your core, to what makes you tick, that you can’t imagine living without it.
“It’s about leadership. Having your say. Making things happen. Putting your stamp on the future.”

Twice now I have received this letter from the *Harvard Business Review*. I must be scheduled to get it mid-summer every other even-numbered year. Aside from the humor of the fact that they have sent me the same form letter twice, the letter itself is actually quite instructive. The most concise and highly-researched conclusions about where our society is today can often be found in the advertising campaigns that depend on split-second appeals. These appeals give us a peak into how people think. Surely, the *Harvard Business Review* must offer us an accurate reflection of what people today think about leadership. Apparently, we like to think of ourselves as leaders, and a leader is someone who, as they say here, “has your say,” “makes things happens,” “puts *your* stamp on the future.” Leadership is self-assertiveness. It’s self-confidence. Really, it’s self-centeredness.

Is that right? Are these things the core of leadership?

Introducing Nehemiah

In considering the nature of leadership,

few books speak more clearly than the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, which was originally the second half of the book of Ezra. We have reached Nehemiah in our present series of overview sermons on the histories of the Old Testament. In case this is your first, an overview sermon attempts to get at the main message—or the weight—of a whole book of the Bible in one sermon.

Our series began with the book of Joshua, which is set about one thousand years earlier than Nehemiah. Joshua described for us Israel’s conquest and initial settlement of the Promised Land. Judges followed, which recounted three centuries of leaders, some good and some bad. Next was Ruth, a marvelous little cameo of God’s providential care for his people in desperate times. After Ruth came 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, which told and retold the story of God dealing with his people through Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, and all the kings of Israel and Judah until the northern kingdom was destroyed and the southern kingdom was exiled to Babylon in 586 B.C. Then in Ezra, our last study, the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, completing the work in 516 B.C., seventy years after the old temple was destroyed. And now in Nehemiah, the place where Old Testament history ends in about 440 B.C., God’s people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

In Nehemiah, we watch the people of God resettle the land, build Jerusalem’s walls, and prepare to fight. They accom-

plish much, and so many of their names are prominently placed in the lists scattered throughout the book. In the foreground of the unfolding story, however, are the leaders: The priests who work in the temple and teach God's law—chief among whom is Ezra—and the governor himself, Nehemiah.

As we look at the portraits presented in the book of Nehemiah and Ezra, we want to ask an always crucial question: What kind of leadership does the Bible present as exemplary? Even more concisely, what is godly leadership? This question will help guide us through the book of Nehemiah, where we will note *eight* aspects of godly leadership. I pray that through this time, God will give you more understanding of what he calls you to be, as well as how he calls you to use the time, influence, and opportunities that he gives to you.

(1) A Godly Leader Prays

First, we see that a godly leader prays. The book begins in Babylon with Nehemiah getting some bad news. Nehemiah recounts the story:

Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (Neh 1:2-4).²

We do not think much about city walls these days, and so the news Nehemiah hears about the sad state of Jerusalem's walls may not seem like a big deal to

you. But actually, a city's walls were arguably more important than its army. Without walls, a city would be at the mercy of whatever band of marauders came through. It could not control itself. That's why we can make sense of the proverb that says, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control" (Prov 25:28). Such a man is destroyed by any passing temptation or outside influence.

Jerusalem was in such a state. Nehemiah hears about it, is moved, and immediately turns to prayer. His first act is to go to God, who is sovereign over all the empires that might descend upon Jerusalem. He prays,

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king (1:5-11).

It is a beautiful, compact prayer, beginning with praise, moving to confession, then citing God's promises back to God. He reminds God of how his name is tied up with his people's name, and then asks God to move the king of Persia's heart. Adoration, confession, scriptural promise, honoring of God, the request itself—this is not a bad model for a prayer! If you are a leader in any capacity and you want to know how to pray, Nehemiah's brief prayer in chapter 1 is a good model.

Not only was Nehemiah moved to prayer in chapter 1, we find him praying throughout the book. In chapter 2, he shoots up an "arrow prayer," as some call it, when King Artaxerxes asks him a question and he wants to answer well: "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king . . ." (2:4-5a). You can be sure that Nehemiah did not open his mouth and utter a long pastoral prayer like we do in church on Sunday mornings. I assume he prayed silently and briefly. You don't want the king to think you are not paying attention! And these types of prayers seemed to typify Nehemiah's life. He utters brief prayers to God over everything that concerns him throughout the book: "remember me in mercy, O God; frustrate my enemies, O Lord;" and so on.³

I wonder how alone *you* feel when you receive bad news, or when you are enduring a time of tragedy. If you do not believe in the God of the Bible, I expect one of the loneliest feelings in the universe must be experienced when you hear about something of great magnitude—good or bad—and you feel an innate desire to talk to him. To say, "Thank you!" or "Why?" I have seen this happen so many times, and I believe you know what I am talking

about. Perhaps you just thought you were talking to yourself. But I don't think so. I think you were trying to talk to someone else, someone whom you don't even know. And you can!

Friend, God cares about us in ways no one else does. When God's people were in Jerusalem and no one paid attention to them, they were not ultimately at the disposal of their Persian overlords. By God's providence, news came to Nehemiah in Babylon, and Nehemiah was sent! God alone is finally sovereign, and he can always be approached in prayer. That is an amazing thought! That this One who is sovereign over the universe is always approachable to us in prayer! Even those of you who meet with the president of the United States with some regularity may not be able to talk with him at will. But those of us who know God through Christ can always speak with the One who holds the president's heart in his hands. That is the privilege that you and I have in Christ—the privilege of prayer.

My Christian friend, cultivate your prayer life. Cultivate your desire to talk to him. What is your first response to challenges? To bad news? For that matter, what is your first response to good news? What stirs up your heart? When you hear anything of significance, you should respond in prayer. Especially if you would be a leader of God's people!

For those of you who are leaders in the church, I hope you realize that Nehemiah should not encourage us to pray for our nation's armies so much as it pushes us to pray that God's people would be distinct from the surrounding world. *That's* ultimately why Nehemiah was concerned about Jerusalem's walls. Today, we don't need to pray that God would erect a physical boundary between

his people and others; we need to pray that he would preserve the distinction between the people he has redeemed and the people who remain in darkness and rebellion. That is how the world will see the light—through people like us, as we live new lives. And that is what we should pray for as leaders in the church, if we would be godly leaders.

(2) A Godly Leader Acts

If this book is anything, it is a book of action, which brings us to the second characteristic of a godly leader: a godly leader acts.

In large part, the book reads like Nehemiah's own memoirs. By this I don't mean his autobiography, which would be a record of his own internal life. No, they're memoirs because they recount great events and his own part in them. What emerges in these memoirs is a skillful political actor, whose concern for his own people apparently coincided with the desires of his king, Artaxerxes. It is Artaxerxes who commissions Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem:

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that

I can rebuild it."

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time (2:1-6).

What an interesting account! Nehemiah is "very much afraid" of this absolute monarch's power to deal with him simply for looking sad in his presence, yet he continues with his plea despite his fear. He prays, as we mentioned before, and he acts! He speaks to the king about his troubles! Nehemiah was a man of action. "And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me," he says, "the king granted my requests" (2:8b; cf. 2:18). Before you know it—the next verse, in fact (2:9)—Nehemiah is off with permission letters from the king in hand.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah again takes the initiative by setting out on a fact-finding mission:

I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire (2:12-13).

Now, Nehemiah does not wrap up his work after collecting facts. He takes on the challenge of caring for Jerusalem and, in chapter 3, leading the people to re-build the wall.

And he does it skillfully! He divides up the work between various groups of people, giving many of them responsibility for the parts of the wall near their own homes, so that they would have an

obvious interest in it.⁴ Throughout chapter 3, we find the people zealously repairing the wall.

By the end of chapter 6, the wall is completed, but Nehemiah continues to be a man of action throughout the book. In chapter 7, he deals with the problems created by a city population that was too small. In chapter 12, he orchestrates the celebrations for dedicating the completed walls. By God's providence, no significant part of Jerusalem's rehabilitation was accomplished apart from the activity of this one leader, Nehemiah! It is a striking story.

Today, Christian, you and I do not need to act by physically separating ourselves from others. God does not call Christians to live in separate gated communities, or to build high walls around their churches. That is *not* how we apply Nehemiah's efforts to ourselves. Rather, we want to be identified as those who are ransomed by the death of Christ for as long as we live in this world. Christ has granted us a newness of life, and we want this change to mark us out. After all, it is our newness of life, more than any wall, that points the world to him!

Therefore, repentance and trust must be our chief actions. As we continually repent of our sins and trust in him, the wonderful fruit of our newness becomes more and more evident. So we must encourage one another toward continual repentance of the sins that make us look like we still belong to this world.

If that is how godly leaders must act, then pray that God would give the elders of his church wisdom to act in ways that bless this church, preserve the witness of the church, and protect God's people from being dissolved into the world around. So a godly leader acts.

(3) A Godly Leader Will Face Opposition

Third, a godly leader will face opposition. The first stirrings of opposition emerge in chapter 2 when Nehemiah announces his plans to return to Jerusalem (2:10, 19). But the opposition really begins to dominate the story in chapter 4, after Nehemiah has led the people to begin rebuilding the walls.

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (4:1-3).

The rebuilding continues amidst mockery and opposition. But then the stakes rise:

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."

Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times

over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked (4:7-18a).

When the opposition increases, Nehemiah prays and posts a guard. He both invokes God’s aid and acts. I hope you realize there is nothing inconsistent about doing these two things together. When his fellow citizens become discouraged, likewise, he exhorts them not to fear these people, to trust in the Lord, and, if need be, to fight them.

The opposition continues into chapter 6, yet here the Jews’ opponents begin to focus on slandering and intimidating Nehemiah himself. Nehemiah turns to God in prayer, and God gives him the wisdom he needs to respond to this opposition (6:9-13).

Let me add, facing opposition well is usually more complicated than people imagine. But this is what a leader does! Like Nehemiah, we must not let opposition drive us *from* God, but *to* him. There

is nothing surprising about the fact that Nehemiah’s opponents try to intimidate him personally. The adversary of God’s people will always go for the leaders. Discredit and manipulate the leaders, and the flock will be disorganized, confused, and ineffectual.

The wall is completed in fifty-two days despite the opposition (6:15)!

Still, his adversaries do not rest. Nehemiah writes,

Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me (6:17-19).

Tobiah continues insidiously to infiltrate the ranks of Nehemiah’s helpers and to sow opposition against him and his policies. Thank God that he gave his people a leader as fearless as Nehemiah! How easy it would have been for Nehemiah to be deflected into doing whatever he could to stop all the ill reports. But friend, that is never an option for those who aspire to leadership. Leaders will face opposition.

I wonder if you think of yourself as fearless? Perhaps you laugh at that question and say, “No, of course not!” Or maybe the question does not move you at all because you do. You think of yourself as fearless. Let me ask, when you are having a conversation with yourself, how important do you find other’s thoughts of you to be? How much do you care what others think about you? Friend, the only liberation we will ever find from a

debilitating fear of man is a real, true, and correct fear of God. He is the One whose respect we should desire. He is the One whose opinion we should cherish. Everyone from our best friends to our most determined opponents can misunderstand us. But God knows the truth. If you fear him alone, you will not have to fear any opposition he may call you to endure. He is the one we are supposed to ultimately fear. And his opposition is truly fearful. The one being in universe we do *not* want to oppose us is God!

Friend, Jesus Christ faced opposition, and so will we if we follow him. Remember Jesus' words, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Peter, who was present when Jesus uttered these words, later wrote to a group of Christians,

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness (1 Pet 2:21-24a).

My Christian brother or sister, examine yourself. Remind yourself of whom you really serve, so that when you are put to the test, you, like the people of God of old, can face opposition. And pray that we who are leaders in the church will rightly respond when our leadership is opposed. Godly leaders will face opposition.

(4) A Godly Leader Cares

Fourth, a godly leader cares, a lesson that comes to the forefront of the story in chapter 5.

When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, broken walls are not the only problem he finds. A number of the weaker people in the community are being abused. Wealthier citizens are taking economic advantage of the poor, so that the poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer.

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." (Neh 5:1-5)

Once again, Nehemiah acts, and this time to stop the usury. He exhorts the wealthier citizens to fear the Lord and stop extorting money from the poor, to which they respond, "'We will give it back. . . . And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say'" (5:12). Nehemiah then uses a very interesting image to warn the wealthy about the consequences of not keeping their word:

I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised (5:13).

This robe Nehemiah shakes would have had little pockets where personal things could be kept, and he wants these wealthier citizens to know that if they do not keep their pledges, God will shake *them* out of *his* pockets. If they continue to treat God's weaker ones in this fashion, they can expect to be God's special possession no longer.

In short, Nehemiah cares. He is a godly leader who cares enough to act against abuse. More than that, he turns down some of the privileges he could exercise as governor for the sake of feeding the people. He perceives their needs and he pours himself out for them (5:14-15).

Friend, I wonder if your heart goes out to people whom you know are in need. Or do you find yourself cold toward them? At least be honest with yourself in answering this question: Do you find your heart toward others is cold? Do the needs of others have any voice amidst the crowd of desires in your head all clamoring for attention? They did with Nehemiah, because Nehemiah cared. In that sense, he points us to Christ, who *cares* for his church: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

We cannot take the Old Testament as a blueprint for our nation today and use Israel's laws for our laws. But we can see what God values and consider how we might incarnate those values in our country. Clearly, he values caring for the poor. So how do we encourage that concern within our weekly lives? Do we? Or have we mailed in that concern along with our tax payments to the government?

Friend, cultivate a genuine concern for others that leads you to action. For instance: Do you know any older members in the church who have difficulty getting out of their house for church

or shopping or who have other needs? What could you do to establish a relationship with an older member that would encourage and serve them? What about our ministry to the children of prisoners? Have you thought about purchasing a gift for one of these children? Many of them ask for basics, like jeans or school shirts. Also, our congregation has a benevolence fund for helping members in need as well as elderly non-members in the area who cannot afford medicine and other basics. You can quietly act in benevolence with the money you give to the benevolence fund. So many things can be quietly done. But my concern is for you. Do you have a way in which you live out God's concern for others, particularly for those who are poor?

Pray that God will make the leaders of our church—and the church as a whole—marked by a concern for the needy among and around us. Pray that he would make those of us who are leaders especially self-sacrificial in our love. Because godly leaders care.

(5) A Godly Leader Turns People to God's Word

Fifth, a godly leader turns people to God's Word. We see this particularly in chapter 8, where Ezra the priest reads the Law of God.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before

the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion . . .

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read (Neh 7:73b-8:4a; 8:5-8).

So all the people are gathered at the Water Gate, the gate through which the townspeople would exit to get to their nearest source of water for the city. And they have come to hear Ezra read the Law from daybreak till noon. It's a dramatic scene: Ezra stands on the platform with an open book; the people respond by standing and lifting their hands, then bowing down; and the Levites instruct the people so that they "could understand what was being read."

And then notice how Nehemiah leads the people to respond to God's Word. Nehemiah says,

"Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of

the LORD is your strength" (8:9-10; cf. Isa. 30:15).

Undoubtedly, the people are convicted of their sins, as we saw in Ezra 10. But here, interestingly, Nehemiah forbids them from responding with weeping, because "the joy of the LORD is your strength." So, quite simply, they depart in order "to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy" (8:12). In fact, "From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great" (8:17). Why all the joy? "[B]ecause they now understood the words that had been made known to them" (8:12). Ezra then proceeds to read God's law to God's people for seven straight days (8:18)! A godly leader turns people to God's Word.

If you are a non-Christian, hopefully I can help you understand at least this one thing: We Christians do not believe that ultimate truth is something human beings can figure out through the hard work of the intellect. Nor is the truth something that humans create through cultural discourse or long agreed-upon political conventions. Instead, we believe that God has taken the initiative of revealing himself to us in the Bible, which means the Bible is ultimate truth. God has spoken, and so we will call the Bible God's Word. But not only that: God went a step further and sent his Word in the flesh! Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1,14).

If you are a Christian, consider whether you make God's Word central to your own life. When you hear God's Word read or preached, how do you respond? Does your heart leap? The hearts of the Jews in this passage clearly do. Or does your response depend on the skill of the one

preaching it? On how well the sermon is delivered? If you are bored by God's Words, then whose words excite you? The words of your friends or family members, your teacher or coach? What would need to change in order for God's Word to stir your heart in the same way the words of other people can?

The most important thing we do at church is teach God's Word, because God's Word alone generates life. As the apostle Paul said to the Romans, "faith comes from hearing the message" (Rom. 10:17). People who hear God's Word and believe it have their lives changed.

That is certainly the testimony of our church. I and the other elders serve the congregation best by making sure God's Word is accurately and forcefully presented in everything from the Sunday morning gathering to the Sunday evening devotion; from the music we sing to the prayers we publicly pray; from the church's Wednesday night Bible study to the small groups meeting in homes; from discipling relationships to evangelistic outreaches; from the books on the book-stall to the sermons mailed out to seminarians and shut-ins. God's Word is the seed which gives birth to God's people.

This is how God has always done it. He created the world by his word. He created Abraham by calling him out. And he created his people at Mount Sinai by giving them his commands. In Ezekiel's great vision of the valley of dry bones, God speaks and the bones are clothed with flesh and brought to life. Then, of course, there is the Word of God himself, the Lord Jesus, who came, took on flesh, and died for the sins of all who would ever repent of their sins and believe these words about who he is and what he has done. As we said, "Faith comes from hearing the mes-

sage" (Rom 10:17). A godly leader turns people to God's Word because God's Word brings life!

(6) A Godly Leader Confesses Sins

Sixth, a godly leader confesses sins. As we saw, the people celebrated the reading of God's Word. Two days after the people finished feasting, the leaders turned their attention to the sins of the people and led them in confession. The text does not tell us if the following prayer was prayed by Nehemiah, Ezra, or the Levites. But everyone stood, listened, and—we assume—agreed with this leader's prayer:

"Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.

"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. *You* made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. *You* give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

"*You* are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. *You* found his heart faithful to you, and *you* made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. *You* have kept your promise because you are righteous.

"*You* saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; *you* heard their cry at the Red Sea. *You* sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for *you* knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. *You* made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. *You* divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but *you* hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day *you* led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light

on the way they were to take.

"You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

"But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.

"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

"You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed

the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.

"But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.

"But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.

"You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

"Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the

kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

“But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress” (Neh 9:5b-37; emphasis added).

So there they stood, confessing their own sins and the sins of their fathers. But notice, this prayer of confession begins with praising God: “Blessed be your glorious name” (9:5). Really, the whole prayer is cast in the form of praise to God: *You saw, you came, you are, you sent*, and so forth. At the same time, the prayer is both a confession and a summary of Old Testament history. It is awful to observe, isn’t it, that your history is well-summarized as a confession of sin? But so it was (cf. Ezra 9).

And consider this admission: “In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong” (9:33). Just imagine some individual or group stating that publicly today! “In everything that has happened, O Sovereign God, you have acted faithfully. We got what we asked for. Our sins deserved it.” Surely such an admission demonstrates an amazing understanding of who God is and of who we are. It assumes that God is sovereign and that God is good. And surely such faith is

difficult to sustain when life is not going well. Yet that is what the people said: All of this happened “because of our sins” (9:37). They did not shift the responsibility at all.

What a day it was! They spent one-quarter of the day reading God’s Word and one-quarter confessing their sins and worshipping (9:3). Do you see the pattern? By reading God’s Word and perceiving his holy character, they became more and more aware of their sins and the *need* to confess them. Yet by reading God’s Word and perceiving his patient love, they became more and more aware of their *ability* to confess these sins. Scripture reminded them that God is from everlasting to everlasting, and that they could rely on his ancient promises of love.

Oh friend, if we will only hear it, Scripture will stir our hearts, too, and move us to confession and worship of this magnificent God. He is perfect. He is holy. He is just. He is loving. He is merciful. He will not let us saunter into his presence, unaware of our sin. But nor will he let our sin keep us from him—if we will only look to his Son—because he is a God of persistent love.

We, too, are guilty of sinning against this good God. The Jew’s confession of sin is no mere historical record, unrelated to your experience or mine! Just think for a second: What sins of yours have weighed on your conscience this week? Now consider, if they weigh on your conscience at the moment, as filthy, corrupted, and deadened as your conscience has become through repeated compromise with sin, becoming accustomed and learning to even accommodate that sin, can you imagine how your sins will appear when they are brought out of the stygian darkness of our present state and into the bright and

piercing radiance of God's purity?

And yet (!) we can still come with those darkened consciences into his presence to be forgiven of our blackest sins. Friend, if you are separated from God by your sins, the most important business you can conduct is to find out how your sins will be forgiven. The Puritan William Gurnall was right when he said plainly, "Better die in a prison, die in a ditch, than die in [your] sins."⁵

How can you be forgiven of your sins? You must look to Jesus Christ. In Christ, God became a man, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, taking the penalty deserved by all of us who would ever repent of our sins and turn to him in faith. Christ is the answer to our sins. He himself was without sin, but he was made sin for us.⁶

If you are a Christian, you are not surprised at this connection between reading God's Word, worshipping him, and confessing your sins. Yet some Christians have been taught that we confess our sins only once—when you become a Christian—and never again. But in Scripture, from Psalm 32 to James 5:16, we watch as believers confess their sins again and again. They repeatedly go to God and find their forgiveness in him. My basic rule of thumb is this: As soon as you stop sinning against God, you can stop confessing your sins to him.

A godly leader confesses his sins and leads his people to confess their sins.

(7) A Godly Leader Leads People in Making Specific Commitments

Seventh, a godly leader leads people in making specific commitments. Right after chapter 9's Scripture reading and prayer of confession, the people take an oath to keep God's law: "In view of all this, we

are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it" (9:38). The content of this pledge is then found in chapter 10:

"The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts" (10:28-31).

And the pledges continue through the end of the chapter, all of them promising, basically, to follow the laws God gave to Moses (10:32-39). These pledges do not negate the authority of God's Word, but they helpfully summarize God's law. Really, their pledges act like a church covenant. Church covenants should not be used to supplant Scripture, but they can helpfully summarize the things that Scripture requires of our churches. Anyhow, Nehemiah leads the people in making these public promises to God.

Have you ever made any promises to God? Have you ever resolved to repent of your sins, and to believe in Christ? If you have not, that is the most important commitment you can make today. As Jesus himself said, "The time has come.

The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

For you, Christian, take note of how these people make specific resolutions to God and to one another. Are you reluctant to make such specific promises? Is there something in you that wants to avoid committing to a particular group of God's people with whom you say "we"? If so, you deprive *them* of something God intends for them through you, and you deprive *yourself* of what God intends for you through them. But you are thinking more highly of your own abilities than you should; you deceive yourself. So commit yourself to a particular local church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached. Embrace its covenant. And engage with the work of God in that local place.

A good local church will help you not to be a person who picks and chooses which of God's commands to obey. This is one of the reasons that our church uses a covenant. It is a useful summary of our Christian obligations to God and to each other. Yes, it takes humility to submit to one another—and to leaders.

Which raises the flip side of the coin. Should church elders commit themselves to giving the time, trouble, and effort *to leading* well when the other members do not commit themselves to giving the time, trouble, and trust *to following* well? There's as much art in the one as the other. The late historian Stephen Ambrose said several years ago,

I used to tell my students that President Harry Truman was wrong to use the atomic bombs against the Japanese. I believed the Japanese were already ready, even eager, to surrender, as long as they could keep their emperor. I was wrong. New documents reveal that the Japanese intended to fight to the

death. I realized that Truman was exactly right and that his decision saved uncounted American and Japanese lives.⁷

Regardless of your assessment of Truman's decision, hopefully you can see what Ambrose was saying. Truman, as the president, had a number of facts at his disposal that others (even professional historians) did not have, and so he made the decision he did. As someone who has been in leadership, I can simply tell you how often leadership works this way. There are often considerations and information that only the leadership has, and that may not be widely understood or known. So in our churches, we should follow God by following those God has placed in leadership. Do not follow them into sin and error—that is where congregational responsibility kicks in (as in 2 Tim 4:3; Gal 1:6-9). But follow as they lead according to Scripture.

A godly leader leads God's people into making specific commitments.

(8) A Godly Leader Keeps Leading

Finally, a godly leader keeps leading. What do I mean by that? Well, let's remember a couple of things about our place in the storyline. First, we are at the end of Old Testament history. Chronologically, Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls in Jerusalem is the last bit of Old Testament history we have, which brings us to a second thing worth remembering. Throughout this entire series, we have seen God underscore the fact that his people are to be distinct from the nations around them. This has been the main theme of all of these histories, from Joshua to Nehemiah. God pulled a nation out of Egypt to be a distinct people and to display his character to the nations. How

appropriate then for the histories to conclude with the rebuilding of the walls that are supposed to set the people apart.

Now consider: Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem for a time—probably not months, but years. We read in chapter 13, “I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem” (13:6). Then he returns to this place into which he has poured so much of his life, and what does he find? The temple is being used for non-religious purposes (13:6-9). The singers, priests, and other temple servants have gone back to farming because they were not being paid (13:10-11). The Sabbath is being forgotten and desecrated (13:15-22). What’s worse, look at verses 23 and following. Here is the last chapter of Nehemiah. Here is the end of Old Testament history.

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?” (13:23-27).

Oh, friend, when you read this, do you not want to scream?! You have *one thousand years of God’s faithfulness*, and look at what happens! Nehemiah has been gone for maybe a few years; he comes back, and what are they doing? The same thing that Solomon did, which eventually led the people into worshipping other gods! You read this and think to yourself, what’s the point of all this history?! What else can be done?! These people are hopeless! Quite contrary to the many utopian visions of the world, the Old Testament paints a picture of mankind that, on one level, is profoundly pessimistic and—we must admit—realistic. The sins they struggled with in Joshua’s day were the same sins they struggled with in Nehemiah’s day—one thousand years later!

What would God do with such a constantly misled and misleading people?!

In fact, God had told them what he would do decades earlier. While the people were still in exile, the Word of the Lord came to the prophet Ezekiel, who was in Babylon at the time. Through Ezekiel, God criticized the leaders of Israel—whom he refers to as “shepherds”—for the way most of them (unlike Ezra and Nehemiah) misled God’s people. And here is what God promised he would do:

“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shep-

herd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep” (Ezek 34:2-12a).

God himself would come as the good shepherd. And he would come in the fullness of divinity and humanity together in the Lord Jesus Christ. This was necessary because no prophet from Samuel to Malachi and no ruler from Saul to Zedekiah was able to lead God’s people in such a way that the peoples’ hearts actually changed—not even Ezra or Nehemiah. This could only be done when God’s Word himself, Jesus Christ, went to work within them.

So the Word would come. And he would come to convict God’s people of sin and give them new life through the preaching of his good news. Yes, he would have people who would be ruled well, and who would rule well. For we finally see, in the book of Revelation, the completion

of the story, when the great figures surrounding God’s throne praise the Lamb upon the throne, saying, “with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Rev 5:10). Then Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem, will come down out of heaven and God himself will reign. And this new Jerusalem will not need a temple “because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” And this new Jerusalem will not need the sun because “the glory of God gives its light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21:22-23). That is the hope the Bible holds out for us. That is the hope that the Old Testament points to as its history ends. And that is how a leader must continue to lead—by pointing to this hope!

Christian, what implications does this have for how we live? Simply, you must be prepared to continue to battle against sin throughout this life. The warfare that we are called to wage against sin in our lives is short in view of eternity, even if it sometimes feels very long in this world.

For those who are elders in the church, take note of Nehemiah’s experience here: The work of leading a church never ends. This church is not *reformed*, in the sense that its work is now done. Rather, it must continually *be reformed* by the Word of God! As an elder, our work is never done. Neither we, nor the church as a whole, have arrived. We have not learned everything God has to tell us. We still draw breath. We still read the Bible. God’s Spirit still works in our hearts. And God’s Word still refashions us.

For those of you who are not elders in the church, I plead with you to realize that God has given those who lead the church

a great task, and it is our joy to accept that task. Don't ever think that you should not bother the elders. Serving the church is the greatest privilege that God has given us in this life! And please forgive us if we ever appear to forget that privilege. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thess 5:13).

And as Paul wrote to Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim 4:2). A godly leader keeps leading.

Conclusion

So is godly leadership about putting your stamp on the future? Is it about self-confidence and self-assertion? Not according to Nehemiah.

In this book, you get a very different picture of leadership. In chapter 1, Nehemiah asks God to hear "those who delight in revering your name" (1:11). In chapter 5, Nehemiah says that he has not taken advantage of the poor—he has not fleeced the sheep!—"out of reverence for God" (5:15). And in chapter 7, Nehemiah appoints one person to a position of leadership "because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do" (7:2). Here we get to the core of godly leadership in the Bible. Leadership is about fearing God more than others do. Leadership is about revering God's name. Leadership is about taking pleasure in

who God is and what he is like. Leadership is about making the chief end of your life helping, instructing, and challenging others to revere and delight in God's name as well.

Do you delight in doing that? Does that give you more joy than any combination of irritations that comes with leadership? Do you take pleasure in seeing others revere and honor God? Then you, my friend, have the basic components of being a good influence in the lives of others. You will lead well.

Your life isn't just about money, is it? I hope it's about something deeper. Something so central to your core, to what makes you tick, that you can't imagine living without it. I hope it's about leadership. About learning and proclaiming God's Word. About praying to God. About delighting in seeing God's name revered.

Let's pray together

Lord God, we pray that you make us godly leaders and followers as we see depicted in the book of Nehemiah. And give us such persevering love and grace. We pray that we would be like those in the book of Isaiah, who themselves pray, "Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts" (Isa 26:8). O God, we pray that you would make the desire of our hearts the lifting up of your name. Bring glory to yourself though our lives, our church, and all our opportunities for exercising leadership for you. We pray this all so that people will revere your name through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹This sermon is excerpted by permission from Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL:

Crossway, forthcoming, 2006). It was originally preached on November 24, 2002, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

²Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

³4:4-5; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.

⁴3:23, 28-30; cf. 7:3.

⁵William Gurnall, *Christian in Complete Armour* (repr.; Carlsile, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964; Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1864; first published 1662), 169.

⁶Heb 4:15; 2 Cor 5:21.

⁷Stephen Ambrose, "Old Soldiers Never Die," in *Forbes ASAP* (Oct. 2, 2000): 110.

Book Reviews

Coming to Peace with Science. By Darrel R. Falk. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 235 pp., \$17.00 paper.

Falk is professor of Biology at Point Loma Nazarene University in Point Loma, California. He is convinced that the Bible (and especially early Genesis) is theologically significant. Yet he is equally convinced that the natural reading of the text (which he calls the ultra-literal reading) is quite impossible. He believes that many, who have been taught by well-meaning churches and Christian leaders, are forced to choose between rejecting science or rejecting the Bible. Falk believes the evidence is simply overwhelmingly in favor of an ancient earth and gradual creation, but he does not want people to give up their Bible (just their literal reading of it).

Falk, along with Francis Collins (Director of the Human Genome Project), adopts theistic evolution as a peaceful bridge between faith and science. This book is probably the best case yet for theistic evolution, but in my judgment it resolves none of the problems. Falk admits (72) that radiometric dating depends on unchanging decay rates, but there are several other issues with radioactive dating that he does not discuss. He argues (chapter four) that there are many transitional forms in the fossil record but then admits that some of the ones we have (e.g., *Archaeopteryx*) are likely a side branch in the lineage (which means—not a transitional form). Falk is confident, however,

that many transitional forms exist (or existed) but fossilization is rare (an interesting but unclear assumption) and transitional species occur primarily in tiny populations (a convenient explanation for their rarity). Why do we not see gradual modification happening today (130)? Falk's answer is that we do see it, but he admits that peppered moths, extra but non-functional wings on fruit flies, and dog varieties do not qualify. Falk thinks we simply have a much too limited perspective on time. Evolution happens, it just happens too slowly for anyone except trained evolutionary biologists to see it. Evolution does not violate the second law of thermodynamics, says Falk, because we see things growing and increasing in order all around us all the time if excess energy is available from the sun (chapter seven). The sun's energy on non-living matter does not increase its order, however, and Falk knows that. Only living matter can capture and convert the sun's energy to increase order, and that conversion mechanism does not spontaneously arise under any known conditions, nor does it exist anywhere apart from life—and yet the origin of life is the issue. Moreover, the sun's energy does not modify genetic structures or add any encoded genetic information to living forms, and yet that is exactly what evolution requires. So the second law remains an obstacle to evolutionary processes despite Falk's best effort to avoid that conclusion.

Falk believes that life must have been called into existence by God, but he believes a loving God used what I would think is an excessively slow and wasteful process of massive extinction and serial mutation over millions of years to accomplish the environment for today's world. What looks random to us was guided by God, says Falk. The Creator is not a designer (engineer) but an artist. Genesis is poetry (though it seems to me that God himself [see Exodus 20:11] seems to have read it literally). Eve is the bride of Adam just as the church is the bride of Christ, both brides coming from wounds in the bridegroom's side. Thus Falk defends his figurative hermeneutic for Genesis.

Falk interacts with none of the main Creationist writers, nor does he significantly interact with any of their technical articles. Falk clearly defends evolutionary gradualism with the strongest available arguments. We must take this seriously because Falk is a Christian brother. The issues do not seem to change or go away, however. Geographical distributions of species are not well explained by any current theory. Thus, I recommend that this book be read critically as a fair presentation of the theory of theistic evolution, but I cannot affirm that this is the best harmony of science and faith.

L. Russ Bush III
Southeastern Baptist
Theological Seminary

A Sacramental Catechism. By John Willison. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000, xxiv + 342 pp. \$29.95.

This is a reprint of a work originally published in Scotland in 1720 and reprinted, along with other works of the author, well into the middle of the nineteenth century. The author was a highly respected Scottish Presbyterian pastor. An "Introduction for the Modern Reader" is added to introduce the reader more fully to the author and his context. The introduction states, "This work will be enjoyed by all who have a taste for sound scriptural theology and experimental piety." Indeed, "experimental piety" is the real strength of the book.

As the title suggests, the book in its entirety (apart from the appendix) is in a question and answer format. As expected from a good Presbyterian, the section on baptism expounds and defends infant baptism and will, therefore, be of less experimental value for Baptists. However, the majority of the book focuses on the Lord's Supper, particularly preparation for it. Here one finds a pastorally rich and theologically sound approach to self-examination. Willison exhorts us to confront seriously our sins but does not fall into the all too common contemporary trap of simply telling us to "try harder and really mean it this time." He points us to grace and comforts the wounded conscience reminding us that all saints struggle with sin and that the struggle is a sign of life. After self-examination Willison turns to the

stirring up of proper affections asking a series of questions, including:

- What shall we meditate on in order to get holy fear quickened?

- What shall we meditate on to get repentance quickened?

- What shall we meditate on to get love to God and Christ quickened?

- What shall we meditate on to get love to the people of God quickened?

What excellent questions!

While at times the author probably over interprets, this book is welcome in our situation when communion is so rarely appreciated. This theological reflection could arouse some anew to the value of Christ's ordinance. Furthermore, the book will be helpful to pastors simply in the model of self-examination whether or not used in connection with the Lord's Supper. The book's length makes it difficult to read through all at once, but could profitably be used by reading just one section prior to communion over a certain period.

Ray Van Neste
Union University

Richard Hooker and Reformed Theology: A Study of Reason, Will, and Grace. By Nigel Voak. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, xvii + 348 pp., \$95.72.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean churches have been the subject of a great deal of recent scholarly research, some of which has modified earlier perspectives on just how "Reformed" those churches actually were. I recall some years ago my own

surprise at discovering that Charles I sent a delegation to the Synod of Dort so that the Church of England might have some representation at that great Reformed conclave. The battle cries of "Elizabethan Compromise" and "Harrie the Puritans out of England" shouted so loudly at some of us that we did not pause to look carefully at just what the issues really were. Scholars such as Diarmaid MacCulloch, Dewey Wallace, Patrick Collinson, and Alister McGrath have reopened questions concerning the Reformed heritage among the non-Puritan, non-Presbyterian English Reformers of the period and have demonstrated that the situation was not quite what we had been led to think by earlier scholarship. The general sense of the new research is that many (though not all) of the non-Puritan, non-Presbyterian leaders of the English church during this period actually were more committed to Reformation theology (or theologies) than one might guess; it was their anti-Puritan rhetoric which made it seem to be otherwise. With such a revisionist historicism making its tedious way through the dusty journals of ecclesiastical history, one might guess that attention would eventually turn to the one man with the greatest *via media* reputation of all, and it has.

Nigel Voak's treatment of Richard Hooker is only the latest in a series of monographs and essays on Hooker that have been appearing for about the last decade or so. Hooker's great work, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, sets him forth as a defender of many things which were considered

by the Protestant Reformers to be anathema—vestments, rituals during the services of the church, and so on. Further, this work rejects (or modifies) many issues that the Reformers were well known for instituting, such as church discipline. The result is that Hooker has long been seen as the precursor of Laud, or at least the defender of the status quo in an extremely conservative Elizabethan church that wanted little to do with Reformation theology, but that instead sought alliance with Geneva and Zurich only to keep Rome at arm's length. That estimate of Hooker has recently been evaporating; or perhaps it might be better to say that the fog of history has cleared a little so that we might get a better picture.

Voak argues that Hooker underwent development. In his early days (he only lived to be forty-six years old, by the way) he was apparently more committed to Reformation theology. McGrath even argues that Hooker held to a Calvinistic understanding of justification through most of his writings, a point with which Voak concurs. When, however in his early 'thirties, he took the Mastership of Temple Church, his views began slowly to change. There he came into conflict with Presbyterian elements within Anglicanism in the form of Walter Travers. Travers had been involved with Cartwright in the Admonitions Controversy over a decade earlier, and had been a supporter of Cartwright's attack on episcopacy. Hooker's relationship with his fellow-minister Travers left a bad taste in his mouth, and four years after leaving that post, he published

the *Larves*, a volume that would lay out many of the bases for the future Anglican *via media*, especially that which was adopted by the Oxford Movement much later on.

Voak's volume analyzes the key issues related to Hooker's understanding of reason, common grace, special grace, justification and sanctification. Lying before him are the key questions: To what degree was Hooker Anglo-Catholic? Is his position essentially that which will later give comfort to John Henry Newman? Was he the precursor to William Laud? His answers are nuanced. But overall, Voak supports the newer perspective on Hooker that has been advanced by scholars in recent decades. The book is a bit pricey (perhaps a paperback will soon appear), but it is an important addition to the literature both on Hooker and the Elizabethan and Jacobean churches.

Chad Owen Brand

A Genetic History of Baptist Thought. By William H. Brackney. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004, xvi + 592 pp., \$40.00 paper.

There is no doubt that this book will be considered a major contribution to Baptist studies. Brackney teaches history in the Department of Religion at Baylor University, and he has collected an extensive body of data regarding British and North American Baptists.

Almost encyclopedic in scope, Brackney's coverage includes Canadian, African-American, early and

later British Pastors and Academic Theologians, and American Baptist Pastors, Editors, and Schoolmen. There is also a chapter on Baptist Hymnody and one on Baptists in what Brackney calls a Diaspora. In this Diaspora chapter he briefly surveys the work of Carl F. H. Henry, E. J. Carnell (though he admits the identity of Carnell as a Baptist is dubious), Bernard Ramm, Clark Pinnock, Millard Erickson, James William Mclendon, and Harvey Cox. It is instructive to note the relative space given to each of these. The conservative Erickson, the most widely read, is given the least coverage and the most superficial coverage. Pinnock is given a far more significant section of the chapter, and in light of recent challenges to Pinnock's integrity (he signs an inerrancy statement each year in order to maintain his membership in the Evangelical Theological Society, a fact not mentioned by Brackney), it is interesting that Brackney chooses to quote Pinnock as saying (in a 1989 book) that the reason he formerly believed the doctrine of inerrancy was that he "desperately wanted it to be true."

As a side note at this point, Brackney reports a meeting between Paul Pressler and Pinnock at Antoine's Restaurant in New Orleans, a meeting apparently mentioned in Pressler's book (which is listed but wrongly classified in the bibliography). But then Brackney immediately confuses this meeting with one at the Café Du Monde between Pressler and Paige Patterson (who is mentioned by name in the book only in an early chapter as the SBC President who appointed

the committee that formulated the 2000 revision to the *Baptist Faith and Message*). Brackney completely overlooked Ken Keathley's significant Southeastern Ph.D. dissertation on Pinnock, *An Examination of the Influence of Vatican II on Clark Pinnock's "Wider Hope" for the Unevangelized*. This is inexcusable since the bibliography includes many dissertations and even includes various 2-5 page journal articles: it is a very detailed and extensive bibliographical listing. But according to a comment on p. 390, Brackney apparently did not realize that Southeastern even had a Ph.D. program in theology.

In the Diaspora chapter, Brackney also discusses W. A. Criswell. (With over 20 years of close association with Criswell, I only faintly recognize the person in Brackney's description.) He also briefly covers Billy Graham (giving him less credit than he deserves) and Jerry Falwell (giving him more credit than he deserves).

There is also a chapter on Baptist confessions. Brackney gives a generally fair summary of the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (though on p. 57 he incorrectly seems to imply that the article on religious liberty was eliminated in favor of one on the family). He also includes a rather lengthy summary of something called a *Baptist Manifesto* that was formulated by moderate to liberal Southern Baptists who rejected the BF&M 2000. It would appear that he considers this *Manifesto* to be a significant document, but in my view it has been almost totally insignificant for several reasons, some of which Brackney himself identifies.

The chapter on Southern Baptists and their schools is the one on which I have the most factual perspective. Not wanting to appear self-serving, I really expected in a book with almost 1500 footnotes that *Baptists and the Bible* (a book I co-authored in 1980, revised and expanded in 1999) would at least have been mentioned somewhere. Moreover, I was a member (along with Brackney) of a Baptist World Alliance (BWA) team that engaged the Eastern Orthodox leadership in ecumenical dialog in two meetings (one in Istanbul and one in Oxford), and yet only James Leo Garrett and Dale Moody get any recognition for such interests (538, n. 11). Brackney is critical of a list of Baptist theologians for not participating in such ecumenical dialogues, but fails to mention that the BWA groups to which he refers were not open membership groups but were hand-picked by Denton Lotz. Brackney also fails to mention a long series of formal dialogues between Southern Baptist leaders and Roman Catholics in the late twentieth century.

In the chapter on Southern Baptists, however, Brackney surveys Mercer University (the influence of John Dagg), Furman University (James Mims), Southern Seminary (Boyce, Manly, Mullins, Ward, Rust, Garrett, and Dale Moody—surely incorrectly called the most significant Southern Baptist theologian of the latter half of the twentieth century), and Southwestern Seminary (Carroll, Goodspeed, W. T. Conner, and James Leo Garrett). Brackney claims a long list of theological influences on Conner, but Conner's major text-

books (the most widely read of any in Southern Baptist life until Erickson came along) receive no footnote recognition. Brackney says he is disappointed that Garrett in his massive theology textbooks so often ends up accepting a "predictable" position. To me, on the other hand, for a man of Garrett's vast scholarship to arrive at the same conclusion that Baptists have historically affirmed is rather a great encouragement.

On pages 428-29 Brackney bemoans what he perceives as a lack of Southern Baptist leadership in the world-wide family of Baptists or in evangelical Protestantism. I suppose he has forgotten our 6,000 internationally based missionaries (who are establishing Baptist churches), but I think it is more likely that he is simply unhappy with the SBC for giving up on the BWA (at least for now). More significantly, it seems that he probably has not looked at the list of Presidents of the Evangelical Philosophical Society and the Evangelical Theological Society over the last twenty-five years. I believe he would find a good number of Southern Baptists in leadership roles in these significant, non-denominational, national, professional, academic societies.

It is often easy to critique large comprehensive books like this one by pointing out details missed or matters omitted. I do not mean to leave the impression that this volume is flawed to such an extent that it should not be added to Baptist History collections. It is a valuable resource as far as it goes. I have always been impressed with Brackney's Baptist

commitments and with his immense command of Baptist information. This is a valuable resource, and Mercer Press should be commended for publishing this very important volume.

L. Russ Bush III
Southeastern Baptist
Theological Seminary

Paul and the Jews. By Andrew Das. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003, 256 pp., \$24.95 paper.

Through the developments in Pauline studies in the past three decades, Paul the Jew, his self-understanding, and his relationship to early Judaism and its Scriptures, have attracted much attention. The present volume is a fine survey of Paul's most important statements on his fellow Jews.

"In *Paul and the Jews: A New Starting Point*" (1-16) Das gathers all the seemingly negative statements of Paul on Jews and Judaism and juxtaposes all the positive statements in order to illustrate the issues of this monograph. He presents the history of research, including the so-called "new perspective on Paul," defines his position in relation to it, and previews his own study.

In Paul's reasoning, the gracious elements in Judaism were never efficacious for salvation by themselves and apart from the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Mosaic Law had never provided salvation in and of itself. Performance of its regulations involved empty human deeds, and nothing more, apart from the proper framework

of grace in Christ, Abraham's seed. Consequently, if the works required by the Mosaic Law were never the means to salvation, then the Law's own distinctions between Jew and Gentile would not be the basis for identifying those who have a place in the world to come (12).

In chapter two, "Crisis in Galatia: Salvation in Christ and the Mosaic Law," Das describes the situation in Galatia and the identity of the "they-group" that had infiltrated the churches. He outlines the heart of the conflict between Paul and his opponents—"Even as the Galatians have been justified apart from the works of the Law through faith in Christ . . . the subsequent Christian life in the Spirit is based on faith in Christ and not on the Mosaic Law" (33)—and Paul's interaction with them from an apocalyptic perspective. Discussion also includes Paul's critique of the Law and his rethinking of the concept of an elect covenant people.

The following two and a half chapters are devoted to Paul's programmatic letter to the Romans. Das sets out with a fascinating reconstruction of the situation in Rome—"how one reconstructs the situation of the letter would have profound implications for understanding Paul's relationship with the Jews and Judaism" (50)—including the tensions between law-observant and non-Law-observant members. This is followed by a description of the Claudius edict, expelling the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49, and the impact it had on the churches, both during the absence of Jewish Christians and when they returned following the

death of Claudius in A.D. 54. Das then gathers the evidence of the situation in the letter itself and discusses the question of whether the Roman Gentile Christians were still within Jewish synagogues (interacting with M. Nanos, who argues that the weak in Rom 14:1-14:13 are non-Christian Jews, and rightly offering a careful critique). The chapter closes with reflections on Rom 14:1-15:6 (the strong are the non-Law observant; the weak are the Law-observant Christians). Chapter three is a section-by-section study and summary of the argument of Romans 9-11 ("The Messiah and Israel's Elect in Romans") and includes discussions of the following: the election of Christians, the Jews as an elect people not benefiting from their election, God's impartiality and Israel's advantage, the scope of ethnic Israel (God's elect, or God's elect within Israel?), the stumbling of ethnic Israel over the Messianic stone, Paul's expected salvation of "all Israel" in Rom 11:26 (with a fine survey of the three major approaches taken in understanding the Pauline "mystery," including a balanced persuasive critique of the two covenant model), and, finally, Paul's vision for the fate of ethnic Israel. Das writes,

The most satisfactory understanding of 11:26 takes the verse as an anticipation of the day when all Israel will be saved. Once the full number of the Gentiles has entered into the ranks of believers in Christ, the Jewish people will come to faith in Christ en masse. The remnant of Israel that believes in Christ is a promise of what is to come. God has not abandoned

the Jewish people and will graft ethnic Israel back onto its own olive tree *before the end of the age* (11:23) (109, italics mine).

Chapter five is devoted to Israel's priority among the nations, covering the privileges of Israel in Romans 11:11-26, Israel as mediator of God's blessings in Galatians, and a sensitive treatment of Paul's much disputed censure of the Jewish people in 1 Thess 2:14-16 (including discussion of other passages of violent Jewish reactions to the early Christian movement). To me it is not clear why this passage is treated under this heading. It would have deserved a chapter of its own. In 1 Thessalonians 2 Paul is not making a general statement on Jews but referring to those Jews/Judeans who persecute the Jewish Christians of Judaea:

Paul further specifies the objects of wrath by censuring the Jews who had personally prevented him . . . from speaking the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles that they might be saved. . . . The apostle's harsh comments represent intra-Jewish polemic necessitated by a particular situation. Paul is simply responding to the resistance to his message and the persecution of his converts in the polemical language of the apocalypses, a language that tends towards exaggeration, vituperation, and starkness (189).

Das argues, "Such Jews did not realize that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of *all* people. Never did Paul condemn the Jewish people as a whole or leave them without hope in God's final plan" (189). While this is convincing for vv. 14 and 16, v. 15 with its reference to the murder of Jesus and

of the prophets seems to be more fundamental.

The final two chapters deal with aspects of the Mosaic Law, inseparable from the Jewish identity. In view of the heated discussion of this topic in the past two decades, any attempt to summarize it is a daunting task. According to Das, Paul the Jewish Christian, finds three things wrong with the Law: its requirement of perfect obedience, its ethnic exclusivity, and the idea that the Law can function as an enslaving power. Das further studies the various meanings of "Law" in Paul's use (155-65). Chapter seven examines the role of the Mosaic Law in the life of Christians.

In his "Reflections: Paul, the Apostle of Hope," Das summarises his findings, compares Paul with Hebrews and the letter of Barnabas, and relates them to the position taken in the Qumran literature. He also discusses the question, "Is it possible for moderns to affirm the Pauline emphasis on Christ without at the same time affirming the Christian confession's 'anti-Judaic left hand' for the majority of Jews who would disagree?" (194), with reference to the vastly different positions of G. Wasserberg (a radical Christian rejection of Paul and the Jews), D. Boyarin, and M. Rosen (the founder of *Jews for Jesus* ministries). This is welcome as today's "Messianic" Jews are rarely noted in academic discourse. Das concludes:

Although Paul ultimately held out hope for ethnic Israel, the christological focus of this hope will likely remain a stumbling block for Jewish readers. Whether or not the change

that took place in Paul's life is described as a conversion, it initiated a radical departure from his former worldview. He adopted the aberrant position that ethnic Israel would not benefit from God's election or promises apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Should a Jew or Gentile follow Paul in his spiritual journey, a similar conversion would be necessary. But such a convert dare not proceed beyond faith in Christ to a presumptuous dismissal of ethnic Israel's place in God's plan. The apostle would excoriate any who do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah *of Israel*. 'The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29) (196).

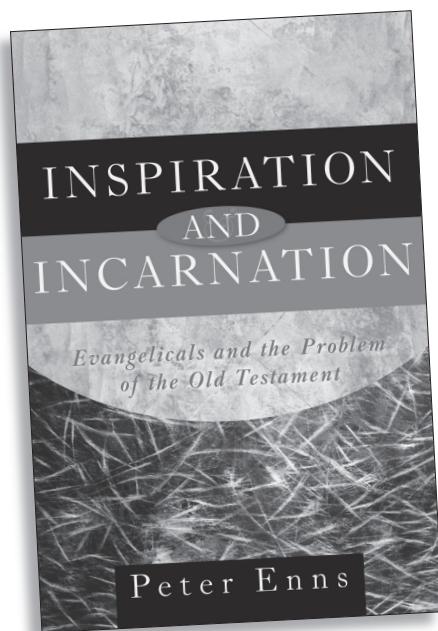
A selective bibliography (197-220) and indexes of modern authors, subjects, and ancient sources round off the volume. Das provides a solid and balanced introductory treatment of Paul and the Jews in Galatians, Romans, and 1 Thessalonians and a good survey of Paul's multifaceted relation to the Mosaic Law. Obviously there are issues I would disagree with. One disagreement concerns his interpretation of Rom 11:26 and argumentation that the envisioned conversion of Israel will not take place with the return of Christ from the heavens, but will take place within the present age through some kind of evangelizing activity. Das takes the prophecies quoted by Paul to refer to Christ's first coming. While 1 Cor 1:23 is once quoted without further treatment (103), 1 Cor 1:22 ("For Jews demand signs") does not occur at all. Philippians 3:1-11 could have been treated on its own rather than as individual verses appearing in several sections of the book.

In addition, Das limits his discus-

sion to the commonly recognized letters of Paul and does not include any of the disputed letters. In these letters it would be important for instance to look at Eph 2:11-3:13; 4:1-16 (other interesting references would be Col 1:26-29; 2:4-23; 3:11; 1Tim 4:1-5, and Titus 1:10-16). It would also be illuminating to compare the relationship of Paul and Judaism in *Luke's* portrayal of Paul in Luke-Acts. The Lukan Paul is also convinced of the priority of Israel among the nations. What do his statements in Acts 1:6f; 13:40-51; 18:5-8, and 28:25-28 imply for the future of ethnic Israel?

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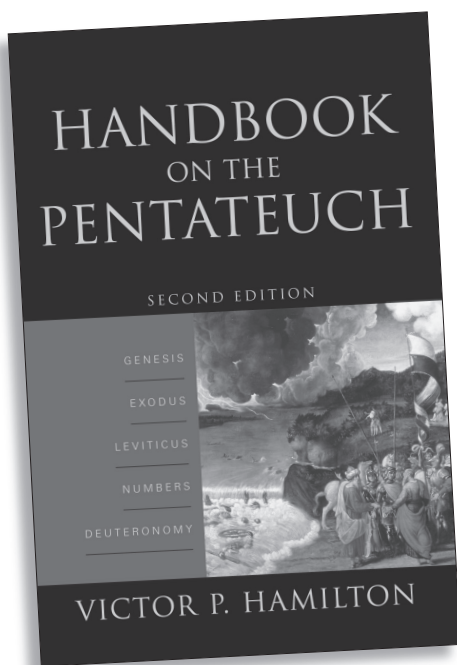
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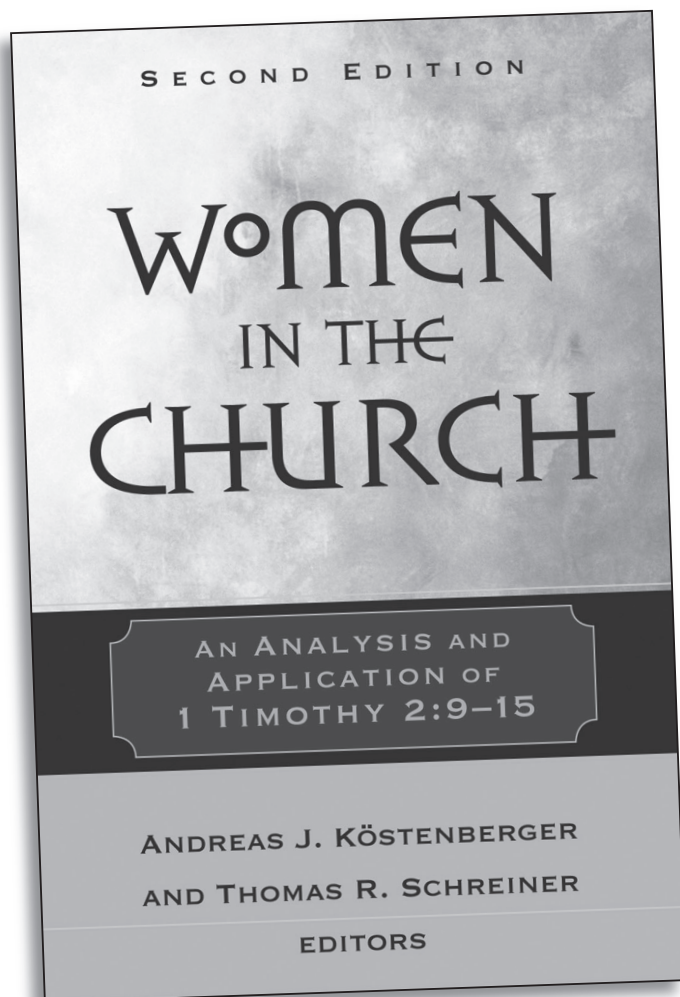
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