

Ezra and Nehemiah

by

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Ezra-Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are generally regarded as belonging to the second of the great histories of Israel in the Old Testament. The first, commonly called Deuteronomistic History (or D-History), includes the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. The second, commonly called the Chronicler's History (or C-History), includes the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, the Chronicles and Ezra were all written by Ezra.

While each of these two histories covers much of the same material (and some of it word for word), there are marked differences also. D-History falls in the second division of the Hebrew canon, the *Nebiim* (= prophets). C-History falls in the third division, the *Kethubim* (= writings). The prevailing theory is that these two histories were produced by two "schools," each school of which compiled and edited pre-existing material and each of which worked from a particular theological viewpoint. D-History begins with the conquest of Canaan, details the period of the judges, and records the history of the monarchy. C-History, while it begins with Adam in a genealogical table, really does not offer any narrative history until the ascension of David. While D-History concludes with the exile of Judah (and was presumably written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem), C-History, written after the exile, carries its history to the rebuilding of the temple and the reconstruction of Jerusalem (and was written after the second temple was constructed). While the D-Historian wrote of both the northern and southern nations of Israel and Judah, the C-Historian wrote only of Judah.¹

Whether or not one agrees with the theories behind the so-called D-History and C-History, the fact remains that there are significant conceptual links between the record in Chronicles and the record in Ezra-Nehemiah. On the one hand, vocabulary, syntax, use of prepositions, and style of quoting the Torah in both Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah lend themselves to a theory of common authorship. On the other hand, there are enough differences to convince some scholars that the works do not have a common origin. Still, whether they have a common literary origin or not (an issue we won't attempt to solve here), it is still to be recognized that they have a common theological concern with an emphasis on Jerusalem, temple worship, the Torah and theocracy.

One Book or Two

In the Hebrew Bible, the works of Ezra and Nehemiah are a single

¹For one widely recognized treatment of the C-History theory from a literary-critical point of view, see M. Noth, *The Chronicler's History*, trans. H. Williamson (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987).

document, hence the two titles are often hyphenated. Their formal separation was a relatively late development. They were divided by Christians as early as the time of Origen (185?-245?). In Jerome's Latin Vulgate (5th century), they were titled 1 and 2 Esdras. They were not divided in Jewish tradition until the 15th century, and Josephus considered them to be a single book.² The two works appear as a single book in the Septuagint under the title *Esdras B*, which distinguishes them from *Esdras A*, the latter being part of the Jewish Apocrypha and canonical for Eastern Orthodox Christians. However, the idea that the two sections were composed by different authors is quite old, even in Jewish thought. In the Talmud, Ezra was described as the author of the book bearing his name while Nehemiah was described as the author of the book bearing his name.³

In the end, then, the relationship between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is still debated. Modern scholars usually connect both books with 1 and 2 Chronicles and conclude that if they were not all written by the same author, they all belong to the same school of thought. Jewish tradition has tended to keep them together until relatively recently, even though Jewish scholars concede that they may have had different authors. Christians, for their part, divided them long ago. E. J. Young is probably correct in saying that inasmuch as the list of returned exiles in Ezra 2 is repeated in Nehemiah 7:6-70, it is unlikely that the two books were composed as a single work.⁴ Here, then, we will assume that the two books are distinct, though they maintain very close ties with each other and with 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Languages

As is well-known, the bulk of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but there are two sections, both relating to the Persian period, which were written in Aramaic. They are in the books of Daniel and Ezra, the latter of which comprises 4:7--6:18 and 7:12-26. The reason why these sections are in Aramaic is not difficult to discover, since they are largely official correspondences between provincial officials and the Persian government as well as between the Persian government and the returned exiles. Aramaic, the language of Aram in Syria, had become the *lingua franca* of merchants much earlier, and by the Persian period it had become the official language of trade and diplomacy. Even as early as the Assyrians and Babylonians, Aramaic "dockets" were attached to state cuneiform tablets, since more people could read Aramaic than cuneiform. In the Persian Empire, Aramaic flourished as the official language. Thus, the biblical use of

²*Against Apion*, I.8. Since Josephus recognizes the number of books in the Hebrew canon as twenty-two, he must assume the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah.

³Baba Bathra, 15a.

⁴E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 378.

Aramaic in Ezra is for official correspondence.⁵

The Ezra-Nehemiah Chronology

Several leaders figured in the movement to restore Jerusalem and its temple, namely, Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra and Nehemiah. One of the most controversial problems is the chronology of the careers of Ezra and Nehemiah. A straightforward reading of the two books suggests that Ezra came first and Nehemiah joined him later, but this traditional opinion has been reexamined by critical scholars. The primary objection to the traditional view is the observation that if Ezra's reforms were earlier and Nehemiah's later, then Ezra's reforms were largely a failure, since Nehemiah had to repeat them. Given that Judaism was so thoroughly shaped by Ezra's ministry, this conclusion seemed incredible. Indeed, Jewish tradition uniformly credits Ezra as the "father" of Judaism. Almost as important an objection is the apparently lengthy gap between the time of Ezra's arrival (Ezra 7) and his reading of the Torah (Ne. 8). If Ezra arrived in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:8) but did not publicly read the Torah until the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Ne. 2:1; 8:1), why did he wait so long before beginning his teaching office? Other smaller objections have been raised, and when combined they lead to the hypothesis that Nehemiah came first. His reforms, though important in their own way, were arbitrary and volcanic, but when Ezra came later, armed with a copy of the Torah and authority from Artaxerxes I to enforce it, his reforms were more permanent.⁶ Generally, critical scholars agree that the coming of Ezra and the reading of the Torah should be connected rather than separated by a long gap of more than a dozen years. If this reconstruction is accepted, then the chronology of the period must allow the book of Nehemiah to be sandwiched somewhere in the middle of Ezra (i.e., between chapters 6 and 7, for instance).

Against this reconstruction is the plain reading of the text. The canonical order of events certainly puts Ezra before Nehemiah, and there is no material evidence or textual evidence that any portions of the books were dislocated. The dates for Nehemiah's ministry seem solid enough, since they are corroborated by the Elephantine papyri.⁷ But when did Ezra come? More conservative scholars

⁵W. LaSor, *ISBE* (1979) I.229ff.

⁶For a readable discussion of the chronological issue and the objections to the traditional viewpoint, see J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 392-403.

⁷The Elephantine papyri are a collection of 5th century B.C. documents recovered from an island in the Nile River. The colony, known as Elephantine (i.e., "elephant location"), marked the extreme southern location of ancient Egypt and originated as a Jewish military settlement. Written in Aramaic, the papyri include letters written to the Persian governor of Judea, cf. R. K. Harrison, *ISBE* (1982) II.59-61. In these letters, Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, is mentioned as a contemporary of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.). Since Nehemiah's mission to Jerusalem commenced

argue that Nehemiah's reforms, in fact, do not suggest failure on Ezra's part, but merely the aftermath of Ezra's thoroughgoing reform movement, which in any case would leave its share of naysayers and obstinates. As to the thirteen year gap between Ezra's arrival and the reading of the Torah, there is no reason to assume that the public reading of Torah in Ne. 8 was the first time Ezra had addressed the subject of the law. In fact, according to Ezra 9:1ff., upon his arrival in Jerusalem Ezra almost immediately began the work of reform. The public reading of the Torah was the climax of his work, not its beginning.⁸

Authorship

While the entire Book of Ezra does not claim to have been composed by a single writer, there are substantial sections that appear in the first person (cf. 7:27--9:15). In Nehemiah, there is even more first person material (chapters 1-7 and 12:27--13:31). Evangelicals accept the historicity and integrity of the Bible and cannot ignore such plain statements in the text. At the same time, the portions in which both Ezra and Nehemiah are referred to in the third person may show the hand of a compiler, possibly even the same hand who compiled the Chronicles record. The personal memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah should be left intact.⁹

The Exile and the Promise of Restoration

The first threat of the exile is to be found in the Torah before the Israelites ever arrived in the land of promise. A constituent part of the Mosaic covenant was that covenant-breaking carried a severe penalty, and if not corrected in time, would ultimately result in the loss of the land (Lv. 26:14-16a, 32-35, 38-39, 42-43; Dt. 28:15, 36-42, 49-52, 63-68; 29:22-28). Of course, this threat is what the prophets preached repeatedly, and in the end, God was faithful to his covenant word: he sent the people of Israel and Judah into exile, just as he had promised (2 Kg. 17:1-23; 25:1-21; 2 Chr. 36:15-21).

However, the same covenant that threatened the loss of the land also promised a restoration (Lv. 26:40-46; Dt. 30:1-10), and the prophets who predicted that the Israelites would lose their land also predicted that God would restore the land to them (Am. 9:13-15; Ho. 1:10-11; 2:21-23; 11:10-11; Is. 10:20-22; 11:11-

in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Ne. 1:1; 2:1), and his leave was in the thirty-second year of the same king (Ne.13:6), this must have been 445 and 432 respectively.

⁸For a more thorough discussion of this conservative response to the literary-critical theory, see D. Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) 146-158 and J. Wright, *Date of Ezra's Coming to Jerusalem* (1947 rpt. London: Tyndale, 1958).

⁹See the discussions in C. Armerding, *ISBE* (1982) II.264-265 and C. Armerding and R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1986) III.515.

12, 16; Mi. 2:12-13; 4:6-8; 7:8-11; Zep. 3:20; Je. 30:1-3; 31:16-17, 21-25; 33:7, 10-26; 50:18-19; Eze. 11:16-17; 20:34-38, 41-42; 34:11-16; 36:24, 28, 33-38; 37:12-14, 20-21; 39:25-29). Jeremiah, in particular, specified that the exile would last 70 years (Je. 25:8-11; 29:10). In one of his later oracles composed in Babylon, Ezekiel predicted that in a short time the exiles would be allowed to return home (Eze. 36:8-12). The Book of Isaiah, also, predicted that after a time the "hard service" of exile would be completed and God would build a highway in the desert for these exiles (Is. 40:1-5).¹⁰ Isaiah even named in advance the Persian ruler who would serve God's purpose in issuing an edict of repatriation so the Jews could return to their homeland (Is. 41:2b-4, 25; 44:28; 45:1, 4, 13). Daniel, who had lived in Babylon most of his life, calculated that with the defeat of Babylon and the rise of Persia, the seventy years predicted by Jeremiah were nearly at an end (Da. 9:1-3). The Chronicles' record ends with the decree of Cyrus, in fulfillment to the prophecy of Jeremiah (2 Chr. 36:22-23), and the Ezra record begins with it (Ezra 1:1-4).

Purpose

Ezra-Nehemiah completes the history begun in 1 and 2 Chronicles, detailing the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, their efforts to build a second temple, the return to temple worship, the renewal of the covenant, and their reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. It is a theological restoration more than a political restoration that is in view. The center for the nation would no longer be the monarchy but the temple and the Torah.

Structure

The Book of Ezra

The Return of Exiles with Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (1-2)

The Restoration of Worship and the Building of the Second Temple (3-6)

The Return of Exiles with Ezra (7-10)

The Book of Nehemiah

The Restoration of Jerusalem's Walls (1-7)

The Reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (8-13)

¹⁰Amazingly, the Persians did indeed build a highway through the desert, the Royal Road which extended some 1600 miles from Susa near the Persian Gulf to Sardis near the western coast of Asia Minor. This highway was so well maintained that by traveling day and night imperial messengers could traverse its length in less than a week, cf. E. Burns, eds. et al., *World Civilizations*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982) I.67.

The Book of Ezra

The significance of the temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem can hardly be exaggerated. Until the time of David, the temporary nature of the tribal league was symbolized by the continued use of the tent of meeting. This center of worship had been constructed at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Ex. 26, 35-40), but as with all tents, it was made to be moved. It traveled with the Israelites in the desert sojourn, it was taken across the Jordan during the conquest, and it was pitched at Shiloh where it remained until the time of Samuel. During all this time, the conquest of Canaan was incomplete. However, the ideal was set forth in the Torah that at such time as the conquest was complete, a permanent place of worship was to be chosen (Dt. 12). It is from this ideal that David determined to build a permanent sanctuary and set in motion the plans for its construction.

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and burned the first temple, he gave physical expression to what Ezekiel saw in visionary terms. The Spirit of Yahweh abandoned his temple (Eze. 10). However, Ezekiel also envisioned that a new temple, a new city and a new commonwealth would be constructed (Eze. 40-48). The Spirit of God which had abandoned the first temple would return (Eze. 43:1-5). The ideal of the temple, even though marred by Israel's covenant violations and the judgment of exile, was not to be forgotten. Instead, as Ezekiel predicted, God ordained that the new temple would be "the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever" (Eze. 43:7). The prediction of a new temple was recorded by Ezekiel precisely so that a future generation might "be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations" (Eze. 43:11-12). Since during his prophetic ministry Ezekiel was well-known among the exiles in Babylon, it is hardly to be doubted that those who prepared to return to Judea believed their mission had a spiritual mandate. It seems almost certain that this perceived mandate was the deepest motivation behind the journey of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. Thus, the Book of Ezra begins with a list of those in the first returning party, "...everyone whose heart God had moved...to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem" (1:5b). To be sure, the second temple was not exactly what Ezekiel envisioned, but in a sense that fact is beside the point. Ezekiel's vision must surely have provided a stimulus for the effort, even if the final result did not entirely match the ideal.

The Return of Exiles with Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (1-2)

The legal permission for the Jews to return to Judea came with the change in empires from Babylon to Persia. While Nabonidus, the Babylonian emperor, was conducting military campaigns in Arabia, and his son, Belshazzar, was serving as regent in the capital,¹¹ Cyrus the Great and the Persians were annexing Babylonian cities. Babylon itself was seized on October 12, 539 B.C., and Cyrus was welcomed into the city as a liberator.¹² In his first regnal year after the conquest, Cyrus issued an edict of repatriation allowing displaced peoples in his regime to return to their homelands. This generosity on the part of Cyrus was a marked change from the expatriation policies of the Assyrian and Babylonian emperors who had preceded him. It was a form of enlightened self-interest which aimed at producing more loyalty among the Persian subjects. The edict was a direct fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction in a letter to the exiles that they would be allowed to return (1:1; cf. Je. 25:12-13; 29:10-14; 32:13-15, 42-44), and incidentally, a direct fulfillment of the prediction in Isaiah, where Cyrus was specifically named as the liberator (Is. 45:1, 13).¹³

The edict of repatriation appears in Ezra in two forms. The form given in Hebrew (1:2-4) is the Jewish version heralded in their communities. The form given later in Aramaic (6:3-5) is the official statement as recorded for the Persian archives.¹⁴ The reader should not make too much of a polytheistic monarch like Cyrus speaking of "Yahweh, the God of heaven" (1:2). His words were probably put in the form of acceptable religious protocol, but we know from the Cyrus Cylinder that Cyrus favored not only the Jews, but other subjects as well, for "...the gods...he returned to their sacred cities," and these included other patron deities of conquered nations, including Nebo, Bel and Marbiti.¹⁵

Along with permission to return, Cyrus consigned to the Jews the temple vessels which had been plundered by Nebuchadnezzar years earlier (1:7-11; 2 Kg. 25:13-15//2 Chr. 36:18) and desecrated by Belshazzar (Da. 5:2-4). As had once happened in Egypt, when the exiles left on this, their second exodus, they were assisted by all sorts of gifts from the natives of Babylon (1:6; cf. Ex. 11:2-3; 12:35-36).

¹¹For the historical data regarding Nabonidus and Belshazzar, see A. Millard, "Daniel and Belshazzar in History," *BAR* (May/June 1985) 73-78.

¹²An ancient record of this conquest can be found on the cuneiform Cyrus Cylinder, currently housed in the British Museum, cf. J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) I.203-204.

¹³ In fact, Josephus even speculates that Cyrus was shown the scroll of Isaiah which named him as the liberator, cf. *Antiquities*, XI.1

¹⁴ J. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 5, 50.

¹⁵ So reads the Cyrus Cylinder, cf. Pritchard, 204.

Two issues of a critical nature should be mentioned here. First, the number of temple vessels listed in the inventory add up to only 2,499, but the text cites the number as 5,400. The reason for this discrepancy is not clear, but it may lay in the possibility that the itemized vessels are only the larger or more valuable ones¹⁶ or the possibility of a corruption in textual transmission.¹⁷ On the other hand, 1 Esdras¹⁸ in the Jewish Apocrypha offers a self-consistent itemization with a total of 5,469 (1 Esdras 2:13-14), and these figures are followed in some translations of Ezra (so RSV). Where the error lies, it is impossible to determine.

The other issue concerns Sheshbazzar who is introduced as the leader of the returning party (1:8, 11). When the actual list of returning exiles is offered in chapter 2, his name is missing, and the leader in the succeeding chapters is obviously Zerubbabel (2:2; 3:2, 8; 4:2-3; 5:2). This abrupt disappearance of Sheshbazzar's name in the narrative is puzzling. Both Haggai and Zechariah agree that Zerubbabel is the leader of the returning exiles. Sheshbazzar is only named twice more and then as a memory, not a functional part of the rebuilding narrative (5:14, 16). The two options for reconciling this conflict are 1) Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are the same person with two names, one Babylonian and one Jewish,¹⁹ or 2) they are different persons, and Sheshbazzar quickly passes from the scene, probably by death or departure. In support of the first option is that the two are never named side by side, both are titled "governor" (5:14; Hg. 1:1), and both are credited with laying the foundation of the temple (3:8-13; 5:16; Zec. 4:9). However, the Jewish tradition in 1 Esdras clearly distinguishes between them, since Sheshbazzar is described as the leader of the returning group (1 Esdras 2:11-15) and Zerubbabel is described as coming later (1 Esdras 4:13, 42-63). Also supporting the view that they should be treated separately is the fact that Sheshbazzar is commissioned by Cyrus (1:8, 11), while Zerubbabel works under the commission of Darius (4:4-5; cf. Hg. 1:1, 13-15; 2:10; Zec. 1:1, 7, 14-17). If the Shenazzar of 1 Chronicles 3:18 is the same as Sheshbazzar, as some scholars think, then Zerubbabel would be his nephew (1 Chr. 3:19).²⁰ Most scholars agree that the two should be treated as separate, but the exact relationship between the two remains unclear. Whether they came to Jerusalem at the same time,

¹⁶ E. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) IV.604.

¹⁷ F. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 46-47.

¹⁸ 1 Esdras in the Apocrypha offers an independent account of several events which are also part of the history in 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. It appeared in the LXX as Esdras A, in the Vulgate as 3 Esdras, and in early English versions (such as the KJV) as 1 Esdras. 1 Esdras is canonical only in Eastern Orthodoxy.

¹⁹ This reasoning is faulty, however, since linguistics indicate that both names are Babylonian.

²⁰ R. Pratt, Jr., *ISBE* (1988) IV.475. Both the names Sheshbazzar and Shenazzar go back to a Babylonian form Sin-ab-usur, cf. S. Short, "Ezra," *IBC*, ed. F. Bruce (1986) 490.

Sheshbazzar as the official leader and Zerubbabel as the unofficial leader, or whether they came at two different times, is debated. F. F. Bruce suggests that Sheshbazzar returned to Persia when he felt his commission had been fulfilled.²¹

The Ezra register of exiles who returned to Judea and Jerusalem includes eleven leaders of whom Zerubbabel and Joshua are the ones clearly identifiable (2:1-2). Apparently, the original group of leaders included twelve names, since the parallel register in Nehemiah 7:7 also names Nahamani (so also 1 Esdras 5:8). The number twelve, the traditional number of the clans of Jacob, would have provided symbolic meaning to the returning group as a new nucleus of the people of Israel who maintained continuity with the past. Other than Zerubbabel and Joshua, only two names are familiar, Nehemiah and Mordecai, but since all the names on the list seem to be common Jewish, Babylonian and Persian names, it is unlikely that they refer to either Nehemiah the governor, who would come many years later, or Esther's uncle, who stayed in Persia.²²

The full register consisted of those who had clear status in the community of Jewish exiles and those who did not. A pure community was of critical importance to the returning exiles, for the community had more significance than the individual. So, the task at hand was to keep out any who did not qualify as well as to include all who belonged. Those with clear status included the ones with firm genealogical pedigrees (2:3-20), clear ancestral roots in an Israelite town (2:21-35), or clear connection with the first temple as priests (2:36-39), Levites (2:40), singers (2:41), gatekeepers (2:42), and temple servants (2:43-58). Those whose status was unclear included those with unsubstantiated claims of genealogy (2:59-60) or unprovable claims of priesthood (2:61-63). These claimants were not excluded, but their full acceptance was postponed until a final decision could be made using the Urim and Thummim.²³

When the Ezra list is compared with the Nehemiah list (Ne. 7:8-65), many

²¹F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 101.

²² Some scholars have speculated that this list may have been composed long after the fact and was a composite of the various leaders who came at different times. As such, they suggest that the Nehemiah was indeed Nehemiah the governor, while Seraiah was Ezra and Bigvai was the man of that name mentioned in Ne. 10:16, cf. R. Bowman, *IB* (1954) III.576-577. However, the text of Ezra seems to indicate that the leaders who were listed all came in the first wave of returning exiles.

²³ Urim and Thummim were the ancient priestly implements stored in the breastpiece of the high priest (Ex. 28:30; Lv. 8:8) and used to inquire about God's will at critical junctures (Nu. 27:21; Jg. 1:1; 20:18, 23, 27-28; 1 Sa. 10:22; 14:37; 22:10, 15; 23:2, 4, 9-12; 28:6; 30:7-8; 2 Sa. 2:1; 5:19, 23-24). Though there has been considerable speculation, the exact nature of these implements and their use is unknown. In Jewish tradition, they were believed to produce flashing light to provide revelation, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, III.8.9. Many scholars, due to the LXX version of 1 Sa. 14:41 which indicates that the "answers" might be unclear, have speculated that they may have been implements for casting lots. In the end, however, their nature and use is still unknown, cf. C. Van Dam, *ISBE* (1988) IV.957-958.

numerical discrepancies are apparent, probably due to incorrect scribal transmissions.²⁴ In all, about 50,000 people made the trek back to Palestine (2:64-67). The rather large number of slaves ("servants," NIV), a ratio of about six to one, indicates that many if not most of the returning families had become reasonably well-to-do during their Babylonian exile. It is likely that these wealthy families contributed substantially toward the gifts and offerings for rebuilding the temple (2:68-69). All these people reached Jerusalem and its environs and began to rebuild their lives in the homeland. If Psalm 126 bears upon their vision for the future, they returned with high hopes indeed!

The Restoration of Worship and the Building of the Second Temple (3-6)

It is helpful to have some concept of the Jewish calendar and seasons when examining the chronology of the biblical data.

Jewish Months	English Months	Seasons	Festivals
<i>Nisan</i>	<i>March-April</i>	<i>Flax harvest</i> <i>Spring rains</i> <i>Barley harvest</i>	<i>Passover</i> <i>Unleavened Bread</i> <i>Firstfruits</i>
<i>Iyyar</i>	<i>April-May</i>	<i>Dry season begins</i>	
<i>Sivan</i>	<i>May-June</i>	<i>Early figs ripen</i>	<i>Weeks (Pentecost)</i>
<i>Tammuz</i>	<i>June-July</i>	<i>Grape harvest</i>	
<i>Ab</i>	<i>July-August</i>	<i>Early olive harvest</i> <i>Summer wheat</i>	
<i>Elul</i>	<i>August-September</i>	<i>Dates</i> <i>Summer figs</i>	
<i>Tishri</i>	<i>September-October</i>	<i>First rains</i>	<i>Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah)</i> <i>Yom Kippur (Atonement)</i> <i>Booths (Tabernacles)</i>
<i>Marchesvan</i>	<i>October-November</i>	<i>Late olive harvest</i> <i>Winter figs</i> <i>Plowing</i>	
<i>Chislev</i>	<i>November-December</i>	<i>Sowing</i>	<i>Dedication (Hanukkah)</i>

²⁴ For a more thorough treatment of discrepancies in names and numbers, see G. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 229-230.

<i>Tebeth</i>	<i>December-January</i>	<i>Rains and snow</i>
<i>Shebat</i>	<i>January-Februar</i>	<i>Almond blossom</i>
<i>Adar</i>	<i>February-March</i>	<i>Citrus harvest</i>

Building the Great Altar and Laying the New Foundation (3:1-13)

The restoration of the temple and its worship was the primary task of the Jews who moved from Babylon to Jerusalem. Long before, when preparations were underway for the first temple to be built, David had purchased a site and erected an altar (2 Sa. 24:18-25//2 Chr. 21:18-26). The site for the temple was firmly fixed, but the exiles, like David, began their work by building the great altar. At this altar, their continuity with the past would be reestablished (cf. Ex. 29:38-46).

The leaders in this building project were clearly Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel and Joshua ben Jozadak (3:2). Sheshbazzar would not be mentioned again except in retrospect (cf. 5:14, 16). The timing of the altar's construction coincided with the annual festivals of the seventh month (3:1), which included the ritual blowing of trumpets (Lv. 23:24-25; Nu. 29:1-6),²⁵ *Yom Kippur* (Ex. 30:9-10; Lv. 16; 23:26-32; Nu. 29:7-11) and the feast of booths (Lv. 23:33-36; Nu. 29:12-40; Dt. 16:13-15; Ex. 23:16b). Obviously, the full ritual of *Yom Kippur* was not possible without a temple, but other aspects of the festivals could at least commence with the construction of the great altar. So, in spite of their uneasiness concerning neighboring peoples who might not understand or who might even be hostile (cf. 1 Esdras 5:50), they built the altar on the site of the old one and began the morning and evening sacrifices (3:3). For each day of the festival of booths, they offered the required sacrifices (3:4), establishing a precedent that would continue into the future (3:5-6).

Soon, materials began to be stockpiled for building the temple itself. Logs from Lebanon were floated to Joppa and dragged overland to Jerusalem (3:7). Appropriate construction supervisors were appointed (3:8-9), and the foundation

²⁵ From the second temple period, archaeologists have discovered in the excavated rubble an inscription which once graced the southwest cornice of the temple mount. It reads, "To the place of the trumpeting...", B. Mazar, "Excavations Near Temple Mount Reveal Splendors of Herodian Jerusalem," *BAR* (Jul.-Aug. 1980) 55. While this inscription is not nearly so old as the time of Zerubbabel, it still demonstrates the importance of the trumpet ritual to the descendants of the post-exilic community. Originally, the Jewish year began on the anniversary of the exodus from Egypt (cf. Ex. 12:1-2). As such, the New Year was in the Spring. In later Judaism, *Rosh ha-Shanah* (= head of the year) was celebrated in the fall on the Day of Trumpets. This anomaly has no clear explanation, but it has been suggested that Israel celebrated two New Year's days, one before the exile and the other after, cf. D. Block, *ISBE* (1986) III.529-532; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 502-506.

was laid. At its completion, a grand celebration was staged with the vested priests, trumpeters, choirs, and orchestra, just as David had prescribed for the first temple (3:10-11; 1 Chr. 16, 23-26; 2 Chr. 5:13). The choirs and the people sang the liturgy, praising Yahweh in antiphonal psalm (possibly Psalm 136).²⁶ It was a deeply emotional event, and the mixing of shouts of joy and cries of disappointment was heard far away (3:12-13). The joy was quite to be expected, but the moment also was bittersweet for the few who could remember the first temple in its grandeur. A repaired foundation would never replace the temple that Solomon built and that stood for four centuries before the Babylonians burned it down.

Opposition to the Temple Project (4:1-24)

Chapter 4 is a summary of the opposition which the Jews faced for several decades. Though they had an imperial edict authorizing their work, the project was plagued with hindrances almost from the start. In the first place, they were approached by some locals who offered to help. At first glance, this might seem to have been a generous overture, but there was more at stake than just finding enough workers. In the first place, these locals were a religiously and ethnically mixed group who were descended from some northern Israelites left in the land and some pagan colonists brought in by the Assyrians. Intermarriage and religious syncretism resulted in the worship of Yahweh, but only as one deity among the whole pantheon of their own ancestral deities (2 Kg. 17:24-41). To be sure, they claimed to worship Yahweh as did the returned exiles (4:1-2), but as the record in 2 Kings states, "They worshipped Yahweh, but they also served their own gods..." (2 Kg. 17:33). This was hardly the sort of help Zerubbabel and Joshua needed to rebuild a community of faithful followers of the Torah. So, the leaders of the exiles turned down the offer abruptly (4:3). The locals responded by harassing the Jews through discouragement, intimidation and threats (4:4). They even hired professionals to assist them in hindering the temple project. This antagonism continued for sixteen years and effectively stymied the work throughout the reigns of the Persian rulers Cyrus, Cambyses and Darius (4:5), that is, from 536 B.C. to 520 B.C.²⁷

Now follows a long parenthesis in which the author will summarize a whole series of oppositions before returning to his description of the temple

²⁶ The Hebrew text reads, "And when [it was time] to praise, they answered..." While the NIV simply says "they sang," the RSV better captures the verb *'anah* (= to answer) by the translation, "They sang responsively."

²⁷ Cyrus' edict of repatriation was in 539 B.C., and the trek back was completed in 538 B.C. The foundation and temple work commenced in the second year after the return (3:8), or 536 B.C. The reigns of the Persian kings are as follows: Cyrus the Great (550-529 B.C.), Cambyses (529-523 B.C.), and Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.). In the end, the work was stopped until the second year of Darius the Great, that is, 520 B.C. (4:24).

reconstruction. This parenthesis takes the reader far beyond the temple project and on into the reconstruction of Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest that the whole section of 4:6-23 should be punctuated with brackets to better indicate its parenthetical character.²⁸ The account of the temple reconstruction will not resume until 4:24.

During the reign of Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.),²⁹ after the temple was completed, there was some sort of accusation leveled against the Jews (4:6). No further details are known of this incident. Later still, in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.), a formal complaint from local Persian officials was sent to the Persian capital warning that Jerusalem had a long history of rebellion, and if the city was allowed to be refortified, that rebellion would spawn a general loss of all the Trans-Euphrates³⁰ to the Persian Empire (4:7-16).³¹ No doubt, the archival search revealed some of the vacillations of Judah's final kings when they repeatedly wavered between their loyalties to Assyria, Egypt and Babylon. Artaxerxes I could hardly ignore such a threat outlined by his own officials, so he sent a stop order to halt any rebuilding of the city (4:17-22).³² The local officials were quick to enforce the stop order (4:23), and if the opening of the Book of Nehemiah reflects their action, they broke down any new construction and burned the reconstructed gates (Neh. 1:3). The reconstruction of the city would not be resumed until the coming of Nehemiah.

With the long parenthesis complete, the author now returns to the description of the temple project which he left in 4:6. The long hiatus during which the temple reconstruction was abandoned lasted until the second year of Darius the Great, that is, 520 B.C. (4:24).

The Temple Project is Renewed, and the Temple is Completed (5:1--6:22)

The sixteen year hiatus was brutal for the returned exiles. They combated a series of droughts and crop failures which in turn produced economic hardship (cf. Hg. 1:6, 9-11; 2:15-17, 19). It was indeed a "day of small things" (Zec. 4:10). It is not surprising that the people eventually were ready to give up altogether (Hg. 1:2).

²⁸ Kidner, 48, 50, 53; D. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 82.

²⁹ Ahasuerus, the name in the Hebrew text, is the same as Xerxes I, the son of Darius the Great, cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1979) I.76. Ahasuerus is a Hebrew transliteration of the old Persian name *Xsayarsa*, who was the son of Darius, cf. Yamauchi, 628.

³⁰ The Trans-Euphrates refers to the area west and south of the Euphrates River. The primary holdings in the Persian Empire was the area to the east and north of the Euphrates.

³¹ Verse 4:7, of course, begins a long section in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, since it reports the complaint in the language of its composition.

³² The phrase "until I so order" in 4:21 became critically important when Nehemiah sought to reverse this stop order (cf. Neh. 2).

In the midst of this malaise, the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah spurred them on to renew the work in 520 B.C. (Hg. 1:1; 2:10; Zec. 1:1, 7).

The book of Ezra provides only the barest description of the ministries of the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1-2). Fortunately, among the scrolls of the prophets we also have their actual oracles. Haggai chided the people for spending more time on their own homes than on the temple project (Hg. 1:4, 9). He encouraged them by promising that God's glory would surely return to his temple on Mt. Zion (Hg. 2:7). To those who thought the new temple could never be as wonderful as the old, Haggai predicted that the glory of the second temple would be greater than that of the first one (Hg. 2:9). Zechariah, Haggai's contemporary, announced that God was eager for the reconstruction of Zion and Jerusalem, and he was angry at the surrounding nations who had opposed them (Zec. 1:14-15). In the future, God promised prosperity to the towns of Judah and mercy to those who would rebuild his house (Zec. 1:16-17). Surely God's people could not remain unconcerned about something which had aroused the very passion of God (Zec. 8:2)! There might be opposition to the work (Zec. 3:1), but God would intervene (Zec. 3:2ff.). The project would be a success, because the Spirit of God would empower Zerubbabel (Zec. 4:6-7). He had laid the foundation, and he would complete the work (Zec. 4:8; 6:12-15)! The future was bright with promise (Zec. 8:3-8, 11-23), so the people should enter into the reconstruction with their whole hearts (Zec. 8:9).

With the renewal of the temple project, the local officials and "inspectors" (so NEB)³³ immediately descended upon the builders to question their authorization (5:3-4). However, construction was not halted until a review of the archival permits could be arranged (5:5). Consequently, letters of inquiry were composed by the Trans-Euphrates governor to Darius the Great rehearsing the explanation of the Jewish leaders and calling for an archival search for Cyrus' decree composed some sixteen years earlier (5:6-17).³⁴ The search was duly conducted, first at Babylon and then at Ecbatana, Media (6:1-2). Cyrus had stayed in Ecbatana during his first year as the ruler of Babylon, and it was there that they discovered the edict, which not only gave authorization for the building, but also stated its size

³³ The precise meaning of this Aramaic title is unknown, but it probably refers to some kind of official, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 398.

³⁴ The laying of the foundation is credited to Sheshbazzar in 5:16, but it is credited to Zerubbabel in 3:8-13 and Zec. 4:9. As indicated in the introduction, this passage probably means either that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are the same person (a minority opinion), or that Sheshbazzar was given formal credit while Zerubbabel was the actual construction manager (the majority opinion). Too, some suggest that perhaps Sheshbazzar's efforts sixteen years earlier were so minimal that Zerubbabel was compelled to lay the foundation again, cf. Yamauchi, 639. In any case, the mention of Sheshbazzar by name was essential, since in an archival search, it would be his name that was listed as the leader of the returning group under Cyrus (cf. 1:8).

and the directive for state funding (6:3-5).³⁵ Consequently, Darius not only forbade the Trans-Euphrates officials from interfering with the work (6:6-7), he also ordered them to pay the construction expenses as well as provide daily sacrificial animals and offerings (6:8-10). To seal the order, Darius specified capital judgment upon anyone who dared hinder the project (6:11-12)! Darius' order must have been a rude shock to the Trans-Euphrates officials who had set out to stymie the Jews' efforts!

There was nothing for the Trans-Euphrates officials to do but cooperate, and they did so with alacrity (6:13). Between the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah, and the support of the Persian government, the work progressed steadily until the temple was complete in 516 B.C. (6:14-15).³⁶ The second temple was dedicated, and the priests were installed in their offices for service (6:16-18). It had been exactly 70 years (586 B.C. to 516 B.C.) between the destruction of the first temple and the completion of the second one, just the length of time specified by Jeremiah for the exile (Je. 25:12-13; 29:10-14; cf. Ezra 1:1; 2 Chr. 36:22).³⁷ The twelve sacrifices, one for each of the original tribes, demonstrates that this group still strove to maintain continuity with their covenant history, even though the northern nation was gone forever.

Since the completion of the temple was near the end of the year,³⁸ the first Passover to be celebrated after its completion was in 515 B.C. (6:19-22). The language of Ezra now appropriately reverts back to Hebrew. The completion of the second temple reversed the expatriation policies that were begun many years earlier by Assyria, followed by Babylon, and now revoked under Persia. Darius, of course, was the king of Persia, not Assyria. However, the use of the Assyrian name is surely deliberate to show the reversal of what had begun so many years earlier with the exile of the northern nation.

The Return of Exiles with Ezra (7-10)

With the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem now complete, the primary work commissioned to Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel was finished. The fulfillment of this commission had taken more than twenty years from the initial edict by Cyrus in 539 B.C. until the completion of the temple near the end of 516

³⁵ E. Bickerman, *JBL* 65.251.

³⁶ See footnote #27 for the years of Darius' reign. The mention of Artaxerxes in 6:14 looks ahead to the ruler who would authorize the completion of the walls in the time of Nehemiah.

³⁷ There is considerable debate about how the 70 years of Jeremiah are to be calculated, but for the Book of Ezra, at least, the edict of Cyrus to rebuild the temple "to fulfill the word of Yahweh spoken by Jeremiah" (1:1) tips the scales in favor of this calculation.

³⁸ The month Adar (6:15) was the last month of the year.

B.C. In chapter 7 the reader at last encounters the figure who gave his name to the book--Ezra, the priest-scribe. The opening of the chapter begins with the words "after these things" (7:1a), but the reader should be aware that this simple expression spans more than half a century

Ezra Comes to Jerusalem (7:1--8:36)

The narrative moves ahead now to the reign of Artaxerxes I Longimanus (464-424 B.C.), the son of Xerxes I. In the seventh year of his reign (7:8), 458 B.C., Ezra arranged an expedition to Jerusalem. What happened in the intervening period after the close of chapter 6, the reader is not told, but we know from the oracles of Malachi, which date to about 450 B.C. (just a few years later than the coming of Ezra), that the community in Jerusalem had fallen into a state of malaise. The restoration of the temple rituals, which had begun with such enthusiasm, had lapsed into perfunctory acts that betrayed contempt for the Torah's requirements (Mal. 1:13-14; 3:8-9, 13-14). The people were disillusioned, some weeping (Mal. 2:13), some cynical and others hostile toward God (Mal. 1:2; 2:17; 3:7-8, 13-14). Various religious and social evils had proliferated, such as, occultism, adultery, perjury, exploitation and discrimination (Mal. 3:5). Some of the people had entered into mixed marriages with unbelievers (Mal. 2:11-12). The temple priests were failing in their duties of moral instruction (Mal. 2:7-8). What sort of communication might have been carried on between the Jews in Jerusalem and the Jews in Mesopotamia can only be conjectured, and how much Ezra was informed about conditions in Jerusalem is unknown. Still, it is not unreasonable that the impetus for his expedition was some inkling of the sad state of affairs in the homeland. It is clear from 7:6 that Ezra "asked" for the permission and authority to go back.

Ezra was a priest of Aaron's family whose pedigree was impeccable (7:1-5).³⁹ He exemplified the ideal priest who was both a ceremonial leader and a teaching scholar (7:6, 10; cf. Lv. 10:11; Dt. 33:8-10; 2 Chr. 15:3; 31:4; Je. 18:18; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:7). His entourage included various Jews who were associated with temple service (7:7), and the expedition from Babylon to Jerusalem was a four month trek (7:8-9). The letter of authority issued by Artaxerxes I for Ezra's trip, written in Aramaic (7:12-26), is included in full (7:11-12). It permitted Ezra to take priests and Levites along with any other Jews who wanted to go with him (7:13-14). Furthermore, it stipulated a state grant for sacrifices (7:15-19) and permission to draw upon provincial treasuries, all tax exempt (7:19-24). Finally, it authorized Ezra to enforce the laws of Torah by setting up a judicial system with

³⁹ The careful reader will notice some lacunae in the genealogy (cf. 2 Kg. 25:18; 1 Chr. 6:3-15), but these gaps apparently did not endanger Ezra's status.

the power to carry out penalties, even to capital punishment (7:25-26). Still, Artaxerxes I, for all his respectful tolerance of the God of Israel (cf. 7:12, 21, 26, etc.), was mostly concerned that the Israelite deity be appeased so that no divine repercussions might be leveled against Persia (7:23; cf. 6:10).

Interjected into the narrative is Ezra's response of praise and thankfulness for God's help in making the trip possible (7:27-28). The register of families, both family heads and members, were intimately connected with the original group of returned exiles, since the family names are almost identical (8:1-14; cf. 2:3-15; 1 Esdras 8:28-40). All these groups bivouacked for three days near the Ahava Canal (8:15a).⁴⁰

While camped and double-checking the list of expedition members, Ezra discovered that no Levites were present (8:15b). Why they were missing is not explained. Some suggest that the Levites intentionally absented themselves because of the difficulties they envisioned for the expedition,⁴¹ and others speculate that the levitical role had been reduced enough that there was not much incentive to return.⁴² In any case, Ezra organized a delegation to Casiphia,⁴³ where there were known to be Levites, and more than two hundred volunteers responded (8:16-20). After fasting and praying for protection during the trip (8:21-23), they prepared to leave. That Ezra decided not to request military support for fear of injuring the witness of his faith demonstrated his conscientious trust in God's providence (8:22). Still, some years later Nehemiah graciously accepted such an escort when it was offered (Neh. 2:9).

The funding for the expedition was considerable: about 25 tons of silver, 3 3/4 tons of silver vessels, 3 3/4 tons of gold, and 19 pounds of golden bowls plus a couple of polished bronze vessels (8:24-27). All the articles and those who were charged with keeping them were dedicated to the Lord until they should reach their destination (8:28-30). After the four month trek (cf. 7:9), they arrived in Jerusalem, weighed out the articles in their keeping to the temple, offered sacrifices of thanksgiving, and delivered Artaxerxes' letter of authorization to the local authorities (8:31-36). Throughout the whole exhausting trip, the "good hand of God" was with them (cf. 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31)!

The Scandal of Mixed Marriages (9:1--10:44)

Ezra's expedition to Jerusalem was for the purpose of teaching the Torah to

⁴⁰ This canal is an unidentifiable location, S. Hunter and R. Hayden, *ISBE* (1979) I.76.

⁴¹ Kidner, 65.

⁴² H. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 35; F. Holmgren, *Ezra & Nehemiah [ITC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 67.

⁴³ Like Ahava, this is an unknown location, cf. R. Bowman, *IDB* (1962) I.541.

the exiles (7:10). Within four months of his arrival (7:8-9; 10:9), his teaching ministry began to produce a deep moral response. The background for this response was the Torah's clear requirement for racial purity in marriage relationships (Ex. 34:11-16; Dt. 7:1-6; cf. Jos. 23:12-13; 1 Kg. 11:1-2). Even as far back as the patriarchal period, the practice of intermarrying with the Canaanites was strictly avoided (cf. Ge. 24:1-4; 28:1, 6; 34:9, 20-21, 25). The issue, of course, was not racial in and of itself; rather, it was religious. Those who were not part of the congregation of Israel practiced the worship of the various deities from the Canaanite pantheons, and intermarriage was a threat to the pure worship of Yahweh. In some notable cases from Israel's past non-Israelites were married to Israelites if they accepted the faith of Israel (Ru. 4:13; Jos. 6:25; Mt. 1:5).

The initial response to Ezra's teaching came from community leaders, who frankly confessed the sin of intermarriage among the people, priests and Levites (9:1-2). These intermarriages seem to have been between Jewish men and non-Jewish women rather than vice versa.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Malachi's oracles indicate that the situation was more complicated than just the marriage of Jewish men to foreign women, for Jewish men had actually divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry the foreigners (Mal. 2:11-16). When Ezra became aware of the circumstance, he was appalled, exhibiting every sign of great spiritual distress (9:3-5). Like Moses interceding for Israel at the debacle of the golden calf (Ex. 32:31-32) and like Daniel identifying himself with the transgressions of his nation (Da. 9:4-19), Ezra now accepted solidarity with his own people and publicly began to repent of their covenant violations. He acknowledged that their former sins had resulted in devastation and exile (9:6-7) and that God's graciousness had given them a second chance (9:8-9). However, this new covenant violation had endangered the whole restoration movement (9:10-15). The returned exiles, who were the promised remnant (9:8, 13, 14, 15), were now in danger of canceling themselves out of God's gracious provision!

Ezra's public repentance in the court of the temple attracted a crowd (10:1). A spokesman for those watching Ezra urged them all that there was still hope. However, under Ezra's leadership they must rectify their violations by divorcing their foreign wives (10:2-4).⁴⁵ With this new show of support, Ezra put all the

⁴⁴ The enormity of this violation is especially to be seen in light of the role of the mother. A Jewish mother would teach her children Hebrew and instill within them the life, culture and faith of the Jewish tradition, while a non-Jewish mother would not. Later, of course, the Jewish tradition would reinforce the importance of the Jewish mother's role by stipulating that a Jew is one born to a Jewish mother, *Yebamoth* 23a. Also later, the same principle of avoiding mixed marriages holds true for Christians (1 Co. 7:12-16, 39; 2 Co. 6:14-18; 1 Pe. 3:1-2), though if the marriage is already in place between a Christian and a non-Christian, the New Testament does not require divorce as was enforced by Ezra.

⁴⁵ The language of "sending away" in 10:3 reflects the divorce language of the Torah (Dt. 24:1-4).

priests and Levites under oath to do so (10:5-6). Criers were sent to announce in all the outlying villages that the entire Jewish community must assemble at the temple in three days or face expulsion (10:7-8). When they had gathered, sitting outside in the rain, Ezra confronted them with their covenant violation, urging them to confess their sin and to divorce their foreign wives (10:9-11). The whole community accepted his counsel, but they voted to allow their officials to act in their behalf in each town rather than try to conclude the matter while standing outside in the rain and cold (10:12-15). Proper investigations of each questionable marriage would be conducted. Such a procedure would take time, and in the end, it took two months (10:16-17). Doubtless part of this process including the writing of certificates of divorce for each divorced wife in order to give her the freedom to remarry (cf. Dt. 24:1-4). A list of the Jewish men who had married foreign wives was composed (10:18-44), and all these divorced women and their children were sent away, presumably back to their own culture and people.

The Book of Nehemiah

The renewal precipitated by the coming of Ezra in Ezra 7-10 continues right on into the Book of Nehemiah. It is not difficult to see why originally these two books were a single document. In addition to the theological crisis, however, there was also a security crisis. The original decree of Cyrus in 539 B.C., which allowed the Jews to begin returning to Jerusalem and its environs, focused specifically on the reconstruction of the temple, a project that was completed near the end of 516 B.C. However, the neighboring Palestinians, while forced to comply with imperial orders to allow this reconstruction, were hardly placid about the Jewish presence. They attempted to hinder the work in every legal way possible.

Around the time of the coming of Ezra, the Jewish community began to repair the walls of Jerusalem (Ezr. 4:12).⁴⁶ Whether the impetus for this construction resulted from the reforms of Ezra or the preaching of Malachi is unclear, though it might well have been.⁴⁷ In any case, the effort was vehemently opposed by the surrounding people, and they wrote a letter to Artaxerxes, successfully raising alarm concerning the wall construction (Ezr. 4:8-16). Artaxerxes' reply was clear: any work on the city walls must be stopped until further imperial orders (Ezr. 5:17-22). The regional Persian officials of Trans-

⁴⁶Whether this action was before or after the coming of Ezra is uncertain. The exact year is not specified except to say that the general time was "in the days of Artaxerxes," who ruled Persia in 464-424 B.C. (Ezr. 4:7). In any case, it is likely that the extensive preview of actions taken against the wall reconstruction project in Ezra 4:7-23 is the background for the opening of the Book of Nehemiah.

⁴⁷The date of Malachi's ministry is also uncertain, but most scholars put him in about 450 B.C., a few years prior to the coming of Nehemiah.

Euphrates were eager to comply, and they immediately confronted the Jews and "compelled them by force to stop" (Ezr. 4:23). If the opening of the Book of Nehemiah has anything to say about how the officials executed this stop order, their action included the wrecking of any rebuilt wall sections and the burning of the wooden gates (Ne. 1:3).

The Restoration of Jerusalem's Walls (1-7)

The Coming of Nehemiah (1:1--2:20)

Among the group of Jews in Jerusalem who had attempted to begin wall reconstruction was Hanani, who along with a few others, made the long trip from Jerusalem back to Susa to see his brother, Nehemiah (1:1-2). The date was about 445 B.C., the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (cf. 2:1).⁴⁸ They explained the recent problems and the lack of security in Jerusalem (1:3). Nehemiah was deeply troubled, for although he was not part of the returning group, his theological center nevertheless remained in Jerusalem. Like Daniel, he turned to prayer, confessing his nation's sins which had resulted in the exile and reaffirming God's promise to regather the Israelites if they repented (1:4-11a). He concluded his prayer with a single plea: *Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man* (1:11b). To the reader, the reference to "this man" is oblique. Who is he? Nehemiah saves until last both his own occupation and that of "this man." Nehemiah served as the cupbearer⁴⁹ to "this man," the king of Persia!

Four months after receiving this disturbing news from Jerusalem⁵⁰ and while performing his state duties, Artaxerxes questioned Nehemiah about the anxiety that seemed apparent in his visage (2:1-2). Naturally, Nehemiah was uneasy when the king perceived his depression, since personal feelings were not normally exhibited by servants, and as the Proverbs point out, "A king's wrath is a messenger of death" (Pr. 16:14; cf. Est. 4:11). Nevertheless, he explained his concerns about Jerusalem (2:3). In the following conversation and with a prayer in his heart, Nehemiah was bold to request a reversal of the stop order against the reconstruction of the city, offering to oversee the rebuilding project himself to allay a suspicion of an uprising (2:4-5). The stop order had contained a very important contingency clause that the work should cease until, in Artaxerxes own words, "I so order." Nehemiah asked

⁴⁸Exact reckonings are difficult, since some calendars ran from autumn to autumn and some from spring to spring, cf. Fensham, 150.

⁴⁹A cupbearer was an officer of high rank in ancient oriental courts. His duties consisted of serving wine at the king's table, and due to the possibility of plots against the king, especially by poison, he necessarily had to be a person of complete trustworthiness, cf. C. Wolf, *IDB* (1962) I.749.

⁵⁰The news came in Kislev (9th month) and Nehemiah's request to Artaxerxes was made in Nisan (1st month).

that Artaxerxes give just such an order!

The level of trust, which Artaxerxes placed in Nehemiah, is obvious in that he agreed to reverse the stop order while issuing official documents authorizing Nehemiah to make the trip under army security (2:6-7). Nehemiah also was authorized to cut timber for the reconstruction of the gates (2:8). As in the earlier trip by Ezra, Nehemiah's success was guaranteed because, as he said, "The gracious hand of my God was upon me" (2:8b; cf. Ezr. 7:6, 9,28; 8:18, 22, 31). Thus, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, not as a part of the repatriation movement, but as an emissary of the Persian government and a personal friend of Artaxerxes. That he came accompanied by a detachment of the Persian army could hardly fail to impress the Trans-Euphrates officials of the legitimacy of his mission, though it is not surprising that they were chagrined by this unexpected development (2:10)!⁵¹

After his arrival in Jerusalem and a short rest, Nehemiah made a night inspection on horseback to see the damage to the walls (2:11-12). His route can be conjectured from the notations offered (2:13-14):

Valley Gate (cf. 2 Chr. 26:9) - unknown, but speculated to be at the northwestern corner of the City of David⁵²

Jackal's Well or Dragon's Fountain - sometimes thought to be the En-rogel Spring at the southeastern convergence of the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys, though a more plausible explanation is that it refers to a spring or well, now dried up, which lay along the western slope of the Tyropoeon Valley⁵³

Dung Gate - possibly the same as the Potsherd Gate (cf. Je. 19:2), it was about 500 yards from the Valley Gate (cf. 3:13b) at the southern extremity of the city

Fountain Gate - probably an exit toward the En-rogel Spring (see above)

King's Pool - if this is the Pool of Siloam, at the end of Hezekiah's tunnel, it is on the lower western slope of the Tyropoeon Valley; if it is in the Kidron Valley, its location is unknown

The "valley" - the Kidron Valley on the eastern slope of the City of David

On the eastern slope of the Hill of Ophel (City of David), the rubble and steepness of the slope were virtually impassable, forcing Nehemiah to dismount (2:14). At last, he completed the circuit and reentered the City of David by the

⁵¹The name Sanballat is verified by an outside source, since he is mentioned as the governor of Samaria in the Elephantine papyri, cf. Pritchard, "Petition for Authorization to Rebuild the Temple of Yaho," *ANE* (1958) I.281.

⁵²Myers, 104.

⁵³Williamson, 188-189.

same gate he had left (2:15). No one knew of his nocturnal inspection (2:16).

At last, Nehemiah confronted the post-exilic community leaders about their circumstance of disgrace and lack of security. He explained to them his authorization and urged them to resume the work, which they consented to do (2:17-18). Though the Palestinians mocked the Jews' efforts, there was little they could do in the face of Nehemiah's imperial authorization from Artaxerxes (2:19-20). Still, their presence must have been threatening, since Sanballat of Samaria to the north, Tobiah of Ammon to the east, and Geshem the Arab to the south meant that the Jewish community was surrounded by hostile enemies!

The Rebuilding Project Begins in the Midst of Opposition (3:1-4:23)

The construction of the various gates by groups of workers is described in a counter-clockwise fashion, beginning with the Sheep Gate, on the north side of the city (3:1),⁵⁴ and coming full circle until the description ends where it began (3:32).⁵⁵ The gates and other structures are as follows:⁵⁶

Sheep Gate (3:1): Presumably near the temple mount, since it was reconstructed by priests

Tower of the Hundred (3:1): On the north wall (12:39)

Tower of Hananel (3:1): On the north wall (12:39; cf. Je. 31:38)

Fish Gate (3:3; 12:39): Manasseh rebuilt a wall section connecting to the Fish Gate prior to the exile (2 Chr. 33:14). The Fish Gate is associated with an expansion called the New Quarter (Zep. 1:10).

Old (Jeshanah) Gate (3:6; 12:39): Possibly associated with the *Mishneh* (= **Second) District (cf. 2 Kg. 22:14).**

Broad Wall (3:8; 12:38): Part of this wall may have been discovered in excavations in 1969-1971.⁵⁷ Presumably, it curved in a westerly direction.

Ephraim Gate (mentioned only in 12:39): This gate must surely have been on the north side of the city facing Ephraim, which was to the north. The wall section from the Ephraim Gate to the Corner Gate was broken down prior to the exile by Jehoash of Israel (cf. 2 Chr. 25:23).

⁵⁴Assuming that the Sheep Gate of Jn. 5:2 near the Pool of Bethesda was the one built during Nehemiah's reconstruction, then the Sheep Gate can be located with a fair degree of precision, since Bethesda is a known location, cf. D. Weiland, *ISBE* (1979) I.467-468.

⁵⁵The counter-clockwise movement reflects the Hebrew pattern of reading from right to left, whereas for westerners, the tendency to describe movement in a clockwise fashion reflects the pattern of reading from left to right.

⁵⁶W. LaSor, "Jerusalem," *ISBE* (1982) II.1017-1020.

⁵⁷N. Avigad, *IEJ* (20) 1-8, 129-140; (22) 193-200.

Tower of the Ovens (3:11; 12:38): This tower was possibly one of those built by Uzziah (2 Chr. 26:9).

Corner Gate (unmentioned by Nehemiah): Apparently on the west side of the city, this gate was probably where the wall turned south again after its westerly direction from the Broad Wall (2 Kg. 14:13; 2 Chr. 25:23; 26:9; Je. 31:38; Zec. 14:10).

Valley Gate (3:13): Located 1000 cubits (about 500 meters) west of the Dung Gate.

Dung Gate (2:13; 3:14; 12:31): Also called the Ashpot Gate, this gate would almost certainly have been on the least offensive side of the city, and hence, leading to the Valley of Hinnom. It may well have been the same as the Potsherd Gate in Jeremiah's day (cf. Je. 19:2).

Pool of Siloam (3:15; Jn. 9:7, 11): This well-known pool at the southwestern end of Hezekiah's tunnel still stands.

King's Gardens (3:15): Presumably this area belonged to the kings of Judah before the exile, but its location is uncertain. Because of its order in the Nehemiah listing, it is usually thought to be near the southern end of the City of David.

King's Pool (2:14): Either the same as the Pool of Siloam or some location near there. It is possibly the pool constructed by Hezekiah (2 Kg. 20:20; Is. 22:11).

Steps from the City of David (3:15; 12:37): Near the Fountain Gate, these stairs also were at the southern end of the City of David.

Fountain Gate (2:14; 3:15; 12:37): Also called Gate of the Spring, this gate yielded access to the En-rogel Spring south of the city.

Tombs of David (3:16): Somewhere in the lower city, these tombs were the resting place for some fifteen kings in the Davidic lineage, including David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah (Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah and Josiah (1 Kg. 2:10; 11:43; 15:8, 24; 22:50; 2 Kg. 8:24; 9:28; 12:21; 14:20; 15:7, 38; 16:20; 20:21; 23:30). Other Davidic kings either were buried elsewhere (2 Kg. 21:18, 26), exiled (2 Kg. 23:34; 24:12; 25:7) or their interment is at an unknown location.⁵⁸

Artificial Pool (3:16): This site was presumably near the southern end of the City

⁵⁸Excavations in the northern part of the Old City of Jerusalem have disclosed large first temple period burial caves which could very well have been the burial site for the later kings of Judah from Manasseh on, cf. H. Shanks, "Have the Tombs of the Kings of Judah Been Found?" *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1987) 54-56.

of David.

House of David (12:37): Though no longer standing, David's residence was probably marked by tradition.

House of the Heroes (3:16): Near David's house, this site also was probably traditional.

Ascent to the Armory (3:19): Unidentifiable location

House of Eliashib, the High Priest (3:20): Since work at this site was assigned to two groups, it is likely that the house was a sizeable structure.

Angle and the Corner (3:24): Before the exile, Uzziah built three fortified towers in this area (2 Chr. 26:9).

Projecting Tower (3:25-27): This structure is difficult to locate and difficult to define. Could the tower have projected outward, inward or in both directions?

Water Gate (3:26; 12:37): Described as "on the east," this gate may have been near the Gihon Spring, hence its name. However, it fronted a plaza (cf. 8:1, 3, 16), which is hard to reconcile with the topography of the terrain near the Gihon Spring. Alternatively, it may have been the same as the East Gate (see below).

Gate of the Guard (12:39): Possibly near the Court of the Guard where Jeremiah was confined (Je. 32:2)

Wall of Ophel (3:27): Somewhere on the eastern slope of the Hill of Ophel

Horse Gate (3:28): Located north of the Water Gate, probably at the southeast end of the temple area

East Gate (3:29): The East Gate is usually considered to be a gate into the Temple area, not a gate in the city wall.⁵⁹

Inspection Gate (3:31): Sometimes called the Muster Gate, this gate probably gained its name because it was used for mustering and/or inspecting the guard. Some scholars identify it with the Benjamin Gate at the northeastern corner of the city (Je. 37:13; 38:7; Zec. 14:10).

Gates were constructed to control traffic in and out of a fortified city. They were more vulnerable than walls, since they were made of wooden beams and planks. They were usually flanked by towers where archers could protect them from battering rams and fire. At night, even in times of peace, the gates would be

⁵⁹Williamson, 210.

closed and secured by bars of heavy metal or wood.⁶⁰

Daniel's vision of the rebuilding of Jerusalem was that it would be "rebuilt...in times of trouble" (Da. 9:25), and his prediction was accurate! When the Trans-Euphrates officials became aware of just how determined Nehemiah and his workers were, they were angry. The reconstruction of walls was the event that first prompted them to secure a stop order (cf. Ezra 4:7-23), and when that was overturned by a new authorization for Nehemiah (2:9-10), they were very displeased. Still, there was a limit to what they could do without incurring the wrath of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah had come with imperial authority and the army as well, so their first ploy was ridicule and intimidation (4:1-3).

The prayer, interjected as it is in the narrative without introduction, offers a vivid and immediate picture of how these insults were received by the Jews (4:4-5). Nevertheless, they pressed on, working diligently (4:6). When the walls were half completed with the gaps closing quickly, the Jews' enemies determined to risk a more direct attack by force (4:7-8). We should assume that by this time the Persian troops, having fulfilled their duty as armed escorts, were no longer available. The situation was desperate! The rubble was a deterrent, while the hard labor was beginning to take its toll. Still, with prayer, a guard posted day and night, and a will to support each other, they continued (4:9-11). When neighboring Jews complained, Nehemiah posted even more guards, encouraging his workers and guards to trust in God's help (4:12-14).⁶¹ There was no alternative but for the workers to be prepared to fight at a moment's notice. So, half of the crews worked on the wall while the other half stood guard. The workers labored while armed, and the hod-carriers worked with one hand and carried a weapon in the other (4:15-18a). A trumpeter stood ready to sound the alarm if an attack seemed eminent (4:18b). Since the workers were spread around the circumference of Jerusalem, a trumpeter could signal an attack at any point, and all the others could come on the run to help defend (4:19-20a). But, as Nehemiah assured them, "Our God will fight for us" (4:20b)!

The work continued from dawn until dusk (4:21). At night, the workers withdrew inside the city for added protection, but they remained fully clothed and ready to fight at a moment's notice (4:22-23).

⁶⁰J. Rousseau and R. Arav, *Jesus & His World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995) 175.

⁶¹The translation of 4:12-13 varies widely among the versions. A literal rendering of the Hebrew text of 6:12 is confusing and may be corrupt: "When the Jews came, the ones living near them, they said to us ten times from all the places where you return against us." Some versions follow the LXX (so NEB), some the Hebrew text (so NIV, NASB), and some attempt to reconstruct the text (so RSV).

The Wall is Finally Completed (5:1--7:73)

Though the challenge of external enemies was now firmly in hand, another difficulty arose from inside the community. As is often the case, a people may unite to face an outside foe but still divide over internal issues. The wall-building efforts exacerbated stresses that were already present in the community, and a full-scale defection from the wall-building effort threatened. The daily toil to build walls meant that the normal activities of farming and trade had to be laid aside. This redirection of labor took its toll in loss of income and lack of basic staples. Many families were beginning to feel the sting of deprivation (5:1-2), and the first of the complaining groups may well have consisted of those who owned no cultivated land and were dependent on wages from labor.⁶² Since they received no wages from wall building, their families were suffering. Other families who owned tillable land were not able to work their farms properly and were compelled to use them as security for mortgages in order to survive (5:3). Such loans had to be repaid, and by building the wall these farmers were putting themselves in jeopardy and risking the loss their property altogether. Some were in such dire straits that their money was going to pay taxes levied by the Persian government (5:4). A few were so desperate that they were compelled to sell their children into debt-slavery, and this group deeply resented the more well-to-do Jews whose affluence exempted them from such indignities (5:5).

When Nehemiah had heard their distress, he was angry that the leaders of the community, who were the more wealthy of the Jews, should serve as such harsh lenders to their less fortunate brothers (5:6). After consideration, he confronted them and called a general meeting of the whole community (5:6-7). What they were doing to their fellow-Jews was little different than what the Mesopotamian empire-builders had done when they sent the Jews into exile in the first place--they had exploited them to their own advantage (5:8).⁶³ Such exploitation was morally unacceptable (5:9)! Nehemiah, also, had made loans, so it was not the loans themselves that were morally reprehensible, but the harsh terms of the lenders. He now demanded that the lenders suspend their requirement of interest payments and the actions of foreclosure (5:10-11).⁶⁴ After all, this was no more than the Torah required (cf. Ex. 22:25; Lv. 25:35-38; Dt. 23:19-20). The community leaders agreed on oath to do so (5:12-13), and by symbolic gesture Nehemiah publicly

⁶²Williamson, 237.

⁶³Some of the Jews may even voluntarily have sold themselves as bondservants to Gentiles, and their relatives or the rest of the community may have raised the necessary money to redeem them (cf. Lv. 25:47-49). To secure their release but then to put them back into bondage by requiring heavy collateral for loans when they were most vulnerable was unthinkable!

⁶⁴Interest at 1% may seem quite low by modern standards, but as several scholars have pointed out, it may have been reckoned on a monthly basis (i.e., 12% annually), cf. Kidner, 97; Williamson, 240.

conferred a curse on any violators (5:14). For his own part, Nehemiah refused to accept the allotment of food and taxes which the Persian government permitted him to levy for the support of his retinue, since it would have been extracted from his fellow-Jews in Jerusalem, who were Persian subjects (5:15). Unlike the governors who preceded him, he suspended this levy for a dozen years, even though his personal expenses to support his staff were enormous (5:17-18). Though it would have been relatively easy to acquire land through foreclosure on unpaid loans, Nehemiah resolutely refused to do so (5:16). His motives were pure, and he prayed that God would honor his generosity (5:19).

With the internal problem satisfactorily solved, the narrative now returns to the main theme, the reconstruction of the walls. By this time, the gaps in the wall had been closed, though the gates were not yet in place. When the leaders from the Samaritans, Ammonites and Arabs (cf. 2:10, 19) repeatedly invited Nehemiah to leave Jerusalem and travel to meet with them,⁶⁵ he rightly suspected treachery and refused (6:1-4). Finally, they countered with the threat that they would report to Artaxerxes that Nehemiah was an insurgent (6:5-7). The threat was contained in an unsealed letter, which meant that it would shortly be known publicly, since it was to be assumed that the messenger would artfully allow others to read the contents. But Nehemiah would not be intimidated, and while asking God for strength, he refused to capitulate to their machinations (6:8-9). Sanballat and Tobiah even hired a false prophet, like the Moabites once hired Balaam (Nu. 22-24), to urge Nehemiah to flee to the temple for sanctuary because, he warned, an attempt would be made on Nehemiah's life (6:10-13; cf. Ex. 21:13-14; 1 Kg. 1:50; 2:28). However, Nehemiah knew a ploy when he saw one and remained resolute. The interjected prayer for justice against Sanballat, Tobiah and a coterie of false prophets reinforces what the other Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles teach, that is, that the oracle of anyone who claims, "Thus says the Lord," must be carefully evaluated before being accepted (cf. 1 Kg. 22; Je. 14:14-16; 23:9-40; 27-28; 29; 24-32; Eze. 13:1-16; 1 Co. 14:29).

Finally, the walls were completed. Amazingly, all the events of chapters 2-6 had been crowded into a short fifty-two days (6:15). The intimidation of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem had failed; for God had helped the Jews complete their task (6:16). As a footnote, Nehemiah records that all during this period a correspondence had continued between Tobiah and some of the Jewish community leaders, who had connections with him by marriage as well as trade agreements.⁶⁶ These letters continued the harassment and intimidation, but to no avail (6:17-19).

⁶⁵The location is unknown, but presumably it was north of Jerusalem toward the jurisdiction of Sanballat, since Sanballat seems to be the leader among the three.

⁶⁶We should probably understand the term "oaths" (6:18) to refer to trading agreements, cf. Kidner, 101.

When the walls were completed and the gates in place, Nehemiah appointed gatekeepers and others to maintain security (7:1-3).

The city of Jerusalem was now secure, though most of the Jews still lived outside the walls rather than within them, since prior to wall construction there would have been little advantage in rebuilding houses in Jerusalem proper (7:4). Now, however, Nehemiah felt prompted by God to assemble the community leaders and all the people for registration by genealogy. This census would be necessary to determine who had genealogical rights to move into the city (7:5). If Jerusalem was to be populated by Jews, as was the concern of the returning group since the beginning (Ezra 2), it was important that the residents could prove they were properly Jewish! The genealogical record that Nehemiah used is virtually the same as that produced nearly a century earlier when the original group made the first return trip from Babylon (7:6-73).

The Reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (8-13)

The Great Assembly of the Seventh Month (8:1--10:39)

The seventh month, Tishri (September/October), was the high point in Israel's liturgical year. The first day of the month was the memorial blowing of trumpets (Lv. 23:23-25; Nu. 29:1-6). Nearly a century earlier, the first group of returning exiles had celebrated this festival after the great altar was in place once again (cf. Ezr. 3:6).⁶⁷ Just a week and a half after the day of trumpets was *Yom Kippur* on the tenth day of the month, when atonement was made for the nation's sins (Ex. 30:9-10; Lv. 16:1-34; 23:26-32; Nu. 29:7-11). Finally, on fifteenth day of the month began the weeklong celebration of the festival of booths, one of the pilgrim feasts to which all Israelite males were to come (Ex. 23:16-17; Lv. 23:33-44; Dt. 16:13-17).

With the beginning of Nehemiah 8, the reader will notice a shift from the first person to the third person in the narrative. From 8:1 until 12:26 the Nehemiah memoirs will give place to other records, and while Nehemiah figures in the accounts (cf. 8:9-10; 10:1; 12:26), apparently he is not writing about himself. With the completion of the walls, the community was prepared to celebrate the seventh month with enthusiasm, and people arrived from the outlying villages, assembling in the square near the Water Gate (8:1a). Ezra was invited to begin a reading of the Torah, and starting on the day of trumpets, he read from dawn until noon while the

⁶⁷Of course, in later Judaism the first day of the seventh month was also celebrated as *Rosh Hashanah*, the new year, but how this change came about from the earlier celebration of the new year in Nisan (cf. Ex. 12:1-2) is debated, cf. D. Block, *ISBE* (1986) III.529-532; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 502-506.

people listened (8:1b-3). A high platform⁶⁸ had been constructed for the event, and Ezra stood on it while flanked by thirteen attendants, possibly priests or community leaders (8:4). When the scroll was opened and the reading began, the people stood in reverence (8:5). At Ezra's invocation of praise, the people lifted their hands and responded with an antiphonal "Amen" before bowing low to the ground (8:6). Thirteen Levites, also, assisted in the reading by clarifying⁶⁹ and interpreting the Torah so the people could understand it (8:7-8).⁷⁰

The reading of the Torah created agitation among the listeners, much as it had done in the days of Josiah (8:9; cf. 2 Kg. 22:11-13//2 Chr. 34:19-33). However, Nehemiah urged them to rejoice, for while the day was sacred, it was not a day for grieving (8:10-12). On the second day, the listeners heard a description of the feast of booths, and since it was already the seventh month, the very month prescribed for this festival, they prepared to celebrate it with alacrity (8:13-17)! This final festival of the three *haggim* (= pilgrim feasts) had never been observed like this since the days of Joshua almost a thousand years earlier! So, day after day Ezra read from the Torah, and beginning on the fifteenth of the month, they began the weeklong festival of booths, which climaxed with a general assembly (8:18).

On the twenty-fourth day of the month, only two days after the festival of booths had ended, the members of the great assembly were still gathered in Jerusalem. Now they expressed penitence for their many sins and the covenant violations of their ancestors (9:1-2).⁷¹ They divided the first half of the day into listening to the reading of the Torah, confessing their sins and worshiping the Lord (9:3). Two groups of Levites helped direct the congregational responses, one group leading in expressions of repentance and the other in praise and worship (9:4-5a).

A lengthy version of their prayer is offered which exalts God as Creator of the universe (9:5b-6), the covenantor with Abraham (9:7-8), the redeemer of Israel from Egypt (9:9-12), and the lawgiver at Sinai (9:13-15). Nevertheless, in the past the Israelites repeatedly broke covenant, beginning with the golden calf (9:16-18). God's great compassion, however, was not withdrawn, for he continued to nurture them in the wilderness (9:19-21) and gave them military victories on both sides of

⁶⁸The Hebrew *migdal-'ets* (= tower of wood) might also refer to a pulpit, cf. Holmgren, 123.

⁶⁹Some versions read "translating it" (so JB, GNB), presumably into Aramaic. The verb *parash* (= to inform precisely, explain) might be taken to refer to the act of translating, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 299.

⁷⁰The two groups of thirteen are intriguing (and their number is verified by 1 Esdras 9:43-44, 48). We should have expected twelve as a more common symbolic number of the tribes of Israel.

⁷¹It is unclear whether this day of penitence was in any way connected with the fast of the seventh month, which commenced during the exile (cf. Zec. 7:5), a fast presumably in memory of the assassination of Gedaliah (cf. Je. 41:1-3; 2 Kg. 25:25).

the Jordan River so that they possessed the land of promise (9:22-25). Still the people were stubborn, killing the prophets and blaspheming against God. During the time of the judges, the nation went through a terrible cycle of covenant violation, oppressive judgment by Canaanite neighbors, eventual repentance, and finally, restoration--only to begin the vicious circle all over again (9:26-28). This pattern of failure continued right on into the period of the monarchy (9:29-31). Finally, the dire warnings of the Deuteronomic curses caught up with the nation so that her people were exiled to Mesopotamia, for God could be nothing less than true to himself and his covenant word (9:32-35). At the present time, the people were still the subjects of a foreign power, the Persians, even though they had been allowed to return to their homeland (9:36-37).

The climax of their prayer was a binding renewal of the covenant in which they put in writing their intentions to follow the Torah while fixing their seals to the document (9:38). Covenant renewal ceremonies were part of the Israelite tradition, and such renewals had occurred after the original crossing of the Jordan under Joshua (Dt. 27:1-8, 14-16; Jos. 8:30-35) and under the kingship of Josiah (2 Kg. 23//2 Chr. 34-35). The list of those putting their seal to the document included Nehemiah, the Levites and the community leaders (10:1-27). The document was confirmed with an oath, which invited a curse if they failed in covenant faithfulness (10:28-29). While the entire Torah is the object of the renewal ceremony and oath, some requirements of the Torah were singled out for special emphasis, probably because they were the laws, which the people had been most susceptible in violating. These included the prohibition of intermarriage with the Canaanites (10:30; cf. Ex. 34:11-16; Dt. 7:1-6), the observance of the weekly sabbath and the sabbatical years (10:31; cf. Ex. 20:8-11; Dt. 5:12-15; Lv. 25:1-7), the gifts to the temple (10:32; cf. Ex. 30:11-16; Nu. 18:26),⁷² the provision of temple supplies, sacrifices and offerings (10:33), the supply of wood for burning the sacrifices (10:34; cf. Lv. 6:12-13), the offering of first-fruits (10:35; cf. Ex. 23:19a; 34:26a; Nu. 18:12-13; Dt. 26:1-11), the dedication of the first-born (10:36; cf. Ex. 13:1-2, 11-16; 22:29; 34:19-20; Lv. 27:26; Nu. 3:11-13, 40-51; 8:15-19; 18:14-16; Dt. 12:6, 17; 15:19), and the paying of tithes (10:37-39; cf. Lv. 27:30-33; Nu. 18:21-29; Dt. 12:6, 11, 17; 14:22-29). In all these ways, the people committed themselves to support the temple.

Repopulating the City (11:1--12:26)

Family roots lie behind the long list of people who were chosen by lot to

⁷²The change from a half-shekel (Torah) to a third-shekel (Nehemiah) is probably due to a difference in Persian currency, where ten silver shekels equaled one gold shekel. Under the Israelite system reflected in Torah, the sacred shekel was in the proportion of fifteen to one, cf. Myers, 178-179.

repopulate the city of Jerusalem. A tithe of the people was chosen from volunteers to move within the newly finished walls (11:1-2). The bulk of the community was now primarily from three tribes, Judah, Benjamin and Levi, those clans that had remained faithful to David's dynasty (11:3-36; cf. 1 Kg. 12:20-24//1 Chr. 11:1-4, 13-17). Other records show, however, that representatives from the northern clans were also among their number (cf. 1 Chr. 9:1b-34).⁷³

The listing of priests and Levites confirms the importance of continuity and family pedigree (12:1-26; cf. Ezr. 2:61-63). The traditional performance of antiphonal choirs as ordered by David were reinstated (12:24; 1 Chr. 25).

The Wall Dedication (12:27-43)

With the description of the wall dedication, Nehemiah once more picks up the narrative in the first person. On the day of the dedication, purification ceremonies, possibly with sprinkled blood (cf. He. 9:21-22)⁷⁴ or water (cf. Nu. 19:18; Lv. 14:5-7; Eze. 36:25), were conducted for the priest, Levites, the people, the gates and the walls (12:27-30). Twin processions of choirs and musicians, one accompanied by Ezra and the other by Nehemiah, were commissioned to encircle the city on the tops of the walls (12:31-43). Each choir began its procession at the same point, probably the Valley Gate on the southwest side of the city,⁷⁵ and the two groups moved in opposite directions until at last they faced each other again, one choir at the Water Gate on the East and the other a short distance to the north at the Gate of the Guard (12:37, 39). Together the choirs and musicians entered the temple grounds with loud rejoicing!

Nehemiah's Final Reforms (12:44--13:31)

The close of the Book of Nehemiah consists of several final efforts to bring the community into alignment with the Torah. Supervisors were appointed to oversee the storage rooms necessarily for receiving tithes, first fruits and offerings, most of which would come in the form of grain and other food staples. These staples were needed for the support of the priests, Levites, choirs and other temple staff (12:45-47).

⁷³There has long been speculation about the so-called "lost ten tribes," but as the Chronicler's record makes clear, not all of them were "lost." Even by the time of the New Testament, some remnants of the northern tribes were still identifiable (cf. Lk. 2:36). Archaeological evidence suggests that many northerners fled to the south in the 8th century B.C. when the northern nation collapsed, so much so that Jerusalem underwent a major expansion by a factor of three or four times its former size, cf. M. Broshi, *BAR* (Sep./Oct. 1975) 27, 32, and *IEJ*, 24 (1974) 21.

⁷⁴Josephus, for instance, records that at the dedication of the ancient tent of meeting the tent, its furnishings and utensils were all sprinkled with blood, cf. *Antiquities*, III.205-206.

⁷⁵The text does not give the starting point, but the various points en route of the two choirs makes the Valley Gate the most logical choice.

At the public reading of the Torah, the community heard that Ammonites and Moabites were not allowed a place in the worshiping assembly because of their opposition to Israel during the exodus (13:1-3; cf. Dt. 23:3-6). The Jews took immediately action to rectify their lapses in this regard, expelling all foreigners from the assembly.⁷⁶

One rather notable violation of this law occurred during Nehemiah's absence. After his twelve-year tenure at overseeing the reconstruction of the walls and the renewal of the city, Nehemiah had been summoned back to his service to Artaxerxes in the Persian government (13:6). He had been in Jerusalem from 445 B.C. to 433 B.C. (cf. 2:1; 5:14). After he was gone, the priest Eliashib, one of the appointees over the storage rooms in the temple (cf. 12:44), had cleared one of the rooms to accommodate Tobiah, the Ammonite official who had so strongly opposed all Nehemiah's rebuilding efforts (13:4-5; cf. 2:10, 19; 4:3, 7; 6:1-3). Earlier, Tobiah had hired a prophet to intimidate and deceive Nehemiah (cf. 6:12-14), and it is apparent that he maintained close marriage ties with some of the officials in the Jewish community (6:17-19). To make matters worse, he was an Ammonite, and his use of a temple room was a flagrant violation of the Deuteronomic code. When Nehemiah secured permission from Artaxerxes to revisit Jerusalem, he became aware of the reckless favor shown to Tobiah. Promptly, Nehemiah cleaned house, throwing out Tobiah's furniture and purifying the rooms for their proper use (13:6-9).

On this second visit, Nehemiah also discovered other alarming lapses. First, the staples in the storage rooms were being mishandled, so much so that the Levites, for whom the food was designated, had been compelled to go back to farming in order to survive (13:10-11). This delinquency, which seems to have been a recurring one (cf. Mal. 3:6-12), was corrected immediately (13:12-14). Furthermore, Nehemiah noticed that sabbath observances were in decline. The people were farming and marketing on the sabbath, right alongside the Phoenician merchants, who were being allowed to set up their wares in Jerusalem on the seventh day. This flagrant disobedience was sharply rebuked (13:15-18). To strengthen the sabbatical laws, Nehemiah ordered that the city gates be shut on Friday evening near dusk, and he set guards to enforce his mandate (13:19). Some merchants tried to circumvent this restriction by camping just outside the walls, probably hoping to do business with anyone who might come out, but Nehemiah threatened to arrest them if they stayed (13:20-21). He commanded the Levitical gatekeepers to exercise their duty as a sacred charge in preventing sabbath

⁷⁶In the earlier prophets, the ideal was held forth that in the restoration foreigners would be attached to the commonwealth of Israel (cf. Is. 66:19-21; Zec. 9:7), but it is clear that this ideal was not part of the immediate post-exilic vision.

violations (13:22).

Nehemiah's final reform was aimed, once again, at the practice of intermarriage with non-Israelites. This covenant lapse, which Ezra had addressed a number of years earlier (cf. Ezr. 9-10) and which the prophet Malachi rebuked (Mal. 2:11-16), was once more on the rise. Nehemiah's action was nothing short of explosive. Though not a translation, *The Living Bible* captures his mood in a striking paraphrase:

So I argued with these parents and cursed them and punched a few of them and knocked them around and pulled out their hair; and they vowed before God that they would not let their children intermarry with non-Jews (13:25).

Ezra had been content to pull his own hair (cf. Ezr. 9:3), but Nehemiah took a more stern approach and pulled out their hair (13:25)! He knew that mixed marriages had destroyed Solomon, and it would destroy them as well (13:26-27; cf. 1 Kg. 11:1-11; 2 Chr. 8:11). One of the high priest's grandsons had even married the daughter of Sanballat, Nehemiah's Samaritan antagonist (cf. 2:10, 19; 4:1, 7; 6:1-2, 5, 12-14).⁷⁷ The compromising ways of Eliashib, both in his continued friendship with Tobiah the Ammonite (cf. 13:4-5) and now in his family connection with Sanballat the Samaritan, demonstrates the risk of having priestly succession within a single family. As was proven hundreds of years earlier in the days of Eli (cf. 1 Sa. 2:12-17, 27-36; 3:11-14), there was no guarantee of righteous continuity.⁷⁸ It is quite possible that this mixed marriage, in addition to violating the general prohibition of mixed marriages in Torah, also violated the priestly code if Sanballat's daughter was a participant in the widespread fertility rituals of the Canaanites (cf. Lv. 21:7). So, Nehemiah expelled the offender, priestly family or not, and prayed for retribution upon him (13:28-29)!

The book closes with a brief summary of Nehemiah's reform work (13:30-31). Punctuating all his efforts was his constant prayer for God to remember his efforts in behalf of the purity and restoration of the community (5:19; 13:14, 22b, 31b).

⁷⁷For Sanballat's Samaritan connections, see footnote 51.

⁷⁸Small wonder, then, that the New Testament author of Hebrews points out the need for a change in the laws of priesthood from family succession to divine appointment of a single, righteous priest who would live forever to make intercession for the people, cf. He. 7:11, 23-28.