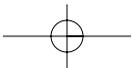
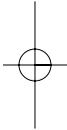
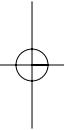


TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 12

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EZRA AND NEHEMIAH



TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 12

GENERAL EDITOR: DONALD J. WISEMAN

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

DEREK KIDNER



Inter-Varsity Press





InterVarsity Press, USA
 P.O. Box 1400
 Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426, USA
 World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
 Email: email@ivpress.com

Inter-Varsity Press, England
 Norton Street
 Nottingham NG7 3HR, England
 Website: www.ivpbooks.com
 Email: ivp@ivpbooks.com

© 1979 by Derek Kidner

First published 1979

Published in this format 2009

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InterVarsity Press®, USA, is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA® <www.intervarsity.org> and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

Inter-Varsity Press, England, is closely linked with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, a student movement connecting Christian Unions in universities and colleges throughout Great Britain, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Website: www.ucf.org.uk.

USA ISBN 978-0-8308-4212-4

UK ISBN 978-1-84474-290-5

Set in Garamond 11/13pt

Typeset in Great Britain by Avocet Typeset, Chilton, Aylesbury, Bucks

Printed in the United States of America ∞



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kidner, Derek.

Ezra and Nehemiah: an introduction and commentary / Derek Kidner.

p. cm.—(Tyndale Old Testament commentaries; v. 12)

Originally published: Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, c1979.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8308-4212-4 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Bible. O.T. Ezra—Commentaries. 2. Bible. O.T.

Nehemiah—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS1355.53.K53 2008

222'.707—dc22

2008047752

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

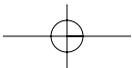
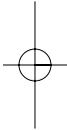
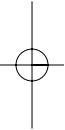
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

P	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
Y	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12		



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GENERAL PREFACE

The aim of this series of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, as it was in the companion volumes on the New Testament, is to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary on each book, with the primary emphasis on exegesis. Major critical questions are discussed in the introductions and additional notes, while undue technicalities have been avoided.

In this series individual authors are, of course, free to make their own distinct contributions and express their own point of view on all debated issues. Within the necessary limits of space they frequently draw attention to interpretations which they themselves do not hold but which represent the stated conclusions of sincere fellow Christians. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah have long been the subject of special and complex academic controversy, not least concerning the order of events recorded. Mr Kidner sincerely maintains the traditional order of their appearance on the stage of history of these two influential Jewish leaders at a time of great national crisis. Other views are by no means ignored; the author purposefully places detailed discussion of some aspects of them in Appendices, to enable the general reader to concentrate on the overall teaching, message and relevance of these Old Testament books.

In the Old Testament in particular no single English translation is adequate to reflect the original text. The authors of these commentaries freely quote various versions, therefore, or give their own translation, in the endeavour to make the more difficult passages or

words meaningful today. Where necessary, words from the Hebrew (and Aramaic) Text underlying their studies are transliterated. This will help the reader who may be unfamiliar with the Semitic languages to identify the word under discussion and thus to follow the argument. It is assumed throughout that the reader will have ready access to one, or more, reliable rendering of the Bible in English.

Interest in the meaning and message of the Old Testament continues undiminished and it is hoped that this series will thus further the systematic study of the revelation of God and his will and ways as seen in these records. It is the prayer of the editor and publisher, as of the authors, that these books will help many to understand, and to respond to, the Word of God today.

D. J. Wiseman

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

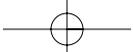
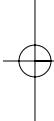
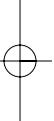
I am glad to take the opportunity which a Preface offers of making a few acknowledgments. I am grateful to Miss Ann Bradshaw for her skill in deciphering a veritable palimpsest to produce an orderly typescript; to Dr Hugh Williamson for drawing my attention to articles which I might easily have overlooked; to the Tyndale Library for providing almost all the reference material which was needed; and to the Editor of this series for giving me this absorbing task.

May this commentary not add greatly to the 'much rubbish' that surrounds the city of God, but even help to stop a gap or two in its defences.

To my regret, the NIV (New International Version, 1979) came into print too late to be consulted among the other translations of the Old Testament.

Derek Kidner

1. See Neh. 4:10.



A SELECTION OF DATES

	REIGNS		JEWISH AFFAIRS
539–530	Cyrus	538	The first homecomers
		537/6	Temple rebuilding begun and halted
530–522	Cambyses		
521–486	Darius I, Hystaspes	520	Temple rebuilding resumed
		516	Temple completed
486–465/4	Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	486	or soon after: ‘An accusation’ (Ezra 4:6)
464–423	Artaxerxes I, Longimanus	458	Ezra to Jerusalem
		Pre-445	Fortification of Jerusalem stopped (Ezra 4:7–23)
		445	Nehemiah to Jerusalem
		433	Nehemiah returns to Artaxerxes
		Post-433	Nehemiah back to Jerusalem
423–404	Darius II, Nothus	410	Letter to Johanan, high priest at Jerusalem, from Jews of Elephantine
		407	Letters from Elephantine to Bagoas, governor of Judah, and to the sons Sanballat, governor of Samaria
404–359	Artaxerxes II, Mnemon		

REIGNS

JEWISH AFFAIRS

359/8-338/7 Artaxerxes III, Ochus
338/7-336/5 Arses
336/5-331 Darius III, Codomannus
331-323 Alexander the Great

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

- Ackroyd *1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah* by P. R. Ackroyd (*Torch Bible Commentaries*), 1973.
- AJBA *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology.*
- AJSL *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures.*
- ANET *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* edited by J. B. Pritchard, ²1955.
- AV Authorized Version (King James), 1611.
- BA *Biblical Archaeologist.*
- BASOR *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research.*
- Batten *Ezra and Nehemiah* by L. W. Batten (*International Critical Commentary*), 1913.
- BDB *Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, 1907.
- BH *Biblia Hebraica* edited by R. Kittel and P. Kahle, ⁷1951.
- Brockington *Ezra and Nehemiah* by L. H. Brockington (*Century Bible, New Series*), 1969.
- BWANT *Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten (und Neuen) Testament.*
- Coggins *Ezra and Nehemiah* by R. J. Coggins (*Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*), 1976.
- DOTT *Documents from Old Testament Times* edited by D. Winton Thomas, 1958.
- ET *Expository Times.*

- G-K *Hebrew Grammar* by W. Gesenius, edited by E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, ²1910.
- GNB Good News Bible (Today's English Version), 1976.
- Heb. Hebrew.
- IDB *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.
- JB Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
- JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*.
- JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*.
- Josephus *The Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus (1st century AD).
- JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*.
- JTS (NS) *Journal of Theological Studies* (New Series).
- K-B *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* edited by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, 1953.
- Keil *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* by C. F. Keil, 1873.
- LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).
- mg. margin.
- MT Massoretic Text.
- Myers *Ezra, Nehemiah* by J. M. Myers (*Anchor Bible*), 1965.
- NBD *The New Bible Dictionary* edited by J. D. Douglas, 1962.
- NEB The New English Bible: Old Testament, 1970.
- OTS *Oudtestamentische Studiën*.
- PEQ *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*.
- RSV American Revised Standard Version, 1952.
- Rudolph *Esra und Nehemia* by W. Rudolph, 1949.
- RV English Revised Version, 1881.
- Ryle *Ezra and Nehemiah* by H. E. Ryle (*Cambridge Bible*), 1907.
- Syr. The Peshitta (Syriac version of the Bible).
- VT *Vetus Testamentum*.
- Vulg. The Vulgate (Jerome's Latin version of the Bible).
- ZAW *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*.

INTRODUCTION

1. Ezra and Nehemiah in the setting of their times

The chequered story of the Kings, a matter of nearly five centuries, had ended disastrously in 587 BC with the sack of Jerusalem, the fall of the monarchy and the removal to Babylonia of all that made Judah politically viable.

It was a death to make way for a rebirth. A millennium before this, Israel had been transplanted to Egypt, to emerge no longer a family but a nation.¹ Now her long night in Babylon was to mark another turning-point, so that she emerged no longer a kingdom but a little flock with the makings of a church. This is the point at which the book of Ezra begins.

Its own story can be soon told, at least in outline. It covers, with the book of Nehemiah, a little over a hundred years, from 538 BC when Cyrus sent the exiles home to re-erect their temple, to some

1. The point is forcefully made in Deut. 26:5ff.

point around 430, or in the following decade, when Nehemiah exercised his second term of office in Jerusalem.² It is not continuous, but centres round three movements and personalities. First there was the struggle to get the Temple rebuilt in the days of Zerubbabel (with Jeshua the high priest and eventually Haggai and Zechariah the prophets). This went on from 538 to 516, and it dominates Ezra 1 – 6, apart from a digression in chapter 4:6–23. Then we hear no more for nearly sixty years, when another expedition sets out from Babylonia. This time it is led by Ezra, whom the emperor has commissioned to enforce the law of Moses – a task whose immediate consequences bring the book to a painful and abrupt conclusion. The third great personality is Nehemiah, who largely tells his own invigorating story of rebuilding the city wall, of outfacing his enemies, repopulating Jerusalem and routing the traitors within his camp. By the end of these two books the former exiles have had their chief structures, visible and invisible, re-established, and their vocation confirmed, to be a people instructed in the law and separated from the nations.

But this renewed sense of identity went hand in hand with political subservience. Oddly enough, they were now more distinctively themselves, more Jewish, than at any time of their existence as a sovereign state. There was now less scope for dreams of grandeur; there had been hard lessons; there were some men of steel to lead them. Providentially, too, the Persian empire gave positive encouragement to its peoples to practise their own religions in full style and with due seriousness.

This brings us to the wider setting of these books, and some brief account of this world power.

The founder of the Persian empire was Cyrus the Great, formerly king of the small state of Anshan near the Persian gulf. He had displaced his overlord Astyages in 549 BC, thereby inheriting the vast Median empire which overarched, to the north and east, that of Babylon. This he extended far to the west into Asia Minor by defeating Croesus of Lydia in 547, to the growing alarm of Babylon and

2. This chronology is disputed; see below, Appendix 4: A question of chronology, pp. 161ff.

Egypt, the allies of his victim. In 539 Babylon fell to him without a struggle, and he began to fulfil unwittingly the prophecies of Isaiah 44:28; 45:1ff. by repatriating the captive cult-objects and peoples of the Babylonian empire, rebuilding their temples and asking their intercessions. An extract from his account of this on the 'Cyrus Cylinder' is given on p. 21.

In 530 Cyrus went to battle in the eastern regions, only to die and be succeeded by Cambyses, his son, who in 525, with extraordinary swiftness, added Egypt to his dominions. It is a point of interest that whereas many Egyptian temples were desecrated in this campaign a Jewish sanctuary at Elephantine, a garrison town at the southern border, was spared. (See below, pp. 20ff., on the religious policy of this dynasty.)

But before setting out on this venture Cambyses had secured his throne by having his brother Smerdis (known also as Bardes or Bardiya) murdered and the fact of his death concealed. If this was effective in the short run, it brought a crop of trouble to Cambyses' successor. Among the many rebel leaders who sprang up in all parts of the empire when the throne fell vacant in 522 were two who successively claimed to be the missing heir. Only the vast energy and skill of Darius I (521–486) availed to restore stability by the end of his second year. This was the year 520 in which Haggai and Zechariah started prophesying, and in which the work on the Temple was at last resumed,³ as recounted in Ezra 5 and 6. Zechariah's two visions of horsemen patrolling the earth (Zech. 1:7ff.; 6:1ff.) may well owe something of their form to the relays of swift couriers who enabled the king's writ to run throughout his enormous realm (cf. Esth. 8:10).

The next king, Xerxes I (486–465/4) or Ahasuerus (these are the Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic forms of the Persian name Khshayarshu), is mentioned only in passing in Ezra (4:6), though he dominates the book of Esther. He is memorable in world history for his spectacular but fruitless expedition against Greece in 480. His

3. Some writers have detected allusions to this recent unrest and the ensuing calm, in Hag. 2:6 and (four months later) Zech. 1:11. See, however, J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP, 1972).

father's campaign had given the Greeks the glory of Marathon in 491; his own added the names of Thermopylae and Salamis to their history.

It is his successor, Artaxerxes I (464–423), who brings us again into substantial contact with our two books, from Ezra 7 to the end of Nehemiah (together with a mention of Darius (II) in Neh. 12:22⁴) – though many scholars would place Ezra's career in the reign of Artaxerxes II (404–359) or even Artaxerxes III (359–338). This departure from our author's chronology is discussed at length on pp. 161–175. Assuming however that Ezra was indeed sent in 458 to regulate affairs in Judah, his mission could well have seemed politically useful to Artaxerxes I, whose early years were plagued with the revolt of Inaros in Egypt, and who would therefore have been especially anxious to promote good order in this nearby territory. A few years later (449) Megabyzus, his own governor of Syria, was to rise in rebellion. The king's sensitivity over this area is seen in Ezra 4:7ff., where his fears of disloyalty in Judah were easily played upon. Once again, though, he had the good sense to recognize a man whom he could trust, in appointing Nehemiah as governor of Judah in 445 and giving him a free hand.

Some light on Nehemiah's local conflicts and their aftermath comes from extra-biblical sources, from which we learn that his opponents were men of considerable status. Sanballat was, either now or later, governor of Samaria (see on the Elephantine papyri, below, p. 157), Geshem was the leader of a quite powerful group of Arab communities, and Tobiah was probably governor of Ammon and a member of an influential Jewish family. His designation as 'the servant' is probably a contemptuous abbreviation of 'the king's servant'. From the Elephantine papyri we know also that by 407 Sanballat's sons, Delaiah and Shelemiah, were acting for him, and we note from their names that their father paid at least lip service to Yahweh – a fact which must have added to Nehemiah's difficulty in opposing him. The Samaria papyri found in 1962 at Wadi Daliyeh reveal that this family was still in office and still of the same religion in the middle years of the next century, when the son of a

4. Some argue that the Darius of this verse is Darius III. See below.

second Sanballat was governor, bearing the Yahwistic name of Hananiah.⁵

The last king to be mentioned in the book of Nehemiah (but only in a chronological note, Neh. 12:22) is ‘Darius the Persian’, i.e. evidently Darius II (423–404). In his reign the letters known as the Elephantine papyri were written, giving us a first-hand footnote to our story (see pp. 157ff.). But with the close of the century our knowledge of Jewish affairs to the end of the Persian empire in 331 fades to almost nothing – unless we take the view, which I reject, that Ezra’s lifetime belongs to that period, under Artaxerxes II or III (404–359, or 359/8–338/7). There are some scraps of information, but little that is certain or significant. From some inscribed jar handles found at Ramat Rahel it seems that Judah continued to have Jewish governors (though there are scholars who read not ‘the governor’ [p^hw[’]] but ‘the potter’ [p^hr[’]], i.e. the makers of the jars).⁶ Some ancient authors, including Eusebius, speaking of punitive measures against Sidon and other trouble-makers, say that Artaxerxes III deported a number of Jews to Hyrcania (near the Caspian sea) early in his reign – but they are writing many centuries after the event.⁷

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5. See F. M. Cross, ‘The Discovery of the Samaria Papyri’, *BA* 26 (1963), pp. 110–121. Josephus (*Ant.* 11:7. 2) speaks of an apparently third Sanballat in the time of ‘Darius the last king’, i.e. Darius III, 336/5–331, but his garbled Persian chronology and his apparent confusion of this person with Nehemiah’s Sanballat make him an unreliable witness at this point. See H. H. Rowley, *Men of God* (Nelson, 1963), pp. 256f.; H. G. M. Williamson, *JTS* (NS) 28 (1977), pp. 49–66.
 6. For ‘the potter’ see F. M. Cross, ‘Judean Stamps’, *Eretz Israel* 9 (1969), esp. p. 24; also J. Naveh, *The Development of the Aramaic Script* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 61. For ‘the governor’ see Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible* (Burns & Oates, 1966), p. 360; also, replying to Cross and Naveh with fresh evidence, N. Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive* (Jerusalem, Qedem 4, 1976), pp. 6f.
 7. See, however, D. Barag in *BASOR* 183 (1966), pp. 6–12, on archaeological indications that some Jewish cities may have suffered deportations at about this time.

What is both certain and significant is that at some point between Nehemiah and the second century BC (cf. 2 Macc. 6:2; Ecclus. 50:25f.) the Samaritans built their own temple on mount Gerizim, next to Shechem, so making the breach with the Jews almost irreparable. Josephus (*Ant.* xi. 8) places this event at the transition from the Persian to the Greek period, i.e. about 330, telling how Sanballat obtained Alexander's permission to build it and to instal his son-in-law as priest. There is too much confusion here with the events of Nehemiah 13:28 (a century earlier) to make Josephus a good witness to the details; but he may be right about the time of building.

So the two centuries of the Persian empire were among the most formative periods of Jewish history. Out of the ruins of the little kingdom of Judah there had emerged the small community whose concern to be the people of God by pedigree and practice shaped it into the nation which meets us in the New Testament. Already the future prominence of the Temple and its priests, of the law and its scribes, as well as the enmity between Jews and Samaritans, could be seen developing. Throughout this time the Persian régime was given a substantial part to play, both in sending and subsidizing the three expeditions, of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and in backing their authority with its own. It was not the first empire, nor the last, to be allotted some such role.

2. The religious policy of the Persian kings

A notable feature of the Persian empire was its integration of a great diversity of peoples into a single administrative system, while maintaining at the same time a tradition of respect for their local customs and beliefs. The religion of the Achaemenid kings⁸ was (at least from Darius I onwards) the worship of the one god Ahura-Mazda, but this was not imposed on peoples of other faiths. Rather, they were encouraged to seek the king's welfare by observing the proper forms of their own religions.

8. Named after Achaemenes, royal ancestor of Cyrus, in whose family the kingship remained throughout the two centuries of the empire's existence.

Cyrus, the first king, identified himself with his new subjects even to the extent of professing allegiance to Marduk and the other gods of Babylon, at the same time restoring the images of non-Babylonian deities to their former cities, repatriating their worshippers, rebuilding their sanctuaries and soliciting their patronage. The so-called Cyrus Cylinder, from which the following is an extract, gives his own account of this.

I returned to these sacred cities ..., the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations ...

May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me ...; to Marduk, my lord, may they say this: 'Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son ...'⁹

What this meant for the Jews, and so for the world, begins to be shown in Ezra 1.

Occasional glimpses of this policy at work reach us from other sources – for the grants of money and materials made to the Jews by Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes for the needs of worship¹⁰ were by no means unparalleled. In Egypt, Cambyses and Darius I took Egyptian throne-names in honour of the god Re, and although Cambyses embarked at one stage on a series of temple destructions and acts of sacrilege, this action was out of character – possibly a reprisal for some suspected priestly plot, since he spared a Jewish temple in the same area. Previously he had paid the customary honours to the Egyptian gods and had strengthened the authority and revenues of the priests of the goddess Neith at his capital city. Darius likewise poured out money and labour on Egyptian religion, 'in order' (as his priestly Egyptian chronicler puts it) 'to uphold the name of all the gods, their temples, their revenues, and the ordinances of their feasts forever'.¹¹

9. The rest is damaged. This translation is from *ANET*, p. 316.

10. Cf. Ezra 3:7; 6:4, 8–10; 7:15–24.

11. From the inscription of Uzahor at Saïs, as rendered by G. B. Gray in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, IV (CUP, 1926), p. 25.

Nor was Egypt an exceptional case. The inhabitants of the Greek island of Delos, when they fled at the approach of the Persian fleet in about 490 BC, were given an assurance of Darius's veneration for so sacred a spot, the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis; and the Persian general Datis made lavish offerings there. More significantly, the same king Darius I made specific mention of a long-standing royal policy in these matters in the course of a rebuke to one of his officials in Asia Minor. The official, Gadatas, had failed to exempt certain cult-servants, the 'gardeners of Apollo', from paying tribute. The same kind of privilege, for all grades of Jewish temple officials, was written into Artaxerxes' letter of appointment to Ezra (Ezra 7:24).

Finally, the concern of these kings to ensure that the native religions were correctly practised is illustrated in the 'Passover Papyrus' of the Elephantine texts.¹² This is a letter, dated 419 BC, from a Jewish provincial official named Hananiah to a group of Jews in the garrison of this Egyptian frontier town of Elephantine, reporting an order from Darius (II) that the local governor should authorize them to hold a festival of unleavened bread. Hananiah has evidently been charged to spell out the procedure to them, which he does in terms which summarize Exodus 12:6, Exodus 12:14–20. He concludes his letter with the formula, 'By order of King Darius'.

This scrap of papyrus not only forms a companion piece to the account of Ezra's commission to enforce the Jewish law, but confirms what the wording of the royal decrees in that book implies: that the broad decisions on these matters were passed on to advisers for detailed drafting; that the advisers were compatriots of the people concerned; and that the documents then went out in the king's name.

These scattered examples of Persian policy, although not essential to our understanding of the two books, enable us to see them not in isolation but in close and convincing relation to their times.

3. Some leading themes of Ezra-Nehemiah

Quite clearly these two books are more than a bare chronicle. Here

12. On these texts see also below, pp. 157ff.

are events to learn from, not only to learn about. There is indeed a certain kinship between this last stretch of narrative in the Old Testament and the last in the New, in that both bring the reader to a point of arrival which is a staging-post rather than a destination, and tacitly invite him to explore God's purpose further. With Nehemiah at Jerusalem, just as with Paul at Rome, the narrative breaks off abruptly, leaving us in no doubt of a stiff journey ahead, but also of a venture well launched and of great potentiality. 'The hand of our God' (to borrow a favourite phrase of Ezra-Nehemiah) has been much in evidence; and since he is the acknowledged author of these events, what is said of him must be the first theme to study.

a. God

There is no question here of a small and cloistered deity, however tiny a remnant his people have become. He is boldly acclaimed as creator and sustainer of 'heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host', to say nothing of the earth and all its creatures (Neh. 9:6); and this is no privately held theology. The Jews' reply to a formidable commission reporting to the emperor was: 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth' (Ezra 5:11) – a title which, abbreviated to 'the God of heaven', was indeed already known to the authorities as the correct form of reference to the God of Israel (cf. e.g. Ezra 1:2; 6:9). For private encouragement his people could remind one another that he was also 'great and awesome' (Neh. 4:14 [Heb. 8.]; cf. 9:32), and that he was committed to them as '*our* God'.

There is in fact a strong emphasis on the covenant by which God had bound himself to Israel in this way, and thereby to the individual as 'my God' (a relationship of which Nehemiah was specially conscious). His choice of Abraham, his rescue of Israel from Egypt and his patience under their provocations, dominate the great confession of Nehemiah 9 and, less broadly, of Ezra 9; and the same faithful love had sent his Spirit among them, however little heeded, in the wilderness and in the preaching of the prophets (Neh. 9:20, 30).

This divine steadfastness is the first thing that meets us in this pair of books. The whole train of events was set in motion to fulfil a promise (Ezra 1:1). What is equally apparent is the divine sovereignty. There are no overt miracles, but one imperial decision after another

is quietly initiated by the Lord, who ‘stirred up the spirit of Cyrus’ (Ezra 1:1), ‘put’ a certain thing ‘into the heart’ of Artaxerxes, and again saw to it that ‘it pleased the king to send’ Nehemiah to reverse a previous policy (Ezra 7:27; Neh. 2:6). Equally, of course, it was God who roused the spirit of each volunteer, we are told, to return from exile (Ezra 1:5), and ‘put into’ Nehemiah’s heart to tackle first the wall (Neh. 2:12) and then the living human structure which it must serve (7:5).

Finally, God is seen here working with as well as in his people, and against as well as through the men of power. The story of Nehemiah is famous for its marriage of the wholly spiritual with the unashamedly hard-headed. ‘We prayed ... and set a guard ... against them day and night’ (Neh. 4:9). ‘Remember the Lord ... and fight’ (4:14). The excellent result is recorded with characteristic gratitude, making nothing of the fact that Nehemiah had outwitted the enemy, although he had, but rather that ‘God had frustrated their plan’ (4:15). This, after all, was the heart of the matter and the sign of greater things to come. So even the enemy perceived. When the wall was finished in a mere 52 days, the surrounding peoples ‘fell greatly in their own esteem’, not because they saw the Jews as disquietingly efficient, although again they were, but because ‘they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God’ (6:16).

If such a God were for them, who could be against them? Whether he chose to protect his people through their own vigilance and hard work, as above, or through the imperial officers and horsemen who escorted Nehemiah to Jerusalem (Neh. 2:9), or invisibly and silently, as he protected Ezra on a similar journey when he was ‘ashamed to ask the king’ for military help (Ezra 8:22), the entire operation was ‘the Lord’s doing’, and it is still marvellous in our eyes.

b. The people of God

Isaiah had foretold that although Israel might be ‘as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them’ would ‘return’ (Isa. 10:22) – return, that is, not only from exile but ‘to the mighty God’ (21). Our two books present us with both aspects of this matter: the smallness of the remnant and a new consciousness that it was a people apart.

Even though there were nearly 50,000 who came back from exile (Ezra 2:64ff.), these homecomers felt themselves to be only a

handful by comparison with their forebears. 'We are left a remnant that has escaped' (Ezra 9:15). But the very fact of survival was a confirmation of God's 'favour' and 'steadfast love' (Ezra 9:8f.) – so that the term 'the exiles' (the *gôlá*, a collective noun) became an honourable title, virtually the equivalent of 'the true Israel'. This slips out in the proclamation of Ezra 10:8, which threatens certain defaulters with being 'banned from the congregation of the *gôlá*', although the exile itself had ended eighty years before.

Two things were stressed in this new era: first, continuity with the historic Israel, whose name and inheritance were carried on by this remnant (cf. Ezra 2:2b), and secondly, separation from the taints of heathenism. The patient recording of families and home towns in Ezra 2 reflects the first of these concerns, and this is underlined by the listing of certain groups in verses 59 and 60 which 'could not prove their fathers' houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel'. It was not only the priests (verses 61–63) who had to produce a pedigree.

The second concern, that of religious purity, was harder and more hazardous to pursue. It carried the dangers of the ghetto, of attracting hostility and breeding arrogance. The hostility was felt at once after the first rebuff of a dubious offer of co-operation, recorded in Ezra 4; but there is little sign of arrogance in the exclusiveness found necessary at this stage. It was still a defensive rather than an offensive stance, and in all sections of society there were many who found it irksome. Since it fell to the leaders to insist upon it, it would be possible to accuse Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah of mere chauvinism; but it would be fairer to point out that their task was to preserve the identity of Israel as 'the holy seed' (Ezra 9:2; cf. Mal. 2:15), and its loyalty to the Lord as something entire and absolute, not to be swamped or diluted by the culture that encircled them.

These were crucial issues. The glimpses that we have in Ezekiel and Jeremiah (e.g. Ezek. 8; Jer. 44:15ff.) of popular religion at the beginning of the exile, and the further glimpses in the Elephantine papyri¹³ of Jewish expatriates of Nehemiah's time who saw no

13. See below, pp. 157ff.

incompatibility between Yahweh and Canaanite deities, show the direction which post-exilic Judaism might easily have taken. And it should be added that the dismissive verdicts on certain neighbours, 'You have nothing to do with us', and 'You have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem' (Ezra 4:3; Neh. 2:20), are balanced and illuminated by the welcome given to genuine converts. The passover that marked the completion of the Temple, we are told, 'was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the pollutions of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel' (Ezra 6:21). Conversely, a Jewish pedigree conferred no moral exemptions. Long before Paul made his memorable gesture of shaking out his garments in rejection of his faithless compatriots (Acts 18:6), Nehemiah had enacted the same dramatic warning against Jewish usurers and oath-breakers, adding 'So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labour who does not perform this promise' (Neh. 5:13). For all the emphasis of these books on externals, the way a man treated his fellows remained the test of his profession. And there is something almost Pauline again in Nehemiah's renouncing of his perquisites as governor, 'because of the fear of God' and 'because the servitude was heavy upon this people' (Neh. 5:14–19; cf. 1 Cor. 9:3–18).

The people of God, then, were still confronted with the ethical implications of the covenant and with calls to courageous faith such as had been given by the prophets. But the three successive foci of activity in these two books, namely, the Temple, the law and the wall, bring into special prominence the character of Israel as God's minority group in an alien world, his 'own possession among all peoples'. As such, this community was priestly: called to offer worship, not only through material sacrifices but in songs and prayers for which a highly organized temple staff was maintained (see especially Neh. 11:15–24). It was becoming, in the second place, the people of a book – not only in the sense that the Mosaic law was now vigorously enforced (especially over mixed marriages) but that it was expounded and given a major part to play in worship (cf. Ezra 7:10; Neh. 8:3, 8; 9:3). With this emphasis and the example of the scholarly Ezra, the role of the scribe in Israel was already beginning to emerge in its developed form. The third focus of the story, the

rebuilding of the wall, almost asks to be seen as a symbol of Israel's separatism: the material expression of a siege mentality. While this is not altogether fair, since the wall had been torn down in a campaign of slander and intimidation and rebuilt in a spirit of faith, it is true that Nehemiah used it not only for physical protection but for spiritual quarantine, to defend the sabbath from violation (Neh. 13:15–22). It is also true that separatism was now being taken with new seriousness as a demand of the law ('I ... have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine' – Lev. 20:26), and was thereby – not unlike the city wall itself – potentially a means either of preservation or else, if it should loom too large, of constriction.

In short, what we see in Ezra-Nehemiah is an Israel cut down almost to the roots, but drawing new vitality from its neglected source of nourishment in the Mosaic law and already showing signs, by its new concern for purity, of growing into the Judaism which we meet, both for better and for worse, in the New Testament.

c. Means of grace

To keep the subject within bounds we must confine it to three overlapping areas: cultus, prayer and Scripture.

1. Under *cultus* we can take note of the regular provisions for worship. The altar was set up at the first opportunity, lest unatoned sin and neglected homage should add the displeasure of heaven to the enmity of man ('for fear was upon them because of the peoples of the lands', Ezra 3:3). The Temple, however, lay abandoned for years, first by necessity, then by neglect, until its ruins became an affront to God and a challenge to his prophets (Hag. 1:4; Zech. 4:9). With its completion, Israel again had her visible centre and a role for the army of priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and Temple servants who had hastened to return from captivity (Ezra 2:36ff.) Some idea of the colour and movement of the great occasions of worship, with instrumentalists and antiphonal singers, with the congregation's shouts of joy or lamentation and with the lurid spectacle of sacrifice, can be gained from such passages as Ezra 3:10ff.; 6:16ff.; Nehemiah 12:27ff. Even the daily services had something of this quality, with morning and evening sacrifices and with choirs which had their named leaders and responders (cf. Neh. 11:17, 23; 12:8f., 24). All this was intensified at the festivals, which added the

dimension of a vivid commemoration of God's saving acts – whether with the passover lamb and the unleavened bread (Ezra 6:2off.) or with the home-made arbours that turned all Jerusalem into an Exodus encampment (Neh. 8:14ff.).

2. *Prayer* is woven thoroughly into the fabric of these two books. It takes a variety of forms, from a momentary flash of mental prayer to an eloquent address, accompanied on a penitential occasion by such outward gestures as fasting, pulling out the hair, rending the garments, weeping, casting oneself down (cf. Ezra 9:3; 10:1), or wearing sackcloth and putting earth on one's head (Neh. 9:1); or again, on a joyful occasion reinforcing praise with the music and shouts of acclamation which we noted in the paragraph above.

In their content the prayers reflect a mature Old Testament faith. There is a strong sense of history and of Israelite solidarity, not only where this is reassuring (by virtue of election and covenant and the memory of redemption, Neh. 9:7–15) but equally where it is humiliating. Ezra blushes (Ezra 9:6) for the guilt of the present and the past, although he has had no obvious personal share in either; likewise Nehemiah's general confession, 'we have sinned', is immediately personalized: 'Yea, I and my father's house have sinned' (Neh. 1:6); and there is no excuse offered. God is just (Ezra 9:15; Neh. 9:33); indeed the punishment has been 'less than our iniquities deserved' (Ezra 9:13).

Such self-humbling, by itself, can grow morbid. In these examples, however, the outcome is doubly healthy: not only is courage taken from the biblical promises and from the 'little' signs of God's continued love (Neh. 1:8f.; Ezra 9:8f.), but in each case the confession leads on to costly action. Ezra 9 is followed by the drastic chapter 10; Nehemiah 1 leads into the do-or-die encounter with the king (and since the prayer looked forward to 'success ... today' (11), we may suspect that Nehemiah knew exactly what he was doing when he allowed his air of gloom to attract the king's attention); finally Nehemiah 9 issues in the pledged reforms of the 'firm covenant'.

Prayers of request, matched to some concrete situation, are another well-marked feature of the two books. Nehemiah's opening prayer, as we noticed, grew from confession and appeal (over a period of months – see the comment on Neh. 2:1) into a precise plea, naming 'today' and 'this man' (Neh. 1:11). His next, the famous 'arrow prayer' of 2:4, had no time for words. Between them the two

rather neatly illustrate the twin facts that man's responsibility is to pray a matter through with tenacity, hard thought and deep involvement, and that God nevertheless is not dependent on our fine phrases or suggestions. The other prayers of request give much the same impression. On the one hand, Ezra allowed nothing perfunctory in his company's prayer preparation for the journey from Babylonia. 'I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for ourselves, our children, and all our goods' (Ezra 8:21). And on the other hand there were times when little could be said beyond 'Remember the Lord ... and fight', or, 'Now ... strengthen thou my hands' (Neh. 4:14; 6:9). The very brevity of these prayers is eloquent.

This brings us finally to the 'asides' of Nehemiah, mostly in the form, 'Remember me ...' (Neh. 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31). Sometimes it is 'Remember *them* ...', that is, the sworn enemies, the defeatists and the traitors (Neh. 6:14; 13:29); and on one occasion the prayer against them is elaborated into an imprecation: 'Turn back their taunt upon their own heads ... Do not cover their guilt ...' (Neh. 4:4f.). The affinity of this with certain psalms may give us the clue to both kinds of interjection, positive and negative. Nehemiah is committing himself and his opponents to the verdict of God. In other words, he is looking beyond success or failure, beyond the measures he is taking and must take against the opposition; beyond even the verdict of history. To have God's ready help, and, above all, God's 'well done', is his hunger and thirst and the direction of his praying. It is not surprising that his book closes with this prayer.

3. *Scripture*, and more precisely, the law of Moses, is the third outstanding means of grace in Ezra-Nehemiah. Other parts of the Bible are of course referred to; the whole story opens with a fulfilled prophecy of Jeremiah, and we are soon hearing well-known words from a psalm (Ezra 3:11); but the driving and directing force is the law.

We discuss elsewhere (pp. 175–182) the theory, widely held, that this potent influence was partly due to novelty: that Ezra came from Babylon with a Pentateuch¹⁴ larger and more elaborate than

14. I.e. the first five books of the Bible, also known by the Heb. term for law or authoritative teaching, the Torah (*tôrâ*).

anything known before, thanks to the labours of priests and scholars like himself, who had (it is suggested) collected and modified the laws and traditions derived from various centres in Israel and blended them with the books already known, ascribing to Moses a host of material that had grown up since his day but was thought to represent his teaching or its legitimate development.

This is not a view which I share, nor is it needed (as I see it) to account for the phenomena of Ezra-Nehemiah which are our present concern. While our data could largely be explained along the lines of the last paragraph, they can also be accounted for in the light of the book of Malachi, which gives a revealing picture of the kind of religious scene which confronted the two reformers, and is generally considered to belong to approximately their period. It was a situation that called for the measures which they introduced, and its chief cause was the failure of the priests to teach the law.¹⁵ The great impact of Ezra's law book was thus comparable in its cause and its effect to that of the Bible at the Reformation and owed its power not to its being new, but precisely to its being old and rediscovered, brought and expounded to the whole people, and treated as an authority which judged the very priests themselves (cf. e.g. Ezra 9:1ff.; 10:1ff.; Neh. 8:1ff.).

An apocryphal story in 2 Esdras 14 makes Ezra a second Moses, hearing God's voice from a bush and receiving the task of writing down in forty days, with the help of five secretaries, ninety-four books, of which twenty-four (i.e. the books of the Old Testament, as traditionally enumerated) were to be made known and the rest kept secret. What this fantasy embroiders is the fact that Ezra gave to Judaism its new attitude to Scripture, and so in a sense gave Scripture to the people. At last the injunctions of Deuteronomy 6:6 began to be taken seriously. Indeed Scripture became a book to study so minutely that in the end, paradoxically, it could scarcely be seen for scribes, or heard for learned comments (cf. Mark 7:1-13; Luke 11:52; John 5:39ff.).

Meanwhile, however, Ezra had set a much-needed example of the

15. Mal. 2:6-9; cf. 3:7; 4:4. The word translated 'instruction' by RSV, etc., in 2:6-9 is *tôrâ*, 'law', on which see the previous footnote.

right kind of biblical expertise, summed up in the famous words of Ezra 7:10 in which a dedicated study is seen hand in hand with personal obedience and with teaching. The fact that to him the Torah, for all its legal force, was far more than a lawyer's text, comes out in a revealing word for it in 7:25 (cf. 7:14): *'the wisdom of your God which is in your hand'*. That was the king's phrase, but we need have little doubt that it reflected the attitude of Ezra.

Scripture is seen, then, in these two books as law to be obeyed and as revelation to be understood; to which we should add: as promises and warnings to evoke prayer and action. Its aspect as *law* is emphasized by the phrase *'those who tremble at the commandment'* (Ezra 10:3; cf. 9:4; 10:9) and by the sanctions, both human and divine, which reinforced it (Ezra 8:26; 9:14). As *revelation*, it was read *'clearly'* (for the possible implications of this see the commentary on Neh. 8:8), *'so that the people understood the sense'* — and there was a team of teachers to make sure of this (Neh. 8:7f.). It was also studied by laymen and priests together in what can only be described as a seminar or study-group (Neh. 8:13). As *material for prayer and action*, we can note its use in the confessions of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9, and more happily in the confident reminders of God's mercy in those chapters and in Nehemiah 1. In the latter especially, the actual words of ancient promises are quoted and appealed to.

So Scripture emerges as a means of grace which, while it does not displace either the cultus or private prayer (but rather enriches and informs them), attains none the less a new prominence at this time. It was never to lose it.