THE NEW COLLEGEVILLE
BIBLE COMMENTARY

EZRA

NEHEMIAH

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ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles
Amos—Amos
Bar—Baruch
1 Chr—1 Chronicles
2 Chr—2 Chronicles
Col—Colossians
1 Cor—1 Corinthians
2 Cor—2 Corinthians
Dan—Daniel
Deut—Deuteronomy
Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes
Eph—Ephesians
Esth—Esther
Exod—Exodus
Ezek—Ezekiel
Ezra—Ezra
Gal—Galatians
Gen—Genesis
Hab—Habakkuk
Hag—Haggai
Heb—Hebrews
Hos—Hosea
Isa—Isaiah
Jas—James
Jdt—Judith
Jer—Jeremiah
Job—Job
Joel—Joel
John—John
1 John—1 John
2 John—2 John
3 John—3 John
Jonah—Jonah
Josh—Joshua
Jude—Jude
Judg—Judges
1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings
Lam—Lamentations
Lev—Leviticus
Luke—Luke
1 Macc—1 Maccabees
2 Macc—2 Maccabees
Mal—Malachi
Mark—Mark
Matt—Matthew
Mic—Micah
Nah—Nahum
Neh—Nehemiah
Num—Numbers
Obad—Obadiah
1 Pet—1 Peter
2 Pet—2 Peter
Phil—Philippians
Phlm—Philemon
Prov—Proverbs
Ps(s)—Psalms
Rev—Revelation
Rom—Romans
Ruth—Ruth
1 Sam—1 Samuel
2 Sam—2 Samuel
Sir—Sirach
Song—Song of Songs
1 Thess—1 Thessalonians
2 Thess—2 Thessalonians
1 Tim—1 Timothy
2 Tim—2 Timothy
Titus—Titus
Tob—Tobit
Wis—Wisdom
Zech—Zechariah
Zeph—Zephaniah

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

The Historical and Theological Importance of Ezra-Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (originally a single literary work, hence Ezra-Nehemiah) deal with one of the more fascinating and, until recently, little known eras in ancient Israelite history. Because it was long thought that most of the Old Testament had been written before or during the Babylonian exile (586–539 B.C.), many biblical scholars paid little attention to the period immediately following the exile known as the Persian period (539–330 B.C.). It was understood simply as that era when the final editorial touches were placed on the larger biblical books and when some of the smaller texts (e.g., the books of Jonah, Esther, and Ecclesiastes) were written.

However, there has been a great change in attitude concerning the historical importance of the Persian period, as it appears more and more to be the formative era for the Old Testament texts. This current interest in the Persian period underscores the importance of Ezra-Nehemiah, since it is the main literary source of historical data for Jerusalem during that era. Just how much reliable information it provides is a matter of some debate.

Additionally, Ezra-Nehemiah has played an important role in biblical theology. Since the nineteenth century, Christian biblical scholars saw the Persian period as the beginning of Judaism, a religion they maintained to be distinct from the Israelite religion that existed prior to the exile. Christian scholars characterized postexilic Judaism as a nationalistic faith that believed that God had reserved blessing for Jews alone. Ezra-Nehemiah, with its condemnation of intermarriage with non-Jews, was held up as evidence for this unflattering portrayal of postexilic Judaism. The alleged contrast served to divorce Judaism from its own historical and religious roots. This allowed some Christian biblical scholars to use the Old Testament to support a theological claim that Christianity had replaced or superseded Judaism. Advances in historical and theological study, along with the great

strides made recently in Jewish-Christian relations, have revealed this kind of biblical interpretation to be flawed. Instead, when one engages in a careful, informed reading of Ezra-Nehemiah, a compelling story emerges which tells of a people's attempt to reassemble the fragments of their lost heritage in order to face the future.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

No careful reading of the Bible can take place without knowledge of the relevant historical and cultural contexts at work behind the text. This is particularly necessary when reading Ezra-Nehemiah. Both Ezra and Nehemiah are functionaries of the Persian crown, and the biblical text makes clear that none of the work of resettlement and restoration would have taken place were it not for imperial support. Several of the ancient Achaemenid kings (what the Persian kings called themselves because they traced their descent from a royal ancestor, Achaemenes) are mentioned in the text, and the imperial government plays a major role throughout the story. The Persian Empire began with Cyrus the Great (559–530) and came to an end in 330 with the defeat of Darius III by Alexander the Great. Please note that *all* dates discussed in this book are B.C. unless otherwise noted.

Sources for the study of the Persian Empire

Knowledge of the ancient Persians for most people comes from study of classical Greek sources.

Sadly, despite the power and magnitude of Persian imperial power, very few Persian texts have survived to offer first-hand information about the empire. Apart from one royal inscription—the famous text of King Darius I (522–486) carved on an inaccessible cliff face at Behistun—there are no existing Persian historical records of significant length. Knowledge about ancient Persia must come from other areas, most notably the writings of peoples who were either Persian subjects or enemies (or, at times, both). These writings include the biblical books of Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and ancient Greek writings (i.e., the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon). However, one must use caution when consulting these writings. They are written from noticeably biased viewpoints (either pro- or anti-Persian) and often emphasize things that the Persians themselves would have found less important, such as the role of Judah and Jerusalem in the political designs of the empire, or the significance of the Persian defeats in Greece.

Many other written sources survive in addition to these literary texts. First are the numerous archives from various parts of the empire that con-

tain records of mundane but necessary day-to-day activities. Special mention must be made here of the archive of Aramaic letters from the Jewish military garrison at Elephantine on the Nile River in Upper (Southern) Egypt. These texts date from the fifth century, i.e., almost contemporaneous with Nehemiah's work in Jerusalem, and offer a precious glimpse of life in the service of the Persian king and the practice of Judaism outside of Palestine. When this latter information is set alongside the texts in Ezra-Nehemiah concerning the building of the Jerusalem temple and establishment of Jewish religious practice, the contrasts are illuminating.

Equally important evidence comes from seals and coins which, by their reference to local political leaders and use of religious iconography, can furnish much knowledge about political and cultural developments. Seals and coins mentioning several Persian governors of Judah from the period after Nehemiah who were otherwise unknown have shed invaluable light on a little-known historical period in ancient Israel. Finally, but not least important, are nonwritten archaeological data, ranging from the ruins of the stunning Persian palaces in Persepolis and Susa to the evidence concerning population and settlement in Jerusalem and its environs. Such data serve both to complement and correct the picture provided by written sources.

The extent and organization of the Persian Empire

Greatness is a term often bandied about, but it is a well-deserved title for the founder of the Persian Empire, Cyrus, whose military exploits became legendary. By 539, he had gained mastery over almost all the major political forces in the ancient Near East, culminating with the defeat of Nabonidus, king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. It is as the conqueror of Babylon that Cyrus figures prominently in the Old Testament, and this will be discussed more below. It was left to Cyrus's successors to solidify Persian power. At its greatest extent in the fifth century, Persian control encompassed three continents, extending south from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf and west from India all the way to Ethiopia (see maps section). Kings built opulent royal residences at Susa, Persepolis, and Ecbatana (all in modern-day Iran), and made elaborate rock-cut tombs for themselves set in the side of a mountain. Persian relief sculptures and inscriptions repeatedly stress the multinational nature of their empire and the vast array of different peoples who live under Persian dominion.

After this rapid period of expansion, Persian imperial policy focused mainly on the consolidation and maintenance of power. To this end an elaborate governmental system was devised. At the top was the king, who ruled as an absolute monarch. He spent the bulk of his time moving seasonally

between the magnificent palaces of his imperial cities. A large retinue accompanied the king wherever he went. In addition to nobles and grandees from around the empire, an elite corps of bodyguards protected the king. Priests and other religious personnel attended to the gods on the king's behalf. A harem comprised of a small number of wives along with a large contingent of concubines was always available to the king.

All of the conquered lands were understood as the king's private property and all subject peoples his servants. The administrative system reflected this, since it served to centralize all authority and resources in the person of the king. The imperial holdings were arranged into organizational units known as satrapies, a term derived from an Old Persian word meaning "protecting the kingdom" and known in the New American Bible Revised Edition as "provinces." The administrator was known as a satrap (in the New American Bible Revised Edition called "governor"). The governor was not exactly a ruler, but functioned as a representative of the king. He served to remind Persian subjects that the power of the king was ever present, even though the king himself might be far away, and this paradoxical combination of absolute power with remoteness surrounded the king with a sense of mystery. Indeed, in most of the major Greek writings of this period, including Plato and Aristotle, the Persian king is simply referred to as "the Great King."

Satrapies themselves were further divided into subunits also called "provinces" in the Bible. These were usually based upon preexisting political boundaries. Judah with its capital in Jerusalem was its own province that in turn was part of the satrapy called "Beyond the River" (translated "West-of-Euphrates" in the New American Bible Revised Edition). This satrapy comprised roughly the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel and took its name from the fact that it was located across the River Euphrates from the vantage point of Persia. Samaria also at this time was a provincial capital in the same satrapy. Residents of Judah were called in Hebrew *yehudim*, which can be translated as either "Judeans" or "Jews." In Ezra-Nehemiah both of these meanings are used, as the author attempts to show that only people who belong to the community of Israel are the rightful occupants of the land of Judah.

Beneath the satraps were various regional overseers (also known in the Bible as governors) responsible for smaller administrative units within an individual satrapy. Often these offices were given to local elites, which offered the Persians a degree of political stability. People whose status and well-being were dependent upon the king may be less likely to engage in seditious behavior. The Israelite functionaries Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah played this role in Judah.

Kings in the ancient Near East extended their dominance to neighboring people for two main reasons. The first was to provide a buffer to protect the homeland from rival powers. The second was to exploit the conquered territories for their resources. This was accomplished in the form of tribute, which took many forms: agricultural produce, manufactured products, precious metals, and people. When Alexander the Great destroyed the Persian capital at Persepolis in 330, he was said to have confiscated an astronomical amount of wealth from the treasury there.

The regional governors and satraps were responsible for the collection of tribute and its payment to the king. In many cases, temples were used as administrative clearinghouses for the collection of tribute, and this helps to explain Persian interest in restoration of the Jerusalem temple. The primary role of satraps and regional governors was to ensure the orderly collection of tribute and its payment to the royal court. They were also required to maintain peace in their territories.

Satraps and governors could become very powerful in several ways. First, they too were supported by tribute and so, prior to sending payment to court, the local official was first given his due. Second, through loyalty to the king they could be granted large land holdings and estates throughout the empire. Because of this, a satrap could amass revenue and military power in an attempt to free himself from the rule of the king. In the middle of the fourth century a number of satraps in Asia Minor undertook just such a revolt which eventually failed. Some scholars believe that certain messianic expectations in Jerusalem concerning Zerubbabel led to his being eliminated by the Persians, given the fact that he disappears abruptly from the narrative. Caught in the midst of this system were the conquered populations and, whether they provided economic support for satrap and king or were pawns in an armed struggle between Persia and her enemies, the burdens on them were very great.

One may well ask how the Persians were able to maintain absolute control over such a large geographic area for two centuries. In addition to their military strength and administrative mechanisms, the Persians, like all conquerors, used art and writing as propaganda with great effect. Persian kings never failed to stress the continuity between their rule and older, well-established monarchies. By the sixth century, Egypt and Babylon already possessed heritages that were over two thousand years old, and in both regions the Persian kings placed inscriptions in which they claimed to be the legitimate successors to the pharaohs of the Nile and the kings of Babylon. The Persians often described themselves as worshipers of the gods of conquered peoples, which portrayed divine support for Persian rule. The

success of this strategy is apparent in the Bible, where the Israelite author of Isaiah portrays Cyrus the Persian as the chosen instrument of God.

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

Attempting to use any biblical book as a historical source presents many obstacles. We do not know exactly when most of the biblical books were written, and hence how close they are to the events they describe. Moreover, whatever sources biblical authors used to write their texts are now lost and must be reconstructed through painstaking, speculative work. Finally, the biblical books have been subjected to extensive editing by ancient copyists who sought to "correct" the text wherever they saw any historical, literary, or even theological deficiencies. Ezra-Nehemiah has posed some of the most difficult problems to those who hope to learn about its history and composition. Discussion below will reflect these problems by focusing on the several viable alternatives proposed by scholars.

The use of sources in Ezra-Nehemiah

It is not known exactly what sources the author of Ezra-Nehemiah used, but the text shows evidence that it draws upon earlier writings of various kinds. Ezra-Nehemiah contains numerous lists of names. These lists denote different groups of Israelites, such as those who returned from exile (Ezra 2:1-70; 8:1-14; Neh 7:5-68); men who had married non-Israelite women (Ezra 10:18-43) and those who signed the covenant agreeing to put away their foreign wives (Neh 10:3-27); those who worked to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and dedicate them (Neh 3:1-32; 12:31-42); those who took up residence there (Neh 11:3-36); and the list of high priests and Levites in the rebuilt temple (Neh 12:1-26). These lists may come from archival sources, or they may be remnants of an oral tradition, which also makes extensive use of lists. What is clear in Ezra-Nehemiah is that these lists do not always fit the context in which they are placed and in some instances date from a later period.

There are also several decrees from Persian kings in the text (Ezra 1:1-4 [Cyrus]; 4:17-22 [Artaxerxes]; 6:3-5 [Cyrus]; 6:6-12 [Darius]; 7:12-26 [Artaxerxes]). These texts, as well as the letters written to the Persian king (Ezra 4–5) may draw upon or reproduce actual Persian administrative documents. This is especially so for those texts written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew (Ezra 4:17-22; 6:3-5, 6-12; 7:12-26), since Aramaic was the official diplomatic language of the Persian Empire. However, neither the presence of official correspondence nor the use of Aramaic is any guarantee that historical sources lie behind the text. Works of creative literary fiction in the Old Testament such as Esther and Daniel also make use of royal decrees and Aramaic.

Parts of Ezra-Nehemiah are written in the first person and give the appearance of direct speech to the reader from Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars have maintained that the first-person sections of Nehemiah (1:1–7:73; 11:1-2; 12:31-43; 13:4-31) draw upon a memoir written by Nehemiah that was deposited in the temple archives. These first-person passages in Nehemiah resemble other texts from the ancient Near East in which the author addresses his god and gives an account of his actions. Naturally the rhetoric of these texts is one of self-justification, but that does not make them devoid of authentic historical information. With the first-person sections of Ezra there is less scholarly consensus. Some think that a text written by Ezra has been incorporated into Ezra-Nehemiah, while others maintain that the first-person sections in Ezra have been written in imitation of the genuine Nehemiah memoir.

Ezra-Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles

Ezra-Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles have long been associated with each other. The last verses of 2 Chronicles are repeated in the opening of Ezra. Both texts seem to focus on the importance of the temple in Jerusalem and proper worship there, especially the function of the Levites. Both are written from a postexilic perspective. If one were to begin reading at 1 Chronicles and read through 2 Chronicles and on to Ezra-Nehemiah, the entire history of Israel is presented from the creation of the world to the restoration of the temple after the exile.

Because of these features, many biblical scholars maintain that 1–2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah have the same author, called the Chronicler for lack of a better name. However, attempts to determine the authorship of ancient works are notoriously difficult and many scholars now doubt the existence of the Chronicler as author of 1–2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Ultimately, what is important to remember is that Ezra-Nehemiah may be profitably read as part of a larger narrative work that includes 1–2 Chronicles, regardless of whether or not the books originate from a single author or group of scribes.

Ezra and Nehemiah in the canon and in later Jewish and Christian traditions

Ezra-Nehemiah was originally a single literary work before Jerome divided it into two separate books when he made the Vulgate translation. For centuries the two books were known as 1 and 2 Esdras in Catholic Bibles. In Judaism the work was not divided until the Middle Ages, although in modern printed Hebrew Bibles the two books are still united. Throughout the ancient Jewish and Christian world, many traditions grew up around

the figure of Ezra. In Jewish tradition he is the second great lawgiver, esteemed as highly as Moses, and is also credited with the collection and publication of the Jewish scriptures.

One tradition in the Talmud states that if God had not called Moses, then he would have given the law to Ezra. The Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza expanded on this tradition and claimed that Ezra was the author of the Pentateuch. There are many apocryphal stories written by both Jews and Christians about encounters between Ezra and divine figures. These stories often have an apocalyptic tone, much like the book of Revelation, which shows that early Jews and Christians saw Ezra as a mediator between God and humankind. With Nehemiah things are simpler. Apart from his presence in Ezra-Nehemiah, Nehemiah is mentioned only in Sirach 49:13, a long poem praising the great Israelites of the past, and in 2 Maccabees 2:13, which recounts his efforts at collecting the lost sacred books after the exile.

Historical background to Ezra-Nehemiah

A very curious feature about all of these later traditions surrounding Ezra and Nehemiah is that the two figures never occur together in any of them. The only place where they are connected is in Ezra-Nehemiah, yet even here there are problems. First, the two men appear to have no knowledge of each other at all, an odd situation given the prominent role both are given in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. They are only mentioned together in Nehemiah 8:9; 12:26, 36, but because neither man speaks or acknowledges the other in any of these instances, most biblical scholars see these texts as editorial glosses inserted to create a relationship between the two men.

Additionally, the chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah as it now stands poses problems. According to Ezra 7:7, Ezra left for Jerusalem in "the seventh year of King Artaxerxes," while in Nehemiah 2:1 we are told that Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem in "the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes." But if Ezra in fact arrived before Nehemiah, there are logical inconsistencies in the story recounting their deeds. When Ezra arrives, he finds a populated, walled (depending on how one reads Ezra 9:9) city, which makes it difficult to explain why Nehemiah, arriving after Ezra, should have to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and arrange for the city to be inhabited. Also, Ezra 10:6 mentions that Johanan was high priest during Ezra's stay in Jerusalem. We know from other records that a Johanan was high priest ca. 410 and was the grandson of Eliashib, who is the high priest in Nehemiah 3:1; 13:10. If Ezra came first, then how could Johanan have been high priest before his grandfather?

The obvious solution to these problems is to reverse the order of Ezra and Nehemiah's journeys to Jerusalem. Some biblical scholars have done this, based upon different historical and literary proposals. One such solution argues that the King Artaxerxes who sent Ezra back is a different Artaxerxes from the one who commissioned Nehemiah's trip to Jerusalem. Since it is almost certain that the Artaxerxes with whom Nehemiah dealt is Artaxerxes I, some maintain that Artaxerxes II (405–359) is the king who commissions Ezra. This makes the "seventh year of King Artaxerxes" in Ezra 7:7 the year 398 rather than 458. According to this reconstruction, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem in 445 and Ezra follows in 398:

Nehemiah: "twentieth year of Artaxerxes" (Neh 2:1) = Artaxerxes I (445)
Ezra: "seventh year of King Artaxerxes" (Ezra 7:7) = Artaxerxes II (398)

Another solution claims that Artaxerxes I is the king who deals with *both* Ezra and Nehemiah, but that the text of Ezra 7:7 should read "the thirty-seventh year" rather than "the seventh year." In Hebrew, the word "thirty" (*sheloshim*) is spelled similarly to the words for "year" (*shenah*) and "seven" (*sheva*). It would be easy for a copyist to accidentally omit the word "thirty." There is a similar instance of a number having dropped out of the Hebrew text of the Bible in 1 Samuel 13:1 which reads: "Saul was a year old when he began to reign, and he ruled two years over Israel." Given the implausible nature of the statement as it stands, it is certain that the actual age of Saul upon his accession has been lost, most likely due to a copyist's error. With this proposed change to Ezra 7:7, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 445 and Ezra followed in 428.

Nehemiah: "twentieth year of Artaxerxes" (Neh 2:1) = Artaxerxes I (445)
Ezra: "[thirty]-seventh year of King Artaxerxes" (Ezra 7:7) = Artaxerxes I (428)

Neither of these solutions is without problems, and other scholars argue that the biblical order of Ezra followed by Nehemiah is also historically plausible, although their arguments too are fraught with gaps and inconsistencies. One factor worth mentioning is that most of the chronological problems occur in the book of Ezra. The first half of the book telescopes almost a century of history into a time span that gives the impression of being much shorter. There is evidence of multiple returns from Babylon behind the portrayal of a single great return in Ezra 1–3. The depiction of Ezra is also highly irregular. He is nowhere mentioned as the governor of Judah, as is Nehemiah, nor is he a high priest. It is clear that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah wants to place the work of Ezra at the same time as that

of Nehemiah and, further, that the author had literary and theological reasons for doing so. Exploring these reasons is a fruitful enterprise, despite the fact that the historical background to Ezra-Nehemiah remains a puzzle.

Literary considerations and ancient history writing

The author may have had other priorities than historical accuracy. Often the questions that modern readers bring to biblical texts are conditioned by assumptions and sensibilities foreign to the biblical authors. That history is only about the retelling of events in the order that they happened is a modern idea that often is at odds with how ancient authors wrote about the past. For the biblical writers, history writing must always have a moral or didactic purpose. It did not exist simply to tell readers about the past, but instead it drew upon traditions about the past to teach readers a lesson.

Many examples of this kind of historical writing are in the Bible. The author of Judges arranged traditional material about early Israelite heroes into a repeated pattern of apostasy, oppression, repentance, and salvation to stress the importance of fidelity to Yahweh for peace and prosperity. Similarly, 1–2 Kings arranges its material through the lenses of "good" and "bad" kings, i.e., those who were either faithful or disobedient to the covenant. Even in the New Testament, one finds that in each gospel, stories about Jesus handed on in the tradition are arranged and shaped according to theological rather than historical aims. Witness in John the fact that the cleansing of the temple is placed at the beginning of the gospel, rather than at the beginning of the Passion as in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In addition to the fact that the biblical writers had a different understanding of history than we do, it is also the case that in many instances they did not intend to write about the past simply as past. Once one understands this, many of the so-called "contradictions" in the Bible disappear because they are revealed to be texts driven by theological or literary concerns rather than historical ones. This is most apparent in the case of the many doublets in the Old Testament, i.e., two (or more) versions of the same story. Examples of these abound, from the two creation stories in Genesis 1–3, to the stories of Abraham and Isaac passing off their wives as their sisters in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, to the two traditions of the slayer of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 and 2 Samuel 21, to the two different versions of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

Turning to Ezra-Nehemiah, one gets the impression reading the text that the book is telling parallel stories simultaneously, rather than recount-

ing a single story in a strict, linear fashion. In response to this, some biblical scholars maintain that the present text of Ezra-Nehemiah is jumbled and needs rearrangement. The following changes are often proposed: Ezra's reading of the law in Nehemiah 7:72–8:18 is placed right after Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem in Ezra 8:36. Ezra's prayer in Nehemiah 9:6-37 is combined with his prayer in Ezra 9:6-15. The people's lament in Nehemiah 9:1-5 about having taken foreign wives is placed in the assembly of the people in Ezra 10. The covenant made by the people in Nehemiah 10:1-40 is placed after Nehemiah 13:31, so as to be the final chapter of the book. The list detailing the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 11:1-19 is placed after Nehemiah 7:72, the end of the list of returned exiles.

Such wholesale emendation of the text is necessary, however, only if the assumption is that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah placed the highest priority on linear coherence. But perhaps the author was more concerned with trying to show how the distinct missions of Ezra and Nehemiah paralleled and complemented each other. Of course some chronological integrity was then sacrificed for the sake of this larger purpose. This would explain why, in the text's present form, the missions of both men contain the same elements: return, reconstruction, assembly, covenant renewal, and reform.

These elements, it should be added, form a larger narrative pattern known from the Greek world involving stories of colonization. During the classical Greek period, roughly contemporaneous with the events depicted in Ezra-Nehemiah, several Greek cities sent groups of citizens to found colonies. Many of these Greek colonies were founded in southern Italy and Sicily, which is why those regions now have some of the most impressive Greek ruins. The leader of the expedition was required to seek divine sanction for the new colony from the gods, to oversee the colony's foundation and governance, and to ensure the proper transfer and institution of the mother-city's religious practices.

Ezra-Nehemiah contains all of the essential elements needed to describe the colonization of a new settlement in antiquity. Here, the two main characters share the duties of the founder. To Ezra is given the task of ritual purification, which involves offering prayers on behalf of the people and giving instruction in the law of Yahweh. To Nehemiah fall the activities of building fortifications, populating the city with worthy inhabitants, and establishing commercial, cultic, and social regulations.

In addition to shaping the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah along the lines of the Greek colonization process, the author also arranged his material according to a handful of stylized type-scenes that are repeated for both Ezra and Nehemiah. Type-scenes are standardized vignettes that ancient

authors and storytellers used to arrange their source material. The type-scene signals the reader to make connections between a particular story and others like it. Here, the purpose of the type-scenes is to draw the reader's attention to the similarities between the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah and the significance of their respective missions.

Among the type-scenes in Ezra-Nehemiah is the return from exile, the first led by Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua (Ezra 1:5; 2:1), and a second led by Ezra (Ezra 7:7; 8:15-36). Another type-scene involves the attempt by enemies to halt the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Ezra 4:1-6; 5:3; Neh 2:10; 3:33–4:2; 6:1-14). The enemies are variously understood as the "people of the land," or other regional governors, such as Sanballat or Tobiah. Both Ezra and Nehemiah say lengthy prayers (Ezra 9:6-15; Neh 1:5-11; 9:6-37) that function much like the long speeches placed into the mouths of main characters in ancient history writing, for example, Peter and Paul in Acts. Ancient authors used such monologues to interpret events in the narrative or to give them historical context. Finally, there is the type-scene which involves the assembly of the entire people (Ezra 3:1; 10:1; 10:9; Neh 8:1; 9:1). This type-scene can coincide with either a rededication to the law of Moses (Neh 10:29-40) or the observance of a religious festival (Ezra 3:4; Neh 8:13-17). This type-scene is also found in other Old Testament texts (e.g., 2 Kings 22; 2 Maccabees 2) and plays a significant role in ancient Israelite self-understanding.

Theology in Ezra-Nehemiah

If the author was subordinating historical concerns to his theological agenda, then the text of Ezra-Nehemiah can be understood without recourse to changing the order or the contents of the text, although it is helpful to know exactly how the author has rearranged his source material in order to understand the author's literary and theological concerns. From the author's perspective, he was telling a tale of the distant past when the people of Israel were brought home to Jerusalem by God in fulfillment of the divine promise. This tale was one of hardship and conflict. Fidelity to the covenant and perseverance in its observance were the only remedies for the people's troubles.

The theology of Ezra-Nehemiah consequently stresses the connection between God's people and God's law, the latter being the defining characteristic of the former. The role of the law is paramount. Ezra comes back to Jerusalem for the sole purpose of bringing the law of Moses to the newly reconstituted community. Nehemiah rebuilds the wall of Jerusalem before he repopulates the city with Israelites and enforces observance of the law. Both of these missions, Ezra's to bring the law and Nehemiah's to build the

wall, serve to create a people set apart in both the literal and metaphorical senses. The law and the wall mark the boundary and maintain the distinction between insiders and outsiders. Indeed, in his great prayer, Ezra brings the metaphorical and the literal understanding of walls together when, in reference to the law, he proclaims that God has given his people "a protective wall in Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 9:9). The connection is clear: both the law of God and the walls of Jerusalem serve to preserve God's people.

This connection is strengthened later in the history of Judaism. There is a famous Greek text called the Letter of Aristeas, which tells the story of how the law of Moses was translated from Hebrew into Greek. Written sometime in the second century, the text is also a defense of the Jewish law. One of the images the author uses for the law is a wall, claiming that through Moses God has surrounded his people with "iron walls" to separate them from other people and their false beliefs.

This concern for adhering to the law through maintenance of community boundaries has been misunderstood by non-Jews for over 2,000 years. This misunderstanding has sadly led many Christians to characterize Judaism as legalistic, rigid, nationalistic, or even xenophobic. Doing so overlooks the larger historical context that led postexilic Judaism to stress fidelity to the law in the manner that it did. Those who came to Jerusalem under the auspices of the Persian authorities saw themselves as returning exiles, descendants of a people who had been brutally deported by the Babylonians in 587. Deportation was a common military strategy in the ancient Near East. Thousands of conquered people were moved great distances and forcibly resettled. Deportation was an effective means of controlling conquered people for the very reason that it destroyed their identity as a people. After three or four generations, people were assimilated to their new habitat, one provided for them by conquerors who were now seen as the guarantors, rather than the destroyers, of a people's identity.

Thus, those who came to Jerusalem saw themselves as the fortunate recipients of another chance to be the people God had intended them to be. Consequently they were determined not to let this opportunity pass them by. Out of this arose a critical reflection, begun already during the exile, in which Israelite intellectuals explored the question: "Why did God allow us to be taken into exile?" Finding an answer to this question would help ensure that such a calamity never happen again.

For the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, part of the answer could be found in Deuteronomistic History, the scholarly designation for that great body of work comprising the books of Deuteronomy–2 Kings that chronicles Israelite history from their arrival in the Promised Land through the division

into two kingdoms that culminates in the exile. There, God repeatedly makes explicit that any violation of the covenant will result in the Israelites' expulsion from the land (see, for example, Deuteronomy 28). Then when both the northern and southern kingdoms are destroyed, the author adds the editorial comment that these disasters were deserved divine punishments for the faithlessness of the people (2 Kings 17, 24).

Ezra-Nehemiah stands in this tradition when it affirms that the exile was the deserved punishment of a just God on a disobedient people. Yet that is only half the picture for Ezra-Nehemiah, since it also chronicles the return from exile. Here, the text takes a cue from the prophetic literature in the Old Testament, which often uses a stylized pattern of sin, punishment, and forgiveness to describe the relationship between God and the Israelites (Amos and Hosea are good examples of this pattern). So too in Ezra-Nehemiah, the return to Jerusalem is seen as a gracious act of mercy on the part of God, a second chance that, because it is undeserved, is not to be squandered.

The Deuteronomistic vision of a just God who punishes wrongdoing and the prophetic proclamation of a merciful God who ultimately forgives come together in Ezra-Nehemiah, most notably in Ezra's great prayer on behalf of the people: "Yet in your great mercy you did not completely destroy them and you did not forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. . . . In all that has come upon us you have been just, for you kept faith while we have done evil" (Neh 9:31, 33). This affirmation of God's just punishment and gracious mercy is at the heart of the Old Testament's theology. It is expressed most forcefully perhaps in the doxological poem that God proclaims about himself during the theophany to Moses on Mt. Sinai:

> The Lord, the Lord, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity, continuing his love for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but bringing punishment for their parents' wickedness on children and children's children to the third and fourth generation! (Exod 34:6-7)

Studying Ezra-Nehemiah at once opens the reader to a time in the history of ancient Israel in which many of the foundational texts and ideas at work in the Old Testament came together and were crystallized in what was seen as a providential opportunity, a graced moment not to be missed. The intensity with which Ezra and Nehemiah exhorted their compatriots to "seize the day" should not be lost on us. Living with one's eyes open to the sweep of history and aware also of the presence of God and the responsibilities of following God are perennial necessities for the life of faith.

The Book of Ezra

I. The Return from Exile

1 **The Decree of Cyrus.** ¹In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lᴏʀᴅ spoken by Jeremiah, the Lᴏʀᴅ stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: ²"Thus says Cyrus, king of

THE RETURN FROM EXILE

Ezra 1–6

Scholars have divided Ezra into two parts. Ezra 1–6 deals with events spanning the first return of exiles in 539 until the sixth year of Darius I (516). Ezra 4 seems to leapfrog into the reign of Artaxerxes I (beginning in 465). Ezra 7–10 presupposes a completed temple and begins with the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem during the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes I (458). Text divisions and subheadings below are taken from the New American Bible Revised Edition. A Greek paraphrase of parts of 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah exists. It is part of the Catholic apocrypha known as 3 Esdras (but in Greek it is called 1 Esdras; biblical studies can be confusing). In certain instances, this Greek version contains interesting variants from the Hebrew text of Ezra-Nehemiah. Where appropriate, these variants will be noted below.

1:1-11 The decree of Cyrus

Cyrus of Persia (d. 530) was the founder of the first true empire in the ancient Near East. In the space of twenty years, he completed a series of stunning military conquests, defeating the Medians, Lydians, Babylonians, and Egyptians (the final conquest of the Egyptians completed by his son Cambyses). In the *Histories* of Herodotus, Cyrus is portrayed as an ambitious and brilliant general, destined for greatness from before his birth.

▶ This symbol indicates a cross-reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 109 for number citations.
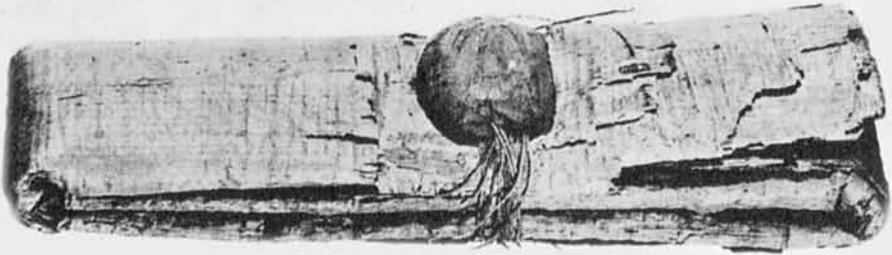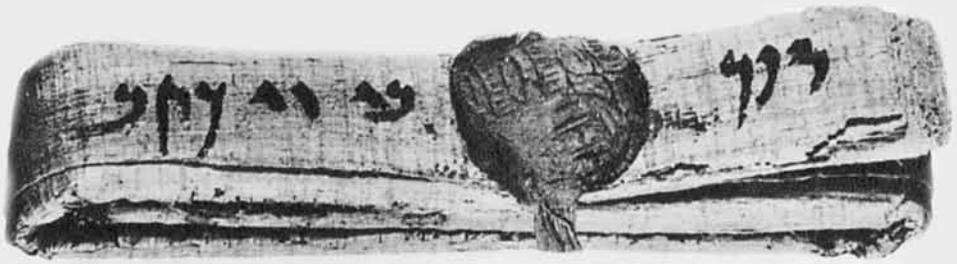
The letter to a Persian governor requesting that a Jewish temple at Elephantine in Egypt be rebuilt. King Cyrus gives similar permission for the temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt (Ezra 1:2ff).

Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

³Those among you who belong to any part of his people, may their God be with them! Let them go up to Jerusalem in Judah to build the house of the

In October 539 Cyrus entered the city of Babylon after having defeated the armies of the Babylonian king, Nabonidus. The decree in Ezra 1:2-4 is dated immediately after Cyrus' conquest of Babylon ("the first year," 1:1) and implies that one of his first acts was to send the exiles home. This decree is also found in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, and functions as the bridge between 1–2 Chronicles, which tells the story of the Israelites from creation to the return from exile, to Ezra-Nehemiah, which continues that story until roughly the year 400.

The decree in Ezra 1 is prefaced by the author's belief that Cyrus was moved to send the exiles back to Jerusalem at the urging of God. The anonymous author of Isaiah 44 expands on this belief and not only has God call Cyrus but also declare him to be his "anointed":

> I say of Cyrus, My shepherd! / He carries out my every wish, / Saying of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," / and of the temple, "Lay its foundations." / Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus, / whose right hand I grasp, / Subduing nations before him, / stripping kings of their strength, / Opening doors before him, / leaving the gates unbarred: / I will go before you / and level the mountains; / Bronze doors I will shatter, / iron bars I will snap. / I will give you treasures of darkness, / riches hidden away, / That you may know I am the LORD, / the God of Israel, who calls you by name. / For the sake of Jacob, my servant, / of Israel my chosen one, / I have called you by name, / giving you a title, though you do not know me. / I am the LORD, there is no other, / there is no God besides me. / It is I who arm you, though you do not know me (Isa 44:28–45:5).

Worth noticing in the biblical portrayal of Cyrus is not only the fact that he is understood as the instrument of God, but also that God is understood as the god of the entire world. Belief in the universal dominion of God appears to have originated in ancient Israel during and after the exile. The fact that the entire known world was under the rule of a single king doubtless played a role in this theological speculation.

The Cyrus decree preserved in the Old Testament is not the only evidence of his astute political policy. The British Museum in London houses a clay barrel on which is a cuneiform inscription that Cyrus had placed in

Lᴏʀᴅ the God of Israel, that is, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴Let all those who have survived, in whatever place they may have lived, be assisted by the people of that place with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, together with voluntary offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.'"

⁵Then the heads of ancestral houses of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites—everyone, that is, whose spirit had been stirred up by God—

Babylon. This inscription, known as the Cyrus Cylinder, sheds valuable light on Cyrus' return of the exiles to Jerusalem in that it is Cyrus' justification for his takeover of Babylon.

In the ancient Near East royal legitimacy was based on continuity. The king was rightfully so because he continued the line, beliefs, prayers, and activities of the ancient kings. By 539, when Cyrus conquered Babylon, the city's culture and traditions were already 2,500 years old. In the inscription, Cyrus demonstrates his rightful place as king both by claiming that the Babylonian king, Nabonidus, had abandoned the correct traditions and that he, Cyrus, had been chosen by the Babylonian god Marduk to restore right worship:

> Nabonidus turned the worship of Marduk into an abomination. . . . Marduk searched all the lands for a righteous ruler. He chose Cyrus and anointed him as the ruler of all the earth. Because Marduk . . . was pleased with Cyrus . . . he ordered him to march against Babylon. They walked together like friends. . . . Marduk allowed Cyrus to enter Babylon without a battle. . . . I [Cyrus] entered Babylon as a friend of Marduk. . . . Every day I offered sacrifices to Marduk who made the people love and obey me (Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, eds., *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 2nd edition [New York: Paulist Press, 1997], 193–94).

Then the text turns to the reestablishment of order under Cyrus after the chaos of life during the rule of Nabonidus. The hallmark of good kingship in the ancient Near East was the creation and maintenance of a divinely ordained order. The king thus functioned as an agent of the gods, and proper worship is a necessary component of right rule. Thus Cyrus proclaims in the Cylinder:

> I returned the statues of the divine patrons of every land . . . to their own sanctuaries. When I found their sanctuaries in ruins, I rebuilt them. I also repatriated the people of these lands and rebuilt their houses. Finally, with Marduk's permission, I allowed statues of the divine

prepared to go up to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. ⁶All their neighbors gave them help in every way, with silver, gold, goods, livestock, and many precious gifts, besides all their voluntary offerings. ⁷King Cyrus, too, had the ves-

patrons of Sumer and Akkad [traditional name of Babylon] to be returned to their own sanctuaries, which I rebuilt (ibid., 195).

In both the biblical and cuneiform decrees, Cyrus the Persian is portrayed as the chosen instrument of the vanquished peoples' god, be it the Hebrew god Yahweh or the Babylonian god Marduk. Cyrus has been sent to restore order, understood specifically as the return of exiled peoples and the reestablishment of temples.

It is a matter of debate whether or not Cyrus actually promulgated decrees specific to each of the many peoples he conquered and repatriated. Scholars disagree over the authenticity of the decree in Ezra 1. The title "King of Persia" is not the customary title Cyrus and his successors used. Many think it highly unlikely that a Persian decree would mention the name of Yahweh, as in Ezra 1:2, although the Cyrus Cylinder freely uses the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. It also seems implausible that Cyrus would have authorized offerings for the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

The phrase "let them go up" in verse 3 is problematic in that, although it is a standard biblical phrase for going to Jerusalem, this is due to the fact that the city sits on a relatively high elevation in comparison to other areas in Palestine. That is to say, the expression "to go up to Jerusalem" would only make sense to someone who lived in Palestine. It is extremely unlikely that Cyrus would use a phrase that draws upon the geographic features of Palestine.

In Ezra 6:3-5 is an Aramaic version of the decree that seems to have more in common with surviving Persian correspondence, yet it too is not without difficulty. However, the Cyrus Cylinder and the praise of Cyrus in Isaiah, when placed alongside the decrees in Ezra and 2 Chronicles speak strongly in favor of an authentic tradition of Cyrus authorizing people in Babylon to return to Jerusalem, regardless of whether the decrees quoted in the Old Testament come from any archival sources now lost.

One may well ask why a Persian king would have had any interest in the destroyed temple of a small people on the southern borders of his empire. As mentioned in the introduction, temples, because they were places that collected offerings, were natural choices for administrative centers and hence facilitated the collecting of tribute. The Persians viewed their empire

sels of the house of the LORD brought forth that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his god. ⁸Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought forth by the treasurer Mithredath, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah. ⁹This was the inventory: baskets of goldware, thirty; baskets of silverware, one thousand and twenty-nine; ¹⁰golden bowls,

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as a source of revenue and were very efficient at exploiting their holdings in order to amass vast wealth. It made good sense to rebuild temples. It won the goodwill of the conquered peoples, or at least of the local elites whose support would be necessary. It showed the ruler to be the favored one of the conquered people's god, thus emphasizing his right to rule. Finally, it allowed the ruler to collect tribute with a minimum of effort.

Sheshbazzar is a mysterious figure, mentioned only here and in Ezra 5:14-17. Although he is called a prince of Judah in the text, it is unlikely that he was of Davidic descent. Instead, as the first governor of Judah, Sheshbazzar is an elite member of the Jewish community whom the Persians designated to establish an administrative structure. The name Sheshbazzar is Babylonian, a not unusual feature for Jews who lived in exile. Such is also the case with the name Zerubbabel. Remember too that Daniel and his companions are given Babylonian names in Daniel 1.

The account of the return in Ezra is most concerned with the rebuilding of the temple and the reestablishment of worship. Thus, there is the list of all the precious vessels returned to Jerusalem by Cyrus. The total amount of goods in verse 11 does not match the specific amounts listed in verses 9-10. All of the gifts are of an extraordinary amount, no doubt a literary exaggeration. It is doubtful that Cyrus would have given gold to the returnees, although the name of his treasurer in verse 8, Mithredath, is Persian. The picture of Jews departing a place of foreign captivity laden with riches is a motif that draws upon Exodus 12:35-36, in which the departing Israelites are given gold and other precious metals by the Egyptians. The author here is trying to draw the comparison between the exodus and the return from the exile. Both are a release from bondage due to an act of divine grace that allows God's people to return to their land.

Historical records show that not all the Jews who lived in Babylon returned to Jerusalem. Indeed, Babylon went on to become one of the major centers of Jewish intellectual life in the following centuries. In verse 5 the author mentions that the only people who returned to Jerusalem were those who had been inspired by God. Implicit in this remark is that not everyone who could go back to Jerusalem did indeed go. There would be many reasons why some exiled Jews chose not to return. After a period of fifty

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The Cyrus cylinder, a Babylonian text similar to Cyrus's charge by God to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2ff).

thirty; silver bowls, four hundred and ten; other vessels, one thousand. ¹¹Total of the gold and silver vessels: five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with him when the exiles were brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

2 A Census of the Returned Exiles. ¹These are the inhabitants of the province who returned from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away to Babylon, and who came back to Jeru-

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years, people would have become acclimated to their "new" surroundings. Children born in exile would have already been fully grown with children of their own. Babylon would have been the land that they knew, and Jerusalem would have been new and different.

Underlying the decision of whether to stay in Babylon or return to Jerusalem is a profound theological question. Can one properly worship God outside of the Promised Land and the Holy City? For many Jews in Babylon the answer to this question was "yes," and they developed a way to be faithful to the covenant without the temple in Jerusalem. Centuries later, when the temple was destroyed by the Romans, the way of life developed by the expatriate Jewish community in Babylon would become part of the norm for all Jews, even to this day.

2:1-70 A census of the returned exiles

Strictly speaking, this is a list of returnees from Babylon, led by Zerubbabel rather than Sheshbazzar. Sheshbazzar curiously drops out of the narrative until chapter 5, and some scholars maintain that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah has combined two separate returns in chapters 1–2, or that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person. The list in this chapter itself is clearly composite and much of it dates from later periods. The Nehemiah mentioned in verse 2 is not the same Nehemiah who builds the wall of Jerusalem. Of particular interest is the name Bigvai in verse 2, since it is a Persian name. It is highly unlikely that a returning Jewish exile would have a Persian name in the first year of Cyrus's reign.

The list is comprised of several subcategories. First is the "people of Israel," noting people by their family names, i.e., "descendants of X," in verses 3-21 and then shifting to designation by place (of settlement or origin?) in verses 22-28, before reverting to family designations in verses 29-35. Curiously, many of the family names are clearly place names, e.g., "descendants of Bethlehem" in verse 21, or "descendants of Jericho" in verse 34. Perhaps the author has combined two lists that used different formulae for designating family/town groups. Next, temple functionaries are listed in descending order of importance: priests (2:36-39), Levites (2:40), singers (2:41), gatekeepers (2:42), and slaves (2:43-54). After the temple