

The Old Testament: Part Eleven

Post-Exilic Historical Books

Ezra, Nehemiah, 1-2 Maccabees and Daniel

The *post-exilic* historical books of the Old Testament: Ezra, Nehemiah and 1-2 Maccabees.

Historical background to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

In its introduction to these two books of Scripture, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states:

The setting for the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the two -hundred-year period in which God's people were citizens of the Persian Empire. The Persian period began in 539 BC when Cyrus the Great of Persia (Iran) wrested control of the ancient Near Eastern world from the Babylonians. It ended in 333 BC when the same area fell into Greek hands under Alexander the Great.

More specifically, events narrated in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah fall within the first part of the Persian period, from 538 BC to shortly after 400 BC. For the Jews this was a time of return and restoration. Over the course of several generations, groups of Jewish exiles in Babylonia made their way back to their homeland of Judah in southern Palestine. There they undertook the work of restoration. They began by rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and reviving its worship. Later, under Nehemiah's leadership, they rebuilt the walls of the city of Jerusalem and repopulated the city. Nehemiah and Ezra also initiated reforms based on the law of Moses and aimed at restoring the identity and integrity of the Jewish people. The return and restoration, then, were gradual, interwoven processes which together pressed toward revitalization. The temple lay at the center. Around it grew the city with protective walls. Within and around Jerusalem, a people was fashioned anew through the influence of the law of Moses. (p.332)

Message. A unifying theme that runs through both books shows that Israel is a theocratic people whose only hope of survival lies in fidelity to their God and to the Torah, and not in military strength.

Ezra and Nehemiah give cohesion and spiritual unity to their people, saving them from disintegration under Hellenism (strong influence of Greek philosophy on Jewish life), which will happen in the next century after the Greeks defeat the Persians. It should be noted that Ezra was the founder of Judaism as it existed in the time of Jesus. The religious zeal of Ezra and Nehemiah persists today in Orthodox Judaism.

Three reasons why the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are important for us today

- They are our chief source of information on the Jewish community following the Exile.
- We see in these books a community's courage in picking up the pieces of a shattered past and arranging them in creative ways, even in the face of considerable opposition. The Jewish community is restored with God's help, its own fierce resolve, properly focused efforts and good leadership.
- In the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah, contemporary readers see models of piety. Both men depend upon and recognize God's help.

Ezra and Nehemiah are models of how to be faithful to one's heritage in creative ways in a new situation (*Collegeville Commentary*, p.339).

Division of the chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah

PART 1: Restoration of the Temple (Ezra 1-6)

PART 2: Restoration of the worshipping community (Ezra 7-10)

PART 3: Restoration of the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-7)

PART 4: Restoration of the community around the law (Nehemiah 8-13)

For more on Ezra, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Article 35.

Nehemiah, a wonderful lay leader for post-exilic Jews

The Book of Nehemiah is well worth reading. In this book, we have a wonderful example of a layman who hears God's call to leave Babylon where he is well regarded by the king, and to return to his homeland which lies in ruins.

Chapter 2: Nehemiah receives permission to return to Jerusalem

"If it pleases the king, if your servant is deserving your favor, send me to Judah to the city of my ancestor's graves, to rebuild it" (v.5).

Having obtained permission from the king to return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah heads out with an authorization

letter for materials for the rebuilding project and any army of officers and cavalry.

Verses 11-16—Nehemiah's night ride. After a three-day rest, Nehemiah goes for a night ride around to survey the actual damage to the city wall. By going quietly at night, he delays the interference by those who would be hostile to his plans.

Verses 17-18—Nehemiah reveals his plans. In these verses, we note the leadership skills of Nehemiah. When he meets with some of the leaders, he first tells them clearly what they know to be true: *"You see the evil plight in which we stand, how Jerusalem lies in ruins"* (v.17). Then he challenges them to act so that they and he will no longer be the laughing stock of their neighbors. The invitation to rebuild the city is a challenge to restore themselves as a people deserving respect. As a clincher to his sales pitch to his audience, Nehemiah states that his plans to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem have the blessing of God and the king. Nehemiah's listeners are moved by his challenge: *"Let us rise up and build!"*

Verses 19-20—Enemies of the project speak up. Once Sanballat and Tobiah hear of Nehemiah's plans, they raise their voices against him. Nehemiah responds by saying: "This is God's work and it is none of your business!" Nehemiah, the strong leader, is not going to be intimidated by the naysayers.

Chapters 3:30 to 4:17: Homeland security kicks into gear to deal with the opposition

"Have no fear of them. Keep in mind the Lord, who is great and to be feared...." (4:8).

When verbal abuse and ridicule (3:33-36) fail to stop the rebuilding, Nehemiah's enemies plan a military attack. Nehemiah's response is *prayer* and *action*. "We prayed to our God and posted a watch day and night." When the workers become discouraged (4:4), Nehemiah gives them a pep talk (v.8). Nehemiah's concern with homeland security means that the number of workers are cut back 50%. Some workers do a bit of both. They carry bricks in one hand and a weapon in the other (v.11). Once again, Nehemiah shows himself to be a very able leader. He refuses to be intimidated by his attackers. He motivates discouraged workers to stay focused on their important work which he firmly believes is God's work.

Chapter 6: A leader who refuses to be sidetracked

"... 'Nothing of what you report has taken place; rather, it is the invention of your own mind.' They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will slacken in the work, and it will never be completed.' But instead, I now redoubled my efforts." (vv 8-9)

This chapter shows again the great leader that the exiles have in Nehemiah. We will read of three failed attempts to stop him from completing his great work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

Chapter 8: An emotional reading of God's Word

When the priest Ezra gathers the people for the reading of God's Word, it is the first time that such an event has happened for several decades, so it is a very emotional experience for all present.

"Standing at one end of the open place...Ezra read out of the book from daybreak to midday, in the presence of the men, the women and those children old enough to understand." (v.3)

We have in verse 1-12 one of the most graphic portrayals in the Old Testament of Israel at worship. Catholics can easily see the roots of our liturgical worship in these verses.

- The assembly gathers together "as one man"—a symbol of a unified community. It consists of men, women and children "old enough to understand." (The younger children stay in the cry room.) The purpose of the introductory rites of the Mass is to unify a diverse community and prepare them to listen to God's Word proclaimed in the liturgy of the Word.
- Ezra, the priest, is the Presider and calls the people to a time of worship.
- Ezra proclaims the Word from "daybreak to midday" (not a short Mass).
- The people are actively engaged. They listen attentively (what every priest hopes for), and at appropriate times, they shout out their "Amen!"—their 'Yes!' to what they hear (v.6).
- Ezra preaches a homily interpreting the Word so that all can understand (v.8).
- The proclamation of the Word moves people to tears. Sometimes the Word of God convicts us of our failures. In the "act of penitence" in the Mass, Catholics have an opportunity to tell God they are sorry for their sins.
- After the completion of the liturgy of the Word, those gathered have a big celebration with rich foods and sweet drinks (lots of cake), and those who cannot afford are also cared for—like bringing forward food for the poor during the offertory at Mass.

For more on the Book of Nehemiah, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Article 36.

Two important post-exilic prophets during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah are **Haggai** (Art. 60) and **Zechariah**

(Art. 61). Both challenge the people not to quit on the reconstruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

1 and 2Maccabees

The last of the historical books of the Old Testament are 1 and 2Maccabees. They are stories of how one family revolted against the cruel policies of Antiochus IV who sought to impose pagan ways on all of his subjects. While we may think 2Maccabees is a continuation of 1 Maccabees, it is not. It is an independent witness to some of the same events covered in 1 Maccabees. There is a significant difference in the response that the two books give the forced Hellenization (Greek ways) policy of Antiochus. 1Maccabees supports armed resistance to Antiochus and his policies. It tells the story of one family of priests, the Maccabees, who successfully leads an armed revolution against the Seleucid Empire, leading to the establishment of Jewish independence.

2Maccabees, on the other hand, see Judah's future in the hands of its God. The author places less emphasis on the military exploits of the Maccabees and their followers while putting more attention on the witness of people, like Eleazar, who embrace martyrdom when forced to choose between violating the Torah and accepting death.

2Maccabees is theologically important because of the author's teachings on the resurrection of the just on the last day (7:9, 11, 14, 23, 14 46), the intercession of the saints in heaven for people living on earth (15:11-16), and the power of the living to offer prayers and sacrifices for the dead (12:39-46).

2Maccabees 6:18-7:42 tells the inspiring stories of the martyrdom of Eleazar and the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons. These verses are about people willing to die rather than deny their faith. In 1Maccabees, we have observed a *violent resistance* to the Hellenization policies of Antiochus; now we will witness a *non-violent response*—the path of martyrdom.

Commenting on the powerful witness of the seven sons, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states:

This narrative is skillfully written, with each character providing another element of the theological argument in favor of martyrdom. The number seven in Jewish tradition symbolizes perfection: accordingly, the reader may look upon this as a "perfect" family. The story, despite its gruesome details, is meant to edify. It underlines the premise that observance of the law is more important than life itself. The presence of the king adds further importance to the story.

Each of the seven sons presents a part of the theological argument: (1) it is better to die than to transgress the law; (2) the king may take their lives, but God will raise them up again; (3) the king may dismember them, but God will restore their limbs; (4) they will be restored to life, but the king will not be restored; (5) God will not forsake the people but will torment the king and his nation; (6) they are suffering because they have sinned as a people.

1 and 2Maccabees are two of the seven books of the Old Testament not found in Protestant bibles.

Book of Daniel

Though placed in the Old Testament as one of the Prophet Books, the Book of Daniel fits more suitably alongside the events described in 1 & 2Maccabees.

Historical context. The book was written as taking place during the period of the Babylonian Exile (587-537 B.C.). But scholars believe that the book was actually written much later—during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (173-164 B.C.)—of a wicked Persian king who persecuted the Jews in the second century B.C.

Purpose. The book was written to give comfort and inspiration to Jewish youth living in a time of persecution. It tells stories of young Jewish men holding fast to their beliefs during the Babylonian Exile. Their example of fidelity to God is intended to give courage to Jewish youth persecuted during the reign of Antiochus IV. They may have suffered like Daniel and his three companions, but God will save them, if not in this world, then in the next life.

Structure and content. The book can be divided into three parts.

Part One: Six Stories (Chs 1-6). The first section of Daniel consists of six romantic stories, sometimes called "court tales," intended to edify and teach proper religious attitudes. These chapters tell stories of a young hero and a 'wise man' and a great interpreter of dreams who lived under great danger in the courts of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II, and the king of the Persians. These stories tell how Jews can live in a Gentile environment and remain faithful to their religious traditions. Our modern situation of religious people seeking to live in a secular world is not so far removed from ancient Jews living in the pagan world of Babylon, or Christians living in a hostile environment in the Arab world today.

Part Two: Daniel's visions (Chs 7-12). In and through four visions, Daniel learns about imminent occurrences either in a dream or through an angel.

Part Three: Three more stories about the hero Daniel (Chs. 13-14). (For more on Daniel, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Article 39.)

Two of the best-known stories in Daniel are about the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lions' den.

Chapter 3: The fiery furnace

The third story is a conflict in the court of Nebuchadnezzar between the king who orders all in his kingdom to worship a statue, and Jews who refuse to obey the king's command. On a deeper level, the story is a battle between the God of Israel, who has the ability to deliver those who remain loyal to him, and the gods of Nebuchadnezzar. After threatening Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego with death for failing to worship the statue, the king throws down the gauntlet directly to God: "*Who is the God that will deliver you out of my hands?*" (v.15). That God, of course, is the God of the Jews who does in fact deliver his faithful servants from the fiery furnace unharmed.

Verses 16-18, quoted above, are considered one of the great dramatic scenes in Old Testament literature. It has served as a model for every tiny group of resisters standing before tyrannical authority. From the three Jews standing before Nebuchadnezzar, one can see the forebears of Peter and the Apostles before the High Priest in the council saying: "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). As far as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are concerned, it doesn't matter whether or not God saves them from the fiery furnace. They have decided to remain loyal to him and not worship the king's statue. Before they enter the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar gives orders to turn up the heat, seven times more than the usual heat level. So huge is the fire that it devours the men who threw Daniel's friends into the furnace (v.22).

Enter the angel of the Lord (vv 46-51). As the fire reaches its peak, an angel of the Lord enters and replaces the fiery flames with a 'dew-laden breeze' (v.50). The presence of the divine figure in the fire symbolizes God's presence with his suffering people.

Nebuchadnezzar praises the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (vv 91-97). Astonished to hear the singing, and bewildered at seeing four men still alive in the midst of the flames, Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel and his friends out of the flames. When the king sees that the three men are unharmed, he blesses their God

for sending them an angel of deliverance and issues a decree forbidding anyone to speak blasphemy against their God.

Chapter 6: Daniel in the lion's den

The sixth and final story in Part One of Daniel strongly resembles the tale of the three young men in the fiery furnace. Here, the hero is Daniel. The purpose of the story is to encourage and strengthen the good Jew who is seeking to remain faithful to God in a hostile situation. The story can be divided into three scenes.

Scene 1: Daniel's co-workers conspire against him (vv 1-10). Because Daniel "outshone all his fellow supervisors in the entire kingdom" (v.4), they look for ways to undermine him in the eyes of the king, much like the Pharisees who will seek to undermine Jesus in the eyes of the authorities in his time. Failing to catch Daniel in any misconduct, they go to the gullible king and get him to sign a foolish law that forbids all people in the empire from praying to their god for a thirty-day period.

Scene 2: Daniel is caught violating the royal decree (vv 11-18). When Daniel hears about the royal decree, he continues his practice of quietly praying to his God. This is a perfect example of a man "obeying God, rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Daniel's faith in God is stronger than his fear of the lions. Because the decree is irrevocable, not even the king, who loves Daniel, can prevent him from being thrown into the den. The king even prays that Daniel's God may protect him (v.17).

Scene 3: Daniel is saved (vv19-29). After a sleepless night, the king rushes to the lions' den hoping to find Daniel alive. Daniel tells the king that an angel of the Lord "*closed the lions' mouths so that they could not hurt him*" (v.23). King Darius is filled with joy. Daniel is released, and his detractors and their families are thrown into the den of hungry lions. (Most likely, they omitted their grace before meals prior to their breakfast!) Then the king sends out a decree throughout his kingdom, testifying to the power and sovereignty of the living God of Daniel. The story of Daniel in the lions' den is proverbial for those who find themselves in any form of adverse circumstances. In his book *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, John Collins writes: "*The tales in Daniel 1-6 have been aptly said to present 'a lifestyle for the Diaspora.' Their message to the Jews in exile is twofold: participate in the life of the Gentile world and be loyal to the king, but realize that your ultimate success depends on your fidelity to your God and his laws*" (p.562).