

TYNDALE



CORNERSTONE

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

Gary V. Smith

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Philip W. Comfort



New Living
Translation.

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featuring the text of the
NEW LIVING TRANSLATION



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VOLUME 5b: EZRA-NEHEMIAH, ESTHER

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* is based on the second edition of the New Living Translation (2007). Nearly 100 scholars from various church backgrounds and from several countries (United States, Canada, England, and Australia) participated in the creation of the NLT. Many of these same scholars are contributors to this commentary series. All the commentators, whether participants in the NLT or not, believe that the Bible is God's inspired word and have a desire to make God's word clear and accessible to his people.

This Bible commentary is the natural extension of our vision for the New Living Translation, which we believe is both exegetically accurate and idiomatically powerful. The NLT attempts to communicate God's inspired word in a lucid English translation of the original languages so that English readers can understand and appreciate the thought of the original writers. In the same way, the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* aims at helping teachers, pastors, students, and laypeople understand every thought contained in the Bible. As such, the commentary focuses first on the words of Scripture, then on the theological truths of Scripture—inasmuch as the words express the truths.

The commentary itself has been structured in such a way as to help readers get at the meaning of Scripture, passage by passage, through the entire Bible. Each Bible book is prefaced by a substantial book introduction that gives general historical background important for understanding. Then the reader is taken through the Bible text, passage by passage, starting with the New Living Translation text printed in full. This is followed by a section called "Notes," wherein the commentator helps the reader understand the Hebrew or Greek behind the English of the NLT, interacts with other scholars on important interpretive issues, and points the reader to significant textual and contextual matters. The "Notes" are followed by the "Commentary," wherein each scholar presents a lucid interpretation of the passage, giving special attention to context and major theological themes.

The commentators represent a wide spectrum of theological positions within the evangelical community. We believe this is good because it reflects the rich variety in Christ's church. All the commentators uphold the authority of God's word and believe it is essential to heed the old adage: "Wholly apply yourself to the Scriptures and apply them wholly to you." May this commentary help you know the truths of Scripture, and may this knowledge help you "grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord" (2 Pet 1:2, NLT).

PHILIP W. COMFORT
GENERAL EDITOR

ABBREVIATIONS

GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

b.	Babylonian	Heb.	Hebrew	NT	New Testament
bar.	Gemara	ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place	OL	Old Latin
c.	<i>circa</i> , around, approximately	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , the same	OS	Old Syriac
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	in loc.	<i>in loco</i> , in the place	OT	Old Testament
ch, chs	chapter, chapters		cited	p., pp.	page, pages
contra	in contrast to	lit.	literally	pl.	plural
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls	LXX	Septuagint	Q	Quelle ("Sayings" as Gospel source)
ed.	edition, editor	ℳ	Majority Text	rev.	revision
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	m.	Mishnah	sg.	singular
et al.	<i>et alli</i> , and others	masc.	masculine	t.	Tosefta
fem.	feminine	mg	margin	TR	Textus Receptus
ff	following (verses, pages)	ms	manuscript	v., vv.	verse, verses
fl.	flourished	mss	manuscripts	vid.	<i>videtur</i> , it seems
Gr.	Greek	MT	Masoretic Text	viz.	<i>videlicet</i> , namely
		n.d.	no date	vol.	volume
		neut.	neuter	γ.	Jerusalem Gemara
		no.	number		

ABBREVIATIONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

ASV	American Standard Version	NCV	New Century Version	NKJV	New King James Version
CEV	Contemporary English Version	NEB	New English Bible	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ESV	English Standard Version	NET	The NET Bible	NLT	New Living Translation
GW	God's Word	NIV	New International Version	REB	Revised English Bible
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible	NIRV	New International Reader's Version	RSV	Revised Standard Version
JB	Jerusalem Bible	NJB	New Jerusalem Bible	TEV	Today's English Version
KJV	King James Version	NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Translation	TLB	The Living Bible
NAB	New American Bible				
NASB	New American Standard Bible				

ABBREVIATIONS FOR DICTIONARIES, LEXICONS, COLLECTIONS OF TEXTS, ORIGINAL LANGUAGE EDITIONS

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (6 vols., Freedman) [1992]	BAGD	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 2nd ed. (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker) [1979]	BDB	<i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Brown, Driver, Briggs) [1907]
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures</i> (Pritchard) [1965]	BDAG	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich) [2000]	BDF	<i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Blass, Debrunner, Funk) [1961]
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> (Pritchard) [1969]				

BHS *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Elliger and Rudolph) [1983]
CAD *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* [1956]
COS *The Context of Scripture* (3 vols., Hallo and Younger) [1997–2002]
DBI *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman) [1998]
DBT *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2nd ed., Leon-Dufour) [1972]
DCH *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (5 vols., D. Clines) [2000]
DLNTD *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development* (R. Martin, P. Davids) [1997]
DJD *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* [1955–]
DJG *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Green, McKnight, Marshall) [1992]
DOTP *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (T. Alexander, D.W. Baker) [2003]
DPL *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Hawthorne, Martin, Reid) [1993]
DTIB *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Vanhoozer) [2005]
EDNT *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (3 vols., H. Balz, G. Schneider. ET) [1990–1993]
GKC *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Gesenius, Kautzsch, trans. Cowley) [1910]
HALOT *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J. Stamm; trans. M. Richardson) [1994–1999]
IBD *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3 vols., Douglas, Wiseman) [1980]
IDB *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4 vols., Buttrick) [1962]
ISBE *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols., Bromiley) [1979–1988]
KBL *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (Koehler, Baumgartner) [1958]
LCL *Loeb Classical Library*
L&N *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Louw and Nida) [1989]
LSJ *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed., Liddell, Scott, Jones) [1996]
MM *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Moulton and Milligan) [1930; 1997]
NA²⁶ *Novum Testamentum Graece* (26th ed., Nestle-Aland) [1979]
NA²⁷ *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed., Nestle-Aland) [1993]
NBD *New Bible Dictionary* (2nd ed., Douglas, Hillyer) [1982]
NIDB *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Douglas, Tenney) [1987]
NIDBA *New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Blaiklock and Harrison) [1983]
NIDNTT *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (4 vols., C. Brown) [1975–1985]
NIDOTTE *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (5 vols., W. A. VanGemeren) [1997]
PG *Patrologia Graecae* (J. P. Migne) [1857–1886]
PGM *Papyri graecae magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*. (Preisendanz) [1928]
TBD *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Elwell, Comfort) [2001]
TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols., Kittel, Friedrich; trans. Bromiley) [1964–1976]
TDOT *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (8 vols., Botterweck, Ringgren; trans. Willis, Bromiley, Green) [1974–]
TLNT *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (3 vols., C. Spicq) [1994]
TLOT *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (3 vols., E. Jenni) [1997]
TWOT *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2 vols., Harris, Archer) [1980]
UBS³ *United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (3rd ed., Metzger et al.) [1975]
UBS⁴ *United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (4th corrected ed., Metzger et al.) [1993]
WH *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Westcott and Hort) [1882]

ABBREVIATIONS FOR BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Deut	Deuteronomy	1 Sam	1 Samuel
Exod	Exodus	Josh	Joshua	2 Sam	2 Samuel
Lev	Leviticus	Judg	Judges	1 Kgs	1 Kings
Num	Numbers	Ruth	Ruth	2 Kgs	2 Kings

1 Chr	1 Chronicles	Song	Song of Songs	Obad	Obadiah
2 Chr	2 Chronicles	Isa	Isaiah	Jonah	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Jer	Jeremiah	Mic	Micah
Neh	Nehemiah	Lam	Lamentations	Nah	Nahum
Esth	Esther	Ezek	Ezekiel	Hab	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Dan	Daniel	Zeph	Zephaniah
Ps, Pss	Psalms, Psalms	Hos	Hosea	Hag	Haggai
Prov	Proverbs	Joel	Joel	Zech	Zechariah
Eccl	Ecclesiastes	Amos	Amos	Mal	Malachi

New Testament

Matt	Matthew	Eph	Ephesians	Heb	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil	Philippians	Jas	James
Luke	Luke	Col	Colossians	1 Pet	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom	Romans	1 Tim	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor	1 Corinthians	2 Tim	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal	Galatians	Phlm	Philemon	Rev	Revelation

Deuterocanonical

Bar	Baruch	1–2 Esdr	1–2 Esdras	Ps 151	Psalms 151
Add Dan	Additions to Daniel	Add Esth	Additions to Esther	Sir	Sirach
Pr Azar	Prayer of Azariah	Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah	Tob	Tobit
Bel	Bel and the Dragon	Jdt	Judith	Wis	Wisdom of Solomon
Sg Three	Song of the Three Children	1–2 Macc	1–2 Maccabees		
		3–4 Macc	3–4 Maccabees		
Sus	Susanna	Pr Man	Prayer of Manasseh		

MANUSCRIPTS AND LITERATURE FROM QUMRAN

Initial numerals followed by “Q” indicate particular caves at Qumran. For example, the notation 4Q267 indicates text 267 from cave 4 at Qumran. Further, 1QS 4:9–10 indicates column 4, lines 9–10 of the *Rule of the Community*; and 4Q166 1 ii 2 indicates fragment 1, column ii, line 2 of text 166 from cave 4. More examples of common abbreviations are listed below.

CD	Cairo Geniza copy of the <i>Damascus Document</i>	1QIsa ^b	Isaiah copy ^b	4QLam ^a	Lamentations
		1QM	<i>War Scroll</i>	11QPs ^a	Psalms
		1QpHab	<i>Pesher Habakkuk</i>	11QTemple ^{a,b}	<i>Temple Scroll</i>
1QH	<i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i>	1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i>	11QTgJob	<i>Targum of Job</i>
1QIsa ^a	Isaiah copy ^a				

IMPORTANT NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

(all dates given are AD; ordinal numbers refer to centuries)

Significant Papyri (P = Papyrus)

P1 Matt 1; early 3rd	same codex)	1 Cor 7–8,	P30 1 Thess 4–5; 2 Thess 1;
P4+P64+P67 Matt 3, 5, 26;	Phil 3–4; late 3rd		early 3rd
Luke 1–6; late 2nd	P20 Jas 2–3; 3rd		P32 Titus 1–2; late 2nd
P5 John 1, 16, 20; early 3rd	P22 John 15–16; mid 3rd		P37 Matt 26; late 3rd
P13 Heb 2–5, 10–12; early 3rd	P23 Jas 1; c. 200		P39 John 8; first half of 3rd
P15+P16 (probably part of	P27 Rom 8–9; 3rd		P40 Rom 1–4, 6, 9; 3rd

- P45 Gospels and Acts;
 early 3rd
 P46 Paul's Major Epistles (less
 Pastorals); late 2nd
 P47 Rev 9–17; 3rd
 P49+P65 Eph 4–5; 1 Thess
 1–2; 3rd
 P52 John 18; c. 125
 P53 Matt 26, Acts 9–10;
 middle 3rd
- P66 John; late 2nd
 P70 Matt 2–3, 11–12, 24; 3rd
 P72 1–2 Peter, Jude; c. 300
 P74 Acts, General Epistles; 7th
 P75 Luke and John; c. 200
 P77+P103 (probably part of
 same codex) Matt 13–14,
 23; late 2nd
 P87 Philemon; late 2nd
- P90 John 18–19; late 2nd
 P91 Acts 2–3; 3rd
 P92 Eph 1, 2 Thess 1; c. 300
 P98 Rev 1:13–20; late 2nd
 P100 Jas 3–5; c. 300
 P101 Matt 3–4; 3rd
 P104 Matt 21; 2nd
 P106 John 1; 3rd
 P115 Rev 2–3, 5–6, 8–15; 3rd

Significant Uncials

- K (Sinaiticus) most of NT; 4th
 A (Alexandrinus) most of NT;
 5th
 B (Vaticanus) most of NT; 4th
 C (Ephraemi Rescriptus) most
 of NT with many lacunae;
 5th
 D (Bezae) Gospels, Acts; 5th
 D (Claramontanus), Paul's
 Epistles; 6th (different MS
 than Bezae)
 E (Laudianus 35) Acts; 6th
 F (Augensis) Paul's
 Epistles; 9th
 G (Boernerianus) Paul's
 Epistles; 9th
- H (Coislinianus) Paul's
 Epistles; 6th
 I (Freerianus or Washington)
 Paul's Epistles; 5th
 L (Regius) Gospels; 8th
 P (Porphyrrianus) Acts—
 Revelation; 9th
 Q (Guelferbytanus B) Luke,
 John; 5th
 T (Borgianus) Luke, John; 5th
 W (Washingtonianus or the
 Freer Gospels) Gospels; 5th
 Z (Dublinensis) Matthew; 6th
 037 (Δ; Sangallensis) Gospels;
 9th
- 038 (Θ; Koridethi) Gospels;
 9th
 040 (Ξ; Zacynthius) Luke; 6th
 043 (Φ; Beratinus) Matthew,
 Mark; 6th
 044 (Ψ; Athous Laurae)
 Gospels, Acts, Paul's
 Epistles; 9th
 048 Acts, Paul's Epistles,
 General Epistles; 5th
 0171 Matt 10, Luke 22;
 c. 300
 0189 Acts 5; c. 200

Significant Minuscules

- 1 Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles;
 12th
 33 All NT except Rev; 9th
 81 Acts, Paul's Epistles,
 General Epistles; 1044
 565 Gospels; 9th
 700 Gospels; 11th
- 1424 (or Family 1424—a
 group of 29 manuscripts
 sharing nearly the same
 text) most of NT; 9th–10th
 1739 Acts, Paul's Epistles; 10th
 2053 Rev; 13th
 2344 Rev; 11th
- fⁱ (a family of manuscripts
 including 1, 118, 131, 209)
 Gospels; 12th–14th
 f¹³ (a family of manuscripts
 including 13, 69, 124, 174,
 230, 346, 543, 788, 826,
 828, 983, 1689, 1709—
 known as the Ferrar group)
 Gospels; 11th–15th

Significant Ancient Versions

- SYRIAC (SYR)
 syr^c (Syriac Curetonian)
 Gospels; 5th
 syr^s (Syriac Sinaiticus)
 Gospels; 4th
 syr^h (Syriac Harklensis) Entire
 NT; 616
- OLD LATIN (IT)
 it^a (Vercellensis) Gospels; 4th
 it^b (Veronensis) Gospels; 5th
 it^d (Cantabrigiensis—the Latin
 text of Bezae) Gospels, Acts,
 3 John; 5th
 it^e (Palantinus) Gospels; 5th
 it^k (Bobiensis) Matthew, Mark;
 c. 400
- COPTIC (COP)
 cop^{bo} (Boharic—north Egypt)
 cop^{fay} (Fayyumic—central Egypt)
 cop^{sa} (Sahidic—southern Egypt)
- OTHER VERSIONS
 arm (Armenian)
 eth (Ethiopic)
 geo (Georgian)

TRANSLITERATION AND NUMBERING SYSTEM

Note: For words and roots from nonbiblical languages (e.g., Arabic, Ugaritic), only approximate transliterations are given.

HEBREW/ARAMAIC

Consonants

א	<i>aleph</i>	= '	מ, ם	<i>mem</i>	= <i>m</i>
ב, ך	<i>beth</i>	= <i>b</i>	נ, ן	<i>nun</i>	= <i>n</i>
ג, ך	<i>gimel</i>	= <i>g</i>	ס	<i>samekh</i>	= <i>s</i>
ד, ך	<i>daleth</i>	= <i>d</i>	ע	<i>ayin</i>	= '
ה	<i>he</i>	= <i>h</i>	פ, ף, ץ	<i>pe</i>	= <i>p</i>
ו	<i>waw</i>	= <i>w</i>	צ, ץ	<i>tsadhe</i>	= <i>ts</i>
ז	<i>zayin</i>	= <i>z</i>	ק	<i>qoph</i>	= <i>q</i>
ח	<i>heth</i>	= <i>kh</i>	ר	<i>resh</i>	= <i>r</i>
ט	<i>teth</i>	= <i>t</i>	ש	<i>shin</i>	= <i>sh</i>
י	<i>yodh</i>	= <i>y</i>	שׁ	<i>sin</i>	= <i>s</i>
כ, ך, ן	<i>kaph</i>	= <i>k</i>	ת, תּ	<i>taw</i>	= <i>t, th</i> (spirant)
ל	<i>lamedh</i>	= <i>l</i>			

Vowels

ֿ	<i>patakh</i>	= <i>a</i>	ֿ	<i>qamets khatuf</i>	= <i>o</i>
ֿ	<i>furtive patakh</i>	= <i>a</i>	ֿ	<i>holem</i>	= <i>o</i>
ֿ	<i>qamets</i>	= <i>a</i>	ֿ	<i>full holem</i>	= <i>o</i>
ֿ	<i>final qamets he</i>	= <i>ah</i>	ֿ	<i>short qibbuts</i>	= <i>u</i>
ֿ	<i>segol</i>	= <i>e</i>	ֿ	<i>long qibbuts</i>	= <i>u</i>
ֿ	<i>tsere</i>	= <i>e</i>	ֿ	<i>shureq</i>	= <i>u</i>
ֿ	<i>tsere yod</i>	= <i>e</i>	ֿ	<i>khatef patakh</i>	= <i>a</i>
ֿ	<i>short hireq</i>	= <i>i</i>	ֿ	<i>khatef qamets</i>	= <i>o</i>
ֿ	<i>long hireq</i>	= <i>i</i>	ֿ	<i>vocalic shewa</i>	= <i>e</i>
ֿ	<i>hireq yod</i>	= <i>i</i>	ֿ	<i>patakh yodh</i>	= <i>a</i>

GREEK

α	<i>alpha</i>	= <i>a</i>	ι	<i>iota</i>	= <i>i</i>
β	<i>beta</i>	= <i>b</i>	κ	<i>kappa</i>	= <i>k</i>
γ	<i>gamma</i>	= <i>g, n</i> (before γ, κ, ξ, χ)	λ	<i>lamda</i>	= <i>l</i>
			μ	<i>mu</i>	= <i>m</i>
δ	<i>delta</i>	= <i>d</i>	ν	<i>nu</i>	= <i>n</i>
ε	<i>epsilon</i>	= <i>e</i>	ξ	<i>ksi</i>	= <i>x</i>
ζ	<i>zeta</i>	= <i>z</i>	ο	<i>omicron</i>	= <i>o</i>
η	<i>eta</i>	= <i>ē</i>	π	<i>pi</i>	= <i>p</i>
θ	<i>theta</i>	= <i>th</i>	ρ	<i>rho</i>	= <i>r</i> (ῥ = <i>rh</i>)

σ, ζ	<i>sigma</i>	= s	ψ	<i>psi</i>	= ps
τ	<i>tau</i>	= t	ω	<i>omega</i>	= ō
υ	<i>upsilon</i>	= u	·	<i>rough</i>	= h (with
φ	<i>phi</i>	= ph		<i>breathing</i>	vowel or
χ	<i>chi</i>	= ch		<i>mark</i>	diphthong)

THE TYNDALE-STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

The Cornerstone Biblical Commentary series uses a word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

There are two main numbering systems used for biblical words today. The one familiar to most people is the Strong's numbering system (made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible*). Although the original Strong's system is still quite useful, the most up-to-date research has shed new light on the biblical languages and allows for more precision than is found in the original Strong's system. The Cornerstone Biblical Commentary series, therefore, features a newly revised version of the Strong's system, the Tyndale-Strong's numbering system. The Tyndale-Strong's system brings together the familiarity of the Strong's system and the best of modern scholarship. In most cases, the original Strong's numbers are preserved. In places where new research dictates, new or related numbers have been added.¹

The second major numbering system today is the Goodrick-Kohlenberger system used in a number of study tools published by Zondervan. In order to give students broad access to a number of helpful tools, the Commentary provides index numbers for the Zondervan system as well.

The different index systems are designated as follows:

TG	Tyndale-Strong's Greek number	ZH	Zondervan Hebrew number
ZG	Zondervan Greek number	TA/ZA	Tyndale/Zondervan Aramaic number
TH	Tyndale-Strong's Hebrew number	S	Strong's Aramaic number

So in the example, "love" *agapē* [^{TC}26, ^{ZC}27], the first number is the one to use with Greek tools keyed to the Tyndale-Strong's system, and the second applies to tools that use the Zondervan system.

The indexing of Aramaic terms differs slightly from that of Greek and Hebrew. Strong's original system mixed the Aramaic terms in with the Hebrew, but the Tyndale-Strong's system indexes Aramaic with a new set of numbers starting at 10,000. Since Tyndale's system for Aramaic diverges completely from original Strong's, the original Strong's number is listed separately so that those using tools keyed to Strong's can locate the information. This number is designated with an S, as in the example, "son" *bar* [^{TA/ZA}10120, ^S1247].

1. Generally, one may simply use the original four-digit Strong's number to identify words in tools using Strong's system. If a Tyndale-Strong's number is followed by a capital letter (e.g., ^{TC}1692A), it generally indicates an added subdivision of meaning for the given term. Whenever a Tyndale-Strong's number has a number following a decimal point (e.g., ^{TC}2013.1), it reflects an instance where new research has yielded a separate, new classification of use for a biblical word. Forthcoming tools from Tyndale House Publishers will include these entries, which were not part of the original Strong's system.



Ezra-Nehemiah

GARY V. SMITH

INTRODUCTION TO *Ezra-Nehemiah*

EZRA-NEHEMIAH PRESENTS US with a theological record concerning the Hebrew people who, beginning in 538 BC, returned from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple (515 BC), rebuilt Jerusalem's wall (445 BC), and continued as a community in Judah. This is not a record of dry ancient events; it is rather a testimony to the fulfillment of God's sovereign plan for his covenant people and his powerful control over every aspect of Israel's history. Many people in Jerusalem wondered if there was any hope for them: Judah had been destroyed by the Babylonians. It was now a small and impotent province in the vast Persian Empire facing opposition to its development by political opponents. Sorrow, joy, and hope filled people's lives as they endured this difficult yet exciting period in the history of Israel. The most important occasions prompted Ezra and Nehemiah to keep "memoirs" of what God was accomplishing among the people during their ministries to reform and restore Jerusalem (458–430 BC). In spite of sinful mistakes of the past, the people would again commit to be separate from the unholy ways of the pagan people around them. God would intervene marvelously on their behalf, even through pagan kings, for the postexilic community was an important continuation of God's chosen people.

AUTHOR

Ezra-Nehemiah does not indicate who wrote it. Some of the earliest traditions in the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Batra* 15a) state that Ezra wrote 1–2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Josephus's method of counting the biblical books in the Hebrew canon implies that his Scriptures had Ezra-Nehemiah as one undivided book (*Against Apion* 1.38–40). No one can be exactly sure how he divided the 13 books that are not part of the four "divine poems" (Wisdom books and Psalms) or the five books that describe history from "creation to the death of Moses" (the Pentateuch). It is most likely that the 13 books Josephus refers to include five prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah-Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets) and eight historical books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther). Eusebius quoted Melito of Sardis (second century AD) who referred to all the material in Ezra-Nehemiah as the work of Ezra (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.26.14). Since Nehemiah 3:32 was marked as the middle verse of the book, we know that the Masoretic scholars treated Ezra-Nehemiah as one book. In addition, the Septuagint (LXX) treats them as one unified book. Origen (third century AD) mentioned that Ezra-Nehemiah was one book in the Hebrew Bible (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.2), but he knew of the separation of Ezra and Nehemiah

in certain Greek traditions. Jerome divided the text into two books of Ezra in the Vulgate, but the division of the text into two books did not enter into Jewish tradition until the Middle Ages.

This information leads to one conclusion, but it raises an interrelated problem. First, the evidence from the manuscripts and tradition most naturally point to the conclusion that one person wrote/edited both Ezra and Nehemiah, not two people. This person who edited the book used original documents (often called "memoirs") that were written by Ezra (Ezra 7–10; Neh 8–10) and Nehemiah (Neh 1–7, 11–13), plus official government letters (Ezra 4:11–16, 17–22; 5:7–17; 6:2–5, 6–12; 7:12–26) to compose the present book. Often the official letters are presented in their original Aramaic (Ezra 4–6), rather than in a Hebrew translation. Aramaic was the administrative language of the Persian government under which the letters were composed.

For many years commentators supported the idea that the same person wrote both Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah (see Fensham 1982:2–4). The support for this theory hinges on four facts:

1. The book of Chronicles ends with the same verses that begin the book of Ezra (cf. 2 Chr 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–2).
2. The apocryphal book of 1 Esdras begins with 2 Chronicles 35–36 and continues right into Ezra without a break.
3. These books have common vocabulary and stylistic characteristics.
4. Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah have a similar theological perspective.

Those who connect Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah usually refer to the editor of this material as "the Chronicler." This theory suggests that he collected the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, several genealogies, and some sources similar to Samuel and Kings, then edited them together into the present books. Some hold the view that this editor distorted the facts by inserting his own theological perspective, while others think he faithfully used his sources (Fensham 1982:2–4).¹

The theory that there was one author of both Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah was seriously undermined when S. Japhet demonstrated 36 significant linguistic and stylistic differences between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah (1968:331–332). R. Braun (1979:52–54) found that the theology of Chronicles had a unique perspective based on a strong concept of retribution (this is mostly absent from Ezra), an inclusive attitude toward foreigners (Ezra and Nehemiah support separation from foreigners), little emphasis on the Exodus tradition (it is stronger in Ezra-Nehemiah), and an emphasis on the Davidic line. Allen (2003:9) found (1) an exilic concept of Israel as exiles in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 11:4), in contrast to Chronicles' view of Israel as the 12 tribes (1 Chr 9:3); (2) no royal eschatology in Ezra-Nehemiah, in contrast to Chronicles; (3) a different view of God's wrath on Israel; (4) an emphasis on the Exodus in Ezra-Nehemiah, but an emphasis on David-Solomon in Chronicles; and (5) an omission of Solomon's failures in Chronicles, but an admission of them in Nehemiah 13:26. These differences bear directly on points 3 and 4 given above in support of a single-author view and suggest that the author of Chronicles did *not* write Ezra-Nehemiah.

Though the text does not name an author/editor of Ezra-Nehemiah, Ezra is a possible candidate because he was a skilled scribe and was not as busy with admin-

istrative duties as Nehemiah. Favoring this idea, the Ezra sections (commonly called the Ezra Memoirs) in Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah 8–10 contain detailed lists (Ezra 8:1–14; 10:18–44; Neh 10:1–27), prayers (Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 9:6–37), and several official documents (Ezra 7:12–26; 8:26–27) that have the appearance of first-hand knowledge. In addition, the Nehemiah Memoirs (Neh 1–7; 11–13) and other documents from Nehemiah’s work would have likely been available to Ezra. The only serious objection to Ezra’s potential authorship is his age. Since the lists of priests and rulers (cf. Ezra 8:1–14; 10:18–44; Neh 10:1–27) extend down to around 405 BC, Ezra must have finished writing the last section of this material when he was quite old (Yamauchi 1988:577). If one assumes he was 40 years old in 458 BC when he came to Jerusalem, he would have been 93 in 405 BC; however, this is not an impossibly old age. Further, if Ezra was 25 when he moved to Jerusalem, then he would have been only 78 in 405 BC. Those who object to this possibility usually suggest that some unknown editor put the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah together at a later date.

Since a good deal of evidence seems to point in the direction that Ezra was probably the author/editor of these memoirs, this commentary will assume that Ezra was the person responsible for putting the book of Ezra-Nehemiah together for posterity. It should be noted, however, that the historical value or inspiration of these books does not stand or fall on the basis of this conclusion.

DATE OF WRITING

A key issue in determining the date of Ezra-Nehemiah is the order of Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s ministries and which kings they served under (Artaxerxes I or Artaxerxes II). Although it appears that Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 BC (Ezra 7:7), about 13 years before Nehemiah (in 445 BC; Neh 2:1), some biblical scholars think Nehemiah actually began his ministry first.² Ezra is placed later by arguing that he served under Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC) rather than Artaxerxes I, or by emending the “seventh” year in Ezra 7:7 (458 BC) to the “thirty-seventh” year (428 BC) of Artaxerxes I. Williamson (1985:xxxix) thinks Ezra’s ministry lasted about one year and that the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah did not overlap. Some of the reasons for suggesting that Nehemiah came before Ezra are as follows:

1. Jerusalem was populated when Ezra came (Ezra 10:1), but few lived there in Nehemiah’s day (Neh 7:4; 11:1). Thus, Nehemiah must have been earlier.
2. Nehemiah’s list of people in Nehemiah 7 does not include some of the names of the people who came with Ezra (Ezra 8:1–14). This may indicate that Ezra came later.
3. Eliashib was the high priest in the time of Nehemiah (Neh 3:1), but Jehohanan his son was priest in the time of Ezra (Ezra 10:6).
4. Since Ezra gave thanks for the walls of Jerusalem (Ezra 9:9), Nehemiah must have already rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.
5. Nehemiah’s reform (Neh 8–10) would not be needed if Ezra had carried out his reform a few years earlier.
6. Because of political unrest in Egypt and the Persian army’s march to Palestine in 458 BC, it seems unlikely that the king would send Ezra at that time.³

None of these arguments are conclusive, for the populations of cities rise and fall over a 20-year period for many political and economic reasons (point 1), arguments from silence cannot prove anything (point 2), Jehohanan was a priest but the text does not say he was a priest in Ezra's time (point 3), Ezra's thanksgiving was not for the completed wall around Jerusalem but for God who was a metaphorical wall around "Judah and Jerusalem" (point 4), and carrying out two similar reforms 15 years apart gives plenty of time for people to slide back into the same sins (point 5). Since none of these issues conclusively require Ezra to be put after Nehemiah, it seems best to accept the present canonical ordering as correct. Although every interpretation must recognize that Ezra-Nehemiah has some chapters out of chronological order, the evidence does not support changing the order of Ezra and Nehemiah or their ministries. The author's purpose in writing Ezra-Nehemiah seems to have been dominated more by thematic and theological issues rather than any attempt to reproduce an exact chronological history of the period. This commentary and its discussion of the date of composition for Ezra-Nehemiah are therefore based on the conclusion that Ezra came to Jerusalem first and that his ministry overlapped with Nehemiah's.

The dates of the events mentioned in Ezra include those of Cyrus's decree in the first year of his reign (539/538 BC) in Ezra 1:1-2, the second year of Darius I (520 BC) in Ezra 4:24, and the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (458 BC) in Ezra 7:7. These dates do not cover the complete ministry of Ezra, however, for he appeared again in the midst of Nehemiah's work (Neh 8) and after the complete rebuilding of the city walls in Nehemiah 12:36 (445 BC). Nehemiah's ministry in Jerusalem extended from the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I in Nehemiah 1:1 (445 BC) until around 432 BC (Neh 13:6). Later, after a short time in Persia, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, but no precise date is given (Neh 13:7). The date when the author composed these books is unknown, but internal data suggest a date a few years before 400 BC. Those who place Ezra's ministry sometime after Nehemiah (in the time of Artaxerxes II rather than Artaxerxes I) often see a later, unknown redactor editing this material. Such an approach places the writing of the book in the early Hellenistic period, around 300 BC (Williamson 1985:xxxvi).

OCCASION OF WRITING

The things described in Ezra-Nehemiah are not just dry ancient events; instead, they are the fulfillment of God's sovereign plan for his covenant people. They involved real people in disastrous circumstances, where people were killed, as well as in happy situations, where people had the joy of returning to the homeland of their forefathers. Sorrow, joy, and hope filled people's lives as they endured this difficult period in the history of Israel. These occasions prompted Ezra and Nehemiah to keep "memoirs" of what God was accomplishing among the people, which were then used by the author/editor (perhaps Ezra) in his composition of the book. The content of Ezra-Nehemiah can be divided into two historical time periods: (1) events before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah—the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple (539–516 BC)—and (2) the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah—the reform and restoration of Jerusalem (458–430 BC). Together,

these two sections span about 120 years of historical events and theological decisions in the life of the nation, but only a few important events are explained from each era. The first 33 years of the nation's life after its return from exile are traced in Ezra 1–6, but nothing is said about the next 60 years. Then a few selected events are recounted from the 28 years when Ezra and Nehemiah were both in Jerusalem (Ezra 7—Neh 13). Below, historical background will be given for each of the two periods along with comments on the reasons for its inclusion in Ezra-Nehemiah.

Long before the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah actually began, the nation of Judah was captured three times by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 25). After Jerusalem was defeated, large groups (cf. 2 Kgs 24:14, 16; 25:11; Jer 39:9; 52:15) of Hebrew people were marched into foreign lands in 605, 597, and finally in 587/586 BC. The Bible does not say a whole lot about what these people endured in Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah 29:4-5 suggests they were able to build their own homes, have a garden, and live a fairly normal life. Ezekiel lived in a Jewish community near the Kebar Canal, probably about 50 miles southeast of Babylon and not far from the city of Nippur (Ezek 1:1-3). At this place, the Hebrew elders were able to meet periodically with Ezekiel (Ezek 8:1; 14:1; 20:1), so the people enjoyed some religious freedom. Some educated Hebrew men were even recruited and trained to fill high positions in the Babylonian government. Daniel and his three friends were able to practice their faith freely most of the time, but there were brief periods of persecution (Dan 3; 6).

God predicted through the prophet Jeremiah that this captivity would last only 70 years (Jer 25:12; 29:10), so the people were not without some hope during these dark days of exile. In the first year of Cyrus's reign, the prophet Daniel prayed for national forgiveness and restoration because he realized that this period of 70 years was about to end (Dan 9:2). Shortly after this, God stirred up the heart of King Cyrus, and he put out a decree that allowed the exiles to return and build the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4). When this happened, many Jewish people were settled in their homes and were doing well in their businesses in Babylon, so they chose not to return to the ruined city of Jerusalem. Little is known about the people who stayed in Babylon, but the books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe what God did among those exiled people of Judah who left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. God fulfilled his promises and prepared the way for them to restore Jerusalem and the worship of God at the Temple.

Ezra 1:1 dates the beginning of these events to the first year of the reign of Cyrus king of Persia (538 BC), less than a year after Babylon was defeated on October 29, 539 BC. According to documents from the time of Nabonidus (ANET 306, 562-563) and the Cyrus Cylinder (ANET 315-316), Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, and his son Belshazzar (Dan 5) were not popular rulers because they rejected the religion and priests of the god Marduk and favored the worship of the moon god Sin at the temples in Ur and Haran. According to these documents, Cyrus, the powerful ruler over the Medes and Persians, attacked and quickly defeated Babylon without much of a fight (ANET 306, 315-316). Once in charge, Cyrus allowed all the different ethnic groups exiled in Babylon to go back to their homelands. Sheshbazzar was the leader of about 50,000 Hebrew people (Ezra 1:8; 2:64-65). Thus the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem and built the Temple during the years 539–516 BC.

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of people who were in the Babylonian exile at this time. E. Yamauchi (1988:567-568) lists a number of scholarly guesses, but they range from 50,000 to 235,000. Yamauchi thinks that 150,000 is about right; thus, only one-third of those in exile went back to Jerusalem in response to Cyrus's decree (Ezra 1:8; 2:64-65; 5:14). Once in Jerusalem, these people built an altar and worshiped God (Ezra 3:3). Then they began to repair the foundations of the Temple itself (Ezra 3:7-10). When the leaders of the Hebrews refused to let the people of the land (foreigners whom Esarhaddon had deported there—see Ezra 4:2) help them rebuild the Temple, the local residents started trouble and told the Persians that the Hebrews were going to rebel against the king (Ezra 4:1-23). This caused the work on the Temple to stop for over 15 years, until the second year of Darius I (reigned 522–486 BC; see Ezra 4:24). Although this frustrating delay tried the patience of many, God used the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to challenge the people to finish rebuilding the Temple.

The beginning of Darius's reign was filled with conflict, so the attempt to restart the construction of the Temple was filled with problems. Cambyses (530–522 BC), the king before Darius I, was fighting a war in Egypt when news came that someone had taken over the government of Persia while he was away from the capital. Cambyses decided to return to his capital and retake his throne, but mysteriously died on his way home. The Greek historian Herodotus reported that Cambyses was accidentally cut with his own sword and died of the severe injuries, but this may be a cover-up for a more sinister plot of assassination (*Histories* 3.64). Darius I then rose to power but had to deal with a series of revolts for the first year and a half of his reign (Hoglund 1992:24). Once order was established, Darius I set out to establish a system of satraps over large areas of the country, governors over regional provinces, and military commanders to keep order in the vast Persian Empire. This reorganization brought new stability to the diverse Persian kingdom.⁴ Under this system, Tattenai was the satrap over the province west of the Euphrates River (Ezra 5:3), and Sheshbazzar was the local governor in Yehud (Judah).

After these revolts were put down, the people of Judah appealed for permission to begin rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem as Cyrus had decreed many years earlier. Officials under Darius I found Cyrus's original document in the archives of the Persian fortress at Ecbatana (Ezra 6:1-5). It gave the Jewish people permission to rebuild the Temple. With the discovery of this official document, Darius I not only allowed the people of Judah to build the Temple in Jerusalem unhindered by their enemies, but he actually offered to pay the full cost of building the Temple from royal taxes (Ezra 6:7-8). In four years the Temple was completed (516/515 BC; see Ezra 6:15). This illustrates the Persians' tolerance (and even promotion) of different religious beliefs outside their own Zoroastrian belief in the god Ahura Mazda (see Boyce 1982).

Although the exact date when Ezra wrote of these historical events is unknown, a central part of his political and religious reform movement was based on reminding his audience about their historical and religious roots. He wanted his audience to see the hand of God at work in their lives and to encourage them to separate

themselves from the pagan people they were marrying; the story of their ancestors' efforts to build the Temple and their willingness to separate themselves from their pagan neighbors provided an inspiring example of such attitudes and actions for his listeners. As the author/editor, Ezra wrote about these historical events to teach the wayward Jews, who had lost their sense of community and dedication to God, that God required them to live according to his covenant stipulations in the Torah. Ezra's method of editing provides a theological emphasis on separation from pagans in chapter 9 and explains why he chose to preface news about his own spiritual reform with information about the nation's earlier commitment to be separate from the half-pagan people of the land (Ezra 4:1-5).

The next group of materials written in Ezra-Nehemiah describes the period of reform and restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah that occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC). Early in his reign, Artaxerxes I struggled to keep control of the distant ends of his empire in Greece and especially in Egypt. These instabilities encouraged the king to entrust Ezra and Nehemiah with the difficult task of establishing a secure and stable society in the neighboring province of Yehud so that the Egyptian troubles would not spread elsewhere in the empire. Ezra the scribe was made responsible for obtaining funds for his work from the treasurer of the province west of the Euphrates River (Ezra 7:21) and was given the power to exempt Temple workers and priests from state taxation (Ezra 7:24), appoint judges for the courts (Ezra 7:25), teach people the laws of the land, and severely punish those who refused to follow those laws (Ezra 7:26). When Ezra found out that many of the leaders and priests had intermarried with pagan people from surrounding nations, he prayed for forgiveness and helped the people institute a lifestyle that was consistent with the law of God (Ezra 9:1–10:44).

Later, when Nehemiah arrived in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I (445 BC; see Neh 1:1; 2:1), the ruined walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in 52 days (Neh 3–6). More theological reform continued when Ezra read God's law to the people and promoted the reestablishment of the Festival of Shelters (Neh 8–10). After Nehemiah organized and repopulated the city of Jerusalem (Neh 11–12), he returned to the Persian capital in Susa to give a report to the king concerning his accomplishments (Neh 13:6). Later, he returned to Jerusalem and carried out additional reforms (Neh 13:6–30). In 12:22 Nehemiah mentions "Darius the Persian," which probably means Darius II (423–404 BC), but it is difficult to know how long Nehemiah's ministry lasted.

The occasion for writing the Ezra Memoirs in Ezra 7–10, plus the entire record of Nehemiah's ministry, is tied to the nature of the ministries of these men. Ezra clearly stated that his purpose in life as a Levitical scribe was "to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people" (Ezra 7:10). Nehemiah's purpose was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so that the disgrace of the nation could be removed and God's name would again be honored (Neh 1:3; 2:3). In order to accomplish these goals, both men needed to address critical problems in the Jewish community. The memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah were written during their service to justify their actions, to encourage people to support their reforms and building projects, and to motivate the people to maintain

the social and religious standards of covenant life the community had agreed to. In addition, the Nehemiah Memoirs (Neh 1–7; 11–13) show how God continued to restore the vitality of his people in spite of repeated failures to separate themselves as a holy people.

In summary, this book is a testimony of what God did through the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah. It served to (1) make future generations aware of the sinful mistakes of the past; (2) motivate people to be separate from the unholy ways of the pagan people around them; (3) illustrate the marvelous ways God sovereignly intervened on their behalf, even through pagan kings; (4) draw people back to the teaching of the word of God in the Torah; (5) reinforce the importance of the people's vows of devotion to God and the bold decisions of earlier generations to be separate; (6) testify to the concrete results the people achieved because there was unity and community dedication to mutually important tasks; and (7) show the postexilic community that they were an important continuation of God's chosen people. Hopefully the new generation of spiritual and political leaders would continue in the path established by Ezra and Nehemiah.

AUDIENCE

Ezra and Nehemiah addressed Persian kings (Neh 2) and their political enemies in Yehud (Ezra 4:1–4; 5:1–17; Neh 4:1–4; 6:1–14; 13:4–9), but most of the time these leaders were encouraging, organizing, or confronting the Jewish people who settled in Jerusalem. God directed both Ezra and Nehemiah to lead a group of people back to Jerusalem and to carry out political, social, and religious reforms among those living in Jerusalem. Apathy, greed, disorganization, compromise, unholy marriage relationships, and ignorance of the word of God characterized these people. When the people did not have strong leaders to challenge them to live holy lives that would honor God, some syncretized their faith with the pagan cultures around them. They needed to confess their sins, follow God's law, and boldly step forward to do the will of God.

When the whole book was completed, at some undefined date a few years after the active ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, it was probably addressed to an audience of Jewish people in Judah who were struggling with how to remain faithful Jews while living in close proximity to foreign people. This required them to decide how to deal with mixed marriages and conduct proper worship, following the requirements of the Torah. Initially this might have included some of the same people or the children of the people Nehemiah addressed in Nehemiah 13:6–31.

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

There never was much doubt about the canonicity of Ezra-Nehemiah, but the presence of apocryphal books called Esdras in the Old Greek (LXX) and the Latin Vulgate have created confusion concerning what exactly was to be included in the Canon. The confusion is caused because of apocryphal works assigned to Ezra (Esdras A and D). The chart below shows the relationships and overlapping material in these three traditions.⁵

Ezra had fasted and prayed earnestly for God's protection on the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, but not much of that prayer was recorded (Ezra 8:21-23).

Another long intercessory prayer is found in Nehemiah 1, after the king's cup-bearer heard that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. This prayer was accompanied by intense emotions, mourning, fasting, and weeping. Nehemiah first recognized God's faithful love and grace to his people, and then he confessed the people's sins. At the end of his intercession, Nehemiah requested that God would grant him success in talking with King Artaxerxes about the problems in Jerusalem.

Elsewhere Nehemiah offered short prayers for help. Sometimes the narrative only mentions "a prayer to the God of heaven" (Neh 2:4); other times we hear an imprecatory request for God to stop the enemies who are interfering with the work on the wall (Neh 4:4-5). Elsewhere Nehemiah just called out to God to remember him and bless his work (Neh 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). These prayers recognized the sovereign power of God to control their lives and the lives of those around them. Some prayers were acts of worship. Some expressed humility and sorrow, while others requested divine help. Frequently Nehemiah noted that God heard his prayer and answered his request. These prayers are an encouragement to all readers to follow the example of Ezra and Nehemiah, for prayer brings God's power to bear on the difficult situations of life.

OUTLINE

The literary organization of Ezra-Nehemiah can be structured around the various sources employed in writing these narratives. D. Howard (1993:278) divides the sources as follows:

1. A historical review (Ezra 1-6)
2. Ezra's memoirs, part 1 (Ezra 7-10)
3. Nehemiah's memoirs, part 1 (Neh 1-7)
4. Ezra's memoirs, part 2 (Neh 8-10)
5. Nehemiah's memoirs, part 2 (Neh 11-13)

This approach helps one understand the sources used in the compositional process but does not explain much about the content or theological themes that are predominant in each section. These sources can help mark out some of the major breaks in a topical outline, but not all commentators choose to make breaks at these places.⁷

- I. The People Return to Jerusalem to Rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-6:22)
 - A. God Returns the Exiles to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-2:70)
 1. God stirs people to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-11)
 2. A list of those who returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:1-70)
 - B. Worshiping God Brings Opposition (Ezra 3:1-4:23)
 1. Restoration of worship (Ezra 3:1-13)
 2. Opposition to the restoration of the Temple (Ezra 4:1-5)
 3. Opposition to the restoration of the walls (Ezra 4:6-23)

- C. God Overcomes Opposition to Constructing the Temple (Ezra 4:24–6:22)
 - 1. Prophetic encouragement challenges the opposition (Ezra 4:24–5:17)
 - 2. Darius encourages rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 6:1–12)
 - 3. The joyous celebrations at the completed Temple (Ezra 6:13–22)
- II. Ezra Returns to Teach God's Law (Ezra 7:1–10:44)
 - A. God Brings Ezra to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1–8:36)
 - 1. Ezra's divine and royal commission (Ezra 7:1–28a)
 - 2. God's hand on those who returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:28b–8:36)
 - B. Ezra Intercedes Because the Holy Race Was Polluted (Ezra 9:1–10:44)
 - 1. Ezra's reaction to unholy marriages (Ezra 9:1–15)
 - 2. The people separate themselves to the Lord (Ezra 10:1–44)
- III. Nehemiah Returns to Build the Walls of Jerusalem (Neh 1:1–7:73a)
 - A. Nehemiah's Vision to Remove Judah's Disgrace (Neh 1:1–2:20)
 - 1. Nehemiah asks God to remove Judah's disgrace (Neh 1:1–11)
 - 2. God causes the king to approve Nehemiah's vision (Neh 2:1–10)
 - 3. God's grace causes the people to accept Nehemiah's vision (Neh 2:11–20)
 - B. God Overcomes Opposition to Building the Walls (Neh 3:1–7:73a)
 - 1. The whole community works to rebuild the walls (Neh 3:1–32)
 - 2. Prayer and hard work overcome outside opposition (Neh 4:1–23)
 - 3. Confrontation and the fear of God overcome internal opposition (Neh 5:1–19)
 - 4. God helps the people complete the wall in spite of opposition (Neh 6:1–7:3)
 - 5. Nehemiah's census and the census of the first exiles (Neh 7:4–73a)
- IV. Ezra's Teaching of the Law of God Brings Covenant Renewal (Neh 7:73b–10:39)
 - A. The Community Understands God's Word (Neh 7:73b–8:18)
 - B. The Community Hears God's Word and Prays (Neh 9:1–37)
 - C. The Community Determines to Obey God's Word (Neh 9:38–10:39)
- V. Nehemiah's Organization of the People and His Reforms (Neh 11:1–13:31)
 - A. The Resettlement of the People (Neh 11:1–36)
 - B. A List of Authentic Priests (Neh 12:1–26)
 - C. The Joyous Dedication of the Walls of Jerusalem (Neh 12:27–43)
 - D. Organization of Temple Worship (Neh 12:44–13:3)
 - E. Nehemiah Confronts the People's Sin (Neh 13:4–31)

COMMENTARY ON *Ezra-Nehemiah*

- ◆ I. The People Return to Jerusalem to Rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)
 - A. God Returns the Exiles to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1–2:70)
 - 1. God stirs people to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1–11)

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia,* the LORD fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah.* He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom:

²"This is what King Cyrus of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

³Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! ⁴Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

⁵Then God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to

Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the LORD. ⁶And all their neighbors assisted by giving them articles of silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock. They gave them many valuable gifts in addition to all the voluntary offerings.

⁷King Cyrus himself brought out the articles that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the LORD's Temple in Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his own gods. ⁸Cyrus directed Mithredath, the treasurer of Persia, to count these items and present them to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the exiles returning to Judah.* ⁹This is a list of the items that were returned:

gold basins	30
silver basins.....	1,000
silver incense burners*.....	29
¹⁰ gold bowls	30
silver bowls.....	410
other items	1,000

¹¹In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. Sheshbazzar brought all of these along when the exiles went from Babylon to Jerusalem.

1:1a The first year of Cyrus's reign over Babylon was 538 B.C. 1:1b See Jer 25:11–12; 29:10. 1:8 Hebrew *Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah*. 1:9 The meaning of this Hebrew word is uncertain.

NOTES

1:1 *the LORD fulfilled the prophecy*. Lit., "in order to complete the word of the LORD." The infinitive construct *keloth* [TH3615, ZH3983] (complete, fulfill) indicates purpose. The text does

not just assure the reader that God fulfilled his promise through Jeremiah; it makes it clear that God acted with the purpose of completing what he said he would do. This fine distinction highlights God's faithfulness to his foreordained plans. The "word of the LORD" refers to Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years of exile (Jer 25:11-12; 29:10), as well as to key passages in Isaiah (Coggins 1976:11). The 70 years of exile began in 605 BC when the first groups of Hebrews were brought to Babylon (Dan 1:1-3), and came to an end following Cyrus's decree that allowed the people to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. If it took around a year for people in exile to get ready to return (to sell their homes and businesses) and then walk the 800 miles back to Jerusalem, then the people should have arrived in Jerusalem no later than 536 BC. See G. Larsson 1967:417-423 and C. F. Whiteley 1954:60-72 for further discussion. Allen (2003:16) points out that there is no evidence that Jews from the northern nation of Israel who were taken captive by the Assyrians in 721 BC returned to Yehud (Judah) at this time.

He stirred the heart of Cyrus. Lit., "The LORD stirred the spirit of Cyrus." The reason for Cyrus's proclamation was God's persuasive movement in his life. The Hebrew word *he'ir* [TH5782, ZH6424] (arouse, stir, move) refers to actions that enliven a person to do something. When the heart is stirred, it is motivated to respond and cannot sit passively. The prophecies about God's stirring up Cyrus's spirit are found in Jer 51:1 (see also Isa 13:17; 45:13; Jer 50:9). Information about the timing of God's fulfillment was derived from Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the 70 years of captivity, but the idea of God's stirring up Cyrus's heart is common to both Isaiah and Jeremiah. Ezra 1:1 and the other references to Cyrus emphasize that this king would not act on his own accord but was stirred or aroused to act by God. Not even the Persian Empire or its powerful king controls the future—God does (for a word study of this key concept of *he'ir*, see NIDOTTE 3.357-360).

1:2 *This is what King Cyrus of Persia says.* This standard formula for introducing messages in the ancient Near East is found often in the Bible and is sometimes called a "messenger formula."

The LORD, the God of heaven. "God of heaven" ('*elohe hashamayim* [TH430/8064, ZH466/9028]) is a typical title in the postexilic books (17 times in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel) to identify the God of the Hebrews as a high god rather than a local deity connected to a specific city or part of nature. It is quite unexpected that the pagan king Cyrus would use the Hebrew divine name Yahweh (cf. NLT, "LORD"), for even the Hebrews tended not to speak this name for fear of taking God's name in vain. It is possible that Cyrus knew this name because of Daniel (Dan 6). On the other hand, this statement may actually be the author's interpretation of the essence of what Cyrus said; thus, it would not be an exact quote, but would capture the spirit of what Cyrus said from a Hebrew theological perspective.

1:4 *let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses.* It is unclear if "their neighbors" (lit., "the men of his place") just referred to Jewish neighbors, as the use of *sha'ar* [TH7604, ZH8636] (cf. 1 Chr 13:2; 2 Chr 30:6; 36:20) might suggest (Bickerman 1946:258-260), or if this means that both Jews and Babylonians (Brockington 1969:49) helped the returnees with their financial or travel needs. The suggestion that Babylonians gave assistance proposes an unusual situation in which pagans were helping provide sacrifices for Israel's God. One should not read into this verse a parallel to the Israelites' spoiling the Egyptians as some do (see Blenkinsopp 1988:75; Allen 2003:17; see Exod 3:21-22; 12:35-36). In this case, fellow Hebrews who stayed in Babylon provided financial aid and animals for sacrifices to their Hebrew brothers who returned to Jerusalem. There was no "spoiling" when the Hebrew people left Babylon, God did not defeat the Babylonians with plagues, and there was no second Passover or anything similar to the Red Sea crossing. The only thing that is somewhat similar to the Exodus is that in both cases Hebrew people left a foreign land to return to Israel.

1:5 *God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.* God sovereignly moved spiritual leaders (priests and Levites) who were needed to renew worship in Jerusalem, as well as the sociopolitical heads of key family units. Important leaders, who could secure the unified effort of an extended family toward a common goal, headed up the ancestral houses (*ra'she ha'aboth* [TH7218/1, ZH8031/3], "heads/chief of the fathers"), the basic social unit in the postexilic era. Living on the ancestral land would be difficult at best, so survival in a hostile economic and political setting like Yehud was next to impossible for a single family. These extended family units provided the necessary numbers and skills to form a self-sufficient group, so they would immigrate as a unit. This verse suggests that no members of the other 10 tribes of Israel returned at this point. One of the reasons for this is that they were exiled by Assyria about 140 years before the people of Judah came to Babylon. This verse, however, does not address what happened in other parts of the empire, so one should not argue from its silence that no one from the other tribes returned.

1:6 *all their neighbors assisted.* Like the admonition in 1:4, this phrase (*kol-sebibothehem* [TH3605/5439, ZH3972/6017], "all those surrounding them") is vague and includes the possibility of both Jewish and Babylonian help (Williamson 1985:16). Some find an Exodus motif behind this statement and try to make this act comparable with the plundering of the Egyptians in Exod 12:35-36, but there is no slavery in this context or plundering of anyone here (contra Breneman 1993:71; Van Wijk-Bos 1998:18, 20). This association with the Exodus reads too much into the text and inserts a parallelism that was not clearly expressed by the writer. Although a comparison of the return of the exiles from Babylon with the Exodus is present in other texts, that association was not clearly made here.

1:7 *articles that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the LORD's Temple.* These "articles" (*keli* [TH3627, ZH3998], "vessels") were the gold and silver basins, incense burners, and bowls used in the sacrificial system at the Temple in Jerusalem (listed in 1:9-11). Nebuchadnezzar may have taken these in the 586 or 605 BC captivities of Judah (see 2 Kgs 25:13-14; Jer 52:17; Dan 1:1-2) and put them in Marduk's temple in Babylon. These were the same vessels that Belshazzar drank from the night Babylon was captured (Dan 5:23). The act of putting the vessels in Marduk's temple symbolized Marduk's power over Israel's God. There is some confusion about whether all the utensils were returned at this time because 7:19 refers to additional utensils being returned to the Temple in 458 BC. Presumably, these new cultic utensils in 7:19 are gifts from the Persian authorities and not part of the original vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

1:8 *Mithredath, the treasurer.* It is unclear why the "treasurer" (*gizbar* [TH1489, ZH1601], a Persian loan word) would be in charge of these items unless these valuable items of gold and silver were being stored in the treasury instead of in the temple of Marduk.

Sheshbazzar, the leader of the exiles. Lit., "Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah." Later in 5:14-16 Sheshbazzar is called the appointed "governor" who laid the foundations of the Temple. Other biblical texts state that Zerubbabel was involved with laying the foundation (3:2-10) and was governor (Hag 1:1), but totally ignore Sheshbazzar. One solution to this problem is to hypothesize that these two names refer to the same person. First Esdras 6:18 and Josephus (*Antiquities* 11.13-14) indicate that these were Babylonian and Hebrew names for the same person, similar to Daniel's having a Hebrew and a Babylonian name (Belteshazzar in Dan 1:7). Unfortunately, the Bible never makes this identification, and most commentaries conclude that both names are Babylonian. Some suggest that Sheshbazzar is Jehoiachin's fourth son Shenazzar (1 Chr 3:17-18), who died shortly after arriving back with the exiles (Clines 1984:41). Others believe the title "prince of Judah" was added by a later, ill-informed editor (Williamson 1985:18), while a few link this prince with the one

mentioned in Ezek 45:7, 9, 17, 22 (Levenson 1976:57-73). None of these options are as attractive as concluding that Cyrus gave Sheshbazzar official responsibilities for the return from Babylon and that Zerubbabel was a high Jewish official who worked with Sheshbazzar and took over his responsibilities when he died. There are no records to indicate when this happened, but it probably took place fairly soon (within two years) after the people returned to Jerusalem. Thus, both were governors (Zerubbabel was later), and both had been involved in laying the foundation of the Temple.

1:9-10 basins . . . incense burners . . . bowls. It is difficult to identify what these utensils were. The “basin” (*‘agartal* [TH105, ZH113]) was some kind of dish, the “incense burner” (*makhalap* [TH4252, ZH4709]) was some kind of pan that was used for burning incense (though the Hebrew text does not say it was silver, it is likely they were made of silver), and the *kepor* [TH3713, ZH4094] was some kind of bowl. They were all used in the Temple to hold blood, incense, or other kinds of offerings.

1:11 In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. The total number of items listed equals 2,499, not 5,400. First Esdras 2:13-15 has a longer list adding up to 5,469, but this does not represent the sum of the items listed. Josephus did not total his list, but his items come to 5,400 (*Antiquities* 11.15). Williamson observed an irregularity in the order of the usual listing of items (object, metal, number) in 1:10 and concluded that a large number has dropped out by a scribal error (1985:5). It was probably not necessary to exhaustively list all the objects given to Sheshbazzar (for example, no knives were included in the list), so it is best to accept the final figure in 1:11 as an approximate, round number of the items returned and to understand the list in 1:9-10 as partial.

COMMENTARY

This narrative describes one of the great miraculous events in the history of Israel. This return to Jerusalem was not accompanied with plagues, the dividing of the Red Sea, or the defeat of Israel’s oppressors, but it was seen as the process that led to the rebirth of the nation in its native land, the Promised Land of Israel. This was not a second “exodus” event (though Isaiah pictured Israel’s future in those terms) but a unique “return” to the land by people who were not oppressed in harsh slavery. Although the secular mind might look at these events as a natural outworking of wise political decisions by the Persians and find no miraculous work by God, Ezra 1 emphasizes that God made all this happen when he stirred up the spirit of Cyrus and the hearts of many of the exiles (1:1-2, 5).

It is surprising to have a pagan king claim that the Hebrew God, Yahweh (“the LORD”), moved him to do these things and that this God gave him all the kingdoms of the earth. What is the reader to think of this? Was Cyrus a Jewish convert or did the Jewish author of Ezra put words in his mouth based on his own Hebrew theology? When this decree is compared to the original Aramaic copy of Cyrus’s decree in 6:3-5, the content and theology are quite different. Were there two decrees? Some conclude that this proclamation was not Cyrus’s actual decree but a Jewish version (Myers 1965:5) or that this was a summary of Cyrus’s statement in the Cyrus Cylinder. This clay cylinder reveals that Cyrus “returned to [these] sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris . . . and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I [also] gathered all their [former] inhabitants and returned [to them] their habitations” (ANET 316). Although this contains a similar idea to 1:1-4, the two are different enough to conclude that Cyrus made a separate decree for the Jewish people (and probably for other

ethnic or religious groups too). Cyrus was a Zoroastrian who followed the Persian god Ahura Mazda, but he was very tolerant of other religious systems. (See Boyce 1982 for more information on the theology and growth of Zoroastrianism.) For political reasons, when he wrote to the Babylonians, he acknowledged that the Babylonian god Marduk chose him and gave him military victories (ANET 315-316). It appears that Cyrus's proclamation in 1:2-4 was also a politically designed proclamation using conventional terminology (possibly with the help of Jewish officials to get the name of their God right) to gain the support of his Jewish audience. This document had a different purpose from the building permit in 6:3-5; it simply grants permission to return rather than spelling out details such as how big the Temple should be.

Whatever motivations Cyrus had, the fundamental testimony of Scripture is that God acts powerfully to cause people to do his will. This conclusion is based on the evidence that God had developed a plan that he partially revealed to his people many years earlier (Isa 45:1; Jer 29:10). In this predetermined plan, God indicated what he would do (send the people back to rebuild Jerusalem), who would be involved (Cyrus would send Israel home), and when it would happen (in 70 years). Such precision is exceptional, for most prophecies do not include a specific time of fulfillment in years or the names of specific individuals in the future. But in other ways this prophecy is like most other prophecies. In all cases God reveals a portion of his determined will to people so that they will know that they can trust him for their future. He rules over the affairs of men and nations and knows how things will turn out. This foreknowledge is predicated on his ability to control what people will do. If he could not rule over human existence, then uncontrollable forces would eventually interfere with what he planned to accomplish. Ezra 1 assures the reader that God caused pagan kings to fit into his preannounced plans (1:1), caused them to be unusually generous (1:2-4), appointed them to do his will to fulfill his plan (1:2), and revived his people's desire to worship him (1:5). God's sovereign rule explains why things happen as they do.

This implies that everything that happens has theological significance because it is a part of God's plan. Although most people today do not read the newspaper through the lens of God's sovereign plan, God is still actively involved in the details of his master plan for this earth. God has not forgotten what to do next, and he knows the timing for each point in the plan. He will complete that plan by moving people's hearts and minds to do amazing things to accomplish his will. As in the time of Ezra, people need to be ready to act in obedience when God stirs their hearts to follow his plan.

To the Israelites, as well as to God, the continuation of a worshiping community of believers in Jerusalem was of utmost importance. By releasing the precious Temple utensils, Cyrus affirmed the legitimacy of Israel's God and his right to have worship at his own Temple in Judah. Possession of these valuable items created continuity between the ancient past and the new worship activities in Jerusalem. These utensils also gave legitimacy to this new worship. The returnees would worship at the same place using the same Temple utensils as their forefathers.

God had totally rejected the sinful Israelite nation in the past because of their worship of pagan gods. If God's name was to be praised, certain things must be done. The holy God must have a certain kind of altar and a prescribed Temple with

appropriate sacrifices offered by pure Levitical priests. The only way for this to happen was for God to establish a new community of believers who knew what would please him from his instructions in the Torah. So God brought his own people back to Jerusalem, not some new group of people. This continuity with the past would assure that the people would return to God's chosen place in Jerusalem (not to some other Temple site), that they would want to rebuild the Temple to worship him (not just rebuild their businesses), and that appropriate priests would use holy utensils to worship God (pagan worship must be excluded). Revival needed to happen among God's own people first if any of this was ever going to take place. Afterwards it would be possible for these people to reach out to others and invite them to observe the wonderful things that God was doing.

This theme of reviving the old community suggests that God will probably work this way in the future. Continuity with the past assures purity and the legitimacy of the new community. Although many look at the Old Testament, the Reformation, or even the old songs and behavioral requirements of their grandparents as outmoded, God connects his present work with his past revelation, his past works of redemption with his future acts of salvation, his past community of believers with his new followers, and his past worship with new ways to praise him. Continuity with the past gives believers the assurance that they are on the right track. The old-time religion is the true faith that is good enough for everyone today, even when it looks or sounds a little different in its modern dress. The same God who guided Israel in the past is in charge of world events today. Our faith does not need to be revised by modern philosophical concepts that destroy the simple truth that we can trust and worship God because he loves us and still rules over everything in our world.

◆ 2. A list of those who returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:1-70)

Here is the list of the Jewish exiles of the provinces who returned from their captivity. King Nebuchadnezzar had deported them to Babylon, but now they returned to Jerusalem and the other towns in Judah where they originally lived. ²Their leaders were Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

This is the number of the men of Israel who returned from exile:

³ The family of Parosh2,172

⁴ The family of Shephatiah372

⁵ The family of Arah..... 775

⁶ The family of Pahath-moab
(descendants of Jeshua
and Joab).....2,812

⁷ The family of Elam.....1,254

⁸ The family of Zattu..... 945

⁹ The family of Zaccai..... 760

¹⁰ The family of Bani 642

¹¹ The family of Bebai 623

¹² The family of Azgad1,222

¹³ The family of Adonikam..... 666

¹⁴ The family of Bigvai2,056

¹⁵ The family of Adin..... 454

¹⁶ The family of Ater (descendants
of Hezekiah).....98

¹⁷ The family of Bezai 323

¹⁸ The family of Jorah..... 112

¹⁹ The family of Hashum 223

²⁰ The family of Gibbar95

²¹ The people of Bethlehem 123

²² The people of Netophah.....56

²³ The people of Anathoth 128

²⁴ The people of Beth-azmaveth*42

²⁵ The people of Kiriath-jearim,*
Kephirah, and Beeroth..... 743

²⁶ The people of Ramah and Geba 621



Esther

GARY V. SMITH

INTRODUCTION TO *Esther*

THE LIFE OF ESTHER demonstrates that God can use women in powerful ways to change the course of history. This young orphan girl went from having almost nothing to becoming one of the most powerful women in the Persian world. Finding herself in the midst of a major crisis, she boldly stepped forward to confront and defeat the evil man Haman. Esther's story illustrates how a woman's wisdom, patience, courage, and availability can bring hope to many. She took the opportunity to stand in the gap to save her people from certain death, and she met the challenge. With the backing of a praying community of supporters, she accepted a difficult role and put her life on the line to save the Jews from genocide.

AUTHOR

The text of Esther does not indicate who took up the pen to write its account of Esther's life (Bush 1996:294). The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Bava Batra* 15a) attributes the Esther story to the men of the Great Synagogue. Some church fathers thought Ezra wrote the book of Esther. But Josephus (*Antiquities* 11.6.13) hinted that Mordecai was the author. This seems like a possibility, for in 9:20 (see note) Mordecai is responsible for putting information about the observance of Purim in writing and for mailing this information to various Jewish communities throughout the Persian Empire. In 10:2, there is a reference to a written account of Mordecai's deeds in *The Book of the History of the Kings of Media and Persia* (cf. 6:1), but its author is unknown. These official chronicles would have focused on the official acts of Mordecai and probably included some information about Esther's role in delivering the Jews from Haman, but they would not have mirrored the exact contents of the book of Esther. Fox maintains that the author lived in Susa, was very well informed about events in the Persian royal court, and was a member of the Jewish community (1991:140).

The author of Esther may have gained some information from official court documents, but most of the book appears to contain more detailed, firsthand knowledge. Since there are many Persian words in the book and no Greek influence, it seems likely that the book was written by a Persian speaker who knew Hebrew, was acquainted with Esther's humble origin, had information about how the royal court operated, and was inspired by Esther's courage to deliver the Jewish people from the plots of Haman. In the end one must admit that there is not enough evidence to hypothesize a likely author (Jobes 1999:28). It is also less than apparent that the book went through two redactional stages as described by Bush (1996:279-294). Although some date this book much later, in the Maccabean period (e.g., Paton 1908:61, 63), believing the author was a Diaspora Jew living in Palestine, the evidence for this view is weak.

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

The events in the book of Esther occurred after many Jews had already returned from Babylonian exile in 539 BC (Ezra 1–2) and before Nehemiah's ministry of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in 445 BC. God had used leaders like Zerubbabel the governor, Jeshua the high priest, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah in the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 5–6, in 516 BC) many years before the time of Esther. But Esther and Mordecai remained in Persia and had nothing to do with these events.

The text does not reveal why Esther and Mordecai did not go back to Jerusalem with the other returnees, but for some unknown reason they and many other Jews chose to stay in the land of Persia. Through a series of unusual events, Esther was chosen to be the queen of the well-known Persian king Ahasuerus (485–465 BC), who was called Xerxes by the Greeks. The reference to the third (1:3) and seventh (2:16) years of Xerxes' reign removes any question about the date when the events in this book took place. This was an era when Persia was very strong and had expanded its empire to the far corners of the earth. Xerxes' father, Darius the Great, conquered parts of India and Europe but suffered defeat at the hands of the Greeks at Marathon (490 BC). Later, Xerxes himself accomplished great military feats, like the subjugation of Egypt, but the Greeks continued to be a significant threat on the western frontier of the empire. (The Greeks eventually defeated the Persians in 470 BC at Eurymedon near Pamphylia.) Wealth from taxes on the provinces poured into the Persian administrative capital of Susa, and Xerxes oversaw the construction of a massive, luxurious new palace at Persepolis. But Xerxes was also known as a cruel king who ruled his kingdom with tyrannical force and was known for his bizarre behavior. Artabanus, the captain of the king's bodyguard, killed Xerxes in a palace plot in 465 BC.

The beautiful Jewish girl Esther entered the king's court through a surprising series of unusual circumstances, and by God's grace she was chosen to be Xerxes' queen. There is no historical data outside this story confirming that Esther was Xerxes' queen, and it is difficult to connect either Vashti or Esther with queen Amestris, who is mentioned by Herodotus (*Histories* 7.61, 114; 9.109), though some conclude that "Esther" is a variant spelling of *Amestris* (Gordis 1981:359–388). The Murashu texts from the archaeological excavations in the city of Nippur indicate that many Jewish families stayed in Babylonia and prospered during this era (ABD 4.927–928), thus confirming the existence of Hebrew families in this area during Xerxes' reign.

The date when the book of Esther was written is unknown, though the most convincing occasion for its writing seems to be the establishment of Purim as a Jewish festival. (Outside Esther, Purim is first mentioned in 2 Macc 15:36.) In particular, Esther 8–10 supports the idea that Esther was written to explain how the feast of Purim originated. The story legitimates Purim as a miraculous deliverance worthy of celebration and explains how this festival came to be added to the original feasts designed by God in Exodus 23. It would be an annual remembrance of God's deliverance of the people from death (9:20–22), similar to his deliverance at the time of the exodus from Egypt (Exod 12–14). The name Purim ("lots") is explained in

the story because Haman cast lots to choose a lucky day to tell King Xerxes about his plan to kill an unidentified evil group of people in the Persian Empire (3:7; 9:24-26). The need to write this story to legitimate the celebration of this feast would only arise some years after the introduction of Purim, probably not hundreds of years later when it was already a solid part of Jewish tradition.

Some hypothesize that the book was composed in Susa in the fourth or third century BC (Levenson 1997:26; Fox 1991:140). Others propose a date as late as the Hellenistic era, when Antiochus Epiphanes was persecuting Jews around Jerusalem in 165 BC (Paton 1908:61-62; Bush 1996:296), because (1) they find historical inaccuracies in the book, (2) Esther is not mentioned in Ben Sirach's list of biblical books, and (3) the type of Hebrew in Esther is late. Against this perspective are the following points: (1) Recent discoveries at Qumran suggest that the Hebrew of Esther is much earlier than the Hebrew language common in the Qumran period (Breneman 1993:290), (2) the lack of Greek vocabulary in spite of the inclusion of Persian words in Esther implies a location in Persia and a date before Alexander's conquest of Persia in 332 BC, (3) the book has none of the apocalyptic tendencies found in many of the scrolls written in the Maccabean period (of course, it is a historical book, not an apocalyptic book like Enoch), and (4) the accurate portrayal of the details of Persian court life requires an early date when these customs were still accurately remembered. Thus, Jobes (1999:30) prefers a date between the late fifth and third century, but a date between 450 and 400 BC, shortly after the events in Esther, is more probable (Baldwin 1984:48-49).

Alleged Historical Problems. Four major objections to the historical account recorded in Esther cause some to conclude that the story is confused, not factually accurate, was written many years after the time of Xerxes, and is probably fictional. These objections are enumerated below with comments in response.

1. There is no historical record in Persian or Greek documents of the existence of Queen Esther or the high official Mordecai. About 30 treasury tablets from Persepolis, the Persian palace of Xerxes, list a man (or more than one man) named Marduka or Mordecai (Yamauchi 1992:273), but one was an accountant, not the second-in-command over the nation (10:3). The Greek historian Herodotus claims that the Persian king had to marry from one of seven Persian families (*Histories* 3.84), and this implies he could not marry Esther, who was Jewish. Now, however, it is known that there was no official requirement that kings marry only from seven upper-class families, for Xerxes' father, Darius, married three women who were not from those families (Herodotus *Histories* 3.88). But Herodotus (*Histories* 7.61) specifically identifies one Amestris, the daughter of a Persian named Otanes, as queen in the seventh year of the reign of Xerxes. Herodotus indicates that Amestris was a brutal person who had the mother of one of Xerxes' lovers mutilated and on another occasion had 14 youths buried alive as an offering to a god (Herodotus *Histories* 7.114; 9.109-112). W. H. Shea (1976:227-246) tried to identify Esther with Amestris; however, this seems unlikely. Although secular historical evidence is limited, its failure to mention Esther does not prove she did not exist, for many facts and details are left out of every historical account. It is completely possible that Xerxes had two or more wives (Baldwin 1984:20-21).

2. According to 1:1 and 8:9, the Persian Empire was divided into 127 provinces, but Herodotus (*Histories* 3.89) knew of only 20 satraps. This seeming inconsistency (Paton 1908:72) is more apparent than real, for there could be many provinces within a satrapy. The administrative leader Daniel indicated that there were 120 provinces in the Persian Empire when Cyrus ruled the nation (Dan 6:1), so it does not seem unreasonable for there to be 127 provinces within the 20 some satrapies that existed during the reign of Xerxes.

3. Some doubt that the Persian king would authorize the extermination of the Jewish people. They also consider the slaughter of 75,000 enemies of the Jews in Persia (9:16-17) as unusually large and implausible (Clines 1984b:257). Although these are surprising events, Cicero (*Pro Lege manilia* 7) refers to all the Romans in the province of Asia being slaughtered under Mithridates VI (ruler of Pontus, of Persian descent) in the first century BC; it is estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 Romans were killed. Herodotus (*Histories* 1.106; 3.79) mentions the slaughter of large numbers of Scythians by Cyaxares and the Medes and magi by the Persians. Nothing disproves the authenticity of what the book of Esther claims, and these other historical accounts confirm that similar incidents happened.

4. Some maintain that the story of Esther contains an unusual number of coincidences and improbabilities that appear to be too good to be true or just plain implausible (Clines 1984b:259). Esther appears to be more of a romantic fiction or an exaggerated legend rather than a historical account. It is true that the book recounts many "coincidences," but that was the way the author chose to communicate to his audience how the unseen hand of God sovereignly directed the affairs of his people. No one can prove that any of these unusual things did or did not happen, but the eyes of faith see the fingerprints of God directing the affairs of his people, miraculously delivering them from the hands of those who wanted to exterminate them.

In addition, some doubt the historicity of Esther because (1) the idea that the laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be broken (1:19; 8:8; also Dan 6:8, 12) has never been confirmed by any extrabiblical Persian document; (2) no Persian law mentions that a person would be killed if the king did not raise his scepter when that person came into his presence (4:11); (3) no Persian documents ever suggest a civil war existed between the Jews and the Persians (Laniak 2003:177); (4) it seems unlikely that a feast would actually last six months (1:1-4), that Haman would give a financial gift as large as what the book of Esther suggests (3:9) or that he would tolerate Mordecai as long as the book suggests; and (5) it seems incredible that Esther would have to wait four years to see the king (2:16; cf. Paton 1908:65-77; Laniak 2003:177-182). But most of these points are based on arguments from silence (which prove very little), on an unwillingness to accept the possibility of unusual circumstances (a characteristic that is common throughout this story), or on a modern understanding of history that is different from what ancient Near Eastern people understood (Jobes 1999:31-32).

AUDIENCE

There is no direct statement about who was intended to read this story about Esther, but since it was written in Hebrew, the main audience would have been

Jewish families throughout the Persian Empire (including Yehud) who were living among non-Hebrews in the years after the death of Mordecai and Esther. The next generation needed to know that their religious freedom was made possible because (1) Mordecai and Esther had positions of high status and authority in Persian politics, (2) Mordecai and Esther were able to remove the evil opposition that was trying to kill the Jewish people, (3) the government permitted the Jewish people to defend themselves if they were attacked, and (4) there were good historical reasons why the people should celebrate the feast of Purim on the 13th and 14th day of Adar (9:17, NLT mg). Although God's name is never mentioned in the book, the plot of the story demonstrates to a Jewish believer that the unusual coincidences that allowed for Mordecai to report a plot against the king (2:19-23), for Esther to be chosen as queen (2:1-18), for Esther to enter the king's presence without being invited (5:1-8), for the vicious plot of Haman to be revealed (6:1-7:10), and for Mordecai to rise to power (8:1-10:3), all point to God's sovereign control over the details of history.

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

One of the odd characteristics of the book of Esther is that the name of God is not mentioned once in its 167 verses. In addition, the New Testament authors never quote from Esther. In fact, Bishop Melito of Sardis (c. AD 170) omitted it from his list of canonical books. Even Martin Luther commented, "I am so hostile to it that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much and displays too much pagan behavior" (n.d.:13).

Although questions about the canonicity of Esther were raised by some, the Talmud (*b. Megillah* 7a; *b. Sanhedrin* 100a) defends the holy status of Esther. Esther is also listed among the sacred books in *b. Bava Batra* 14b-15a, and the Council of Jamnia in AD 90 affirmed its canonical place. The many fragments in the Cairo Genizah suggest that Esther was a very popular text, second only to the Pentateuch (but in contrast to this, no copies of Esther were found among the Qumran scrolls; the feast of Purim was not celebrated by the people at Qumran). Thus, there is every reason to believe that the book of Esther was considered to be Scripture at an early date (Beckwith 1985:289-293). In the Hebrew canon, Esther was placed after Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. These five books were called the five "Megilloth" (scrolls) and were placed toward the end of the Hebrew Bible, after Proverbs and before Daniel. The five books were read at the five Jewish festivals in their liturgical calendar. In the Christian canon Esther was grouped with the historical books, where it was put after Ezra and Nehemiah.

Two difficult issues have arisen concerning the text of Esther. The first is that six additions, totaling 107 verses, appear in the Greek version of this book, as follows:

1. Seventeen verses precede chapter 1 (called A:1-17; Levenson 1997:37-42 discusses each of these apocryphal additions), giving Mordecai's dream about a fierce symbolic battle between two dragons, which ends with a promise of hope for mankind. Later, Mordecai hears the plot against the king, informs the king, and is rewarded.

2. Between 3:13 and 14 are seven verses (called B:1-7), which contain the text of the king's edict to kill the Jews on the 13th day of Adar.
3. Thirty verses follow 4:17 (called C:1-30). Verses 1-10 of this addition record Mordecai's prayer for God to sovereignly rescue the seed of Abraham, while verses 11-30 contain Esther's prayer for God to give her courage and persuasive power when she speaks to the king. These verses are followed by 16 verses (called D:1-16) that describe Esther's fearful, dramatic (she faints), uninvited approach to the king's court.
4. Between 8:16 and 17 [8:12 and 13 in LXX] are 24 verses (called E:1-24) that describe the king's condemnation of Haman, who is identified as an evil Greek, and the king's edict to make the 13th of Adar a festival.
5. Then after 10:3 are 11 additional verses (called F:1-11) that end the Greek book of Esther with Mordecai interpreting the dream he received in addition #1. He recognized God's sovereign deliverance and interpreted the two lots (one for man and one for God). Then there is a final note about the book's arrival in Egypt.

No one knows why these additions were made, if the same person added all of them, or the date of these additions. They may be pious additions clarifying the belief that all the things that happened in this story can be traced back to God, who was directing the affairs of his people. They were probably appended in Egypt to the Old Greek translation between 200 and 100 BC (Breneman 1993:299), but later, when Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin in the Vulgate, he separated all these verses (which he found in the Greek, but not the Hebrew) into an appendix at the end of Esther. Because these verses were not in the Hebrew text he used, they were deemed to be apocryphal additions of secondary importance. (One can read these verses in the Jerusalem Bible, where the editors have put them back in their original places.) Several of these additions duplicate what is already in the Hebrew text, and a few points tend to create a contradiction, so it is not surprising that these passages were not accepted as part of the authoritative words of the book of Esther.

A second problem arises because what is known as the Greek Alpha text of Esther tells the story slightly differently than do the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text. For example, the story in 2:21-23 about the plot against the king's life is missing from the Alpha text. M. Fox (1991) hypothesizes that the Alpha text comes from a different Hebrew original. These three text types (Masoretic Hebrew, Alpha Greek, and Old Greek [LXX]) have led to much speculation about how the story of Esther was edited, expanded, and shaped before it came to the final form we have today. Fox (1991:254-266), Bush (1996:279-293), and Clines (1984a) see various versions of the Esther story growing over the years based on these different text types. They hypothesize a process in which two different stories of Esther were being written over many years before the canonical form finally stabilized. The main difficulty with this approach is that it is subjectively based on what the Masoretic and Alpha texts might have been like at some earlier stage (not their present form), but there is no evidence of this hypothetical earlier form of these texts.

by a Jew. The writer wanted his work to resemble a Persian document and not be disregarded as partisan Jewish propaganda. In addition, for aesthetic and dramatic reasons, he wanted his audience to be drawn into the suspense and irony of the story, so he told it as a historical account of real people struggling against a vicious tyrant, not as a theological treatise on the nature of God's sovereign work through providence in people's lives. The genius of the presentation is that the author reveals to sensitive readers the unseen hand of God behind the events without ever mentioning his name.

OUTLINE

The plot of the book of Esther revolves around the threat to destroy the Jewish people and the attempt to resolve that threat (Baldwin 1984:30). Haman's plan to kill every person who did not obey the king (the queen and the Jews) dominates chapters 1–5. Chapters 6–10 resolve this threat when the king kills Haman and honors Mordecai and Esther. The resolution of the problem required a reversal of everything Haman was planning to do (Fox 2001:158-163; Levenson 1997:8; Bush 1996:301-304). This plan for the book becomes clear when Mordecai receives what Haman had, Haman's decree is reversed, and the Jews gain control over their enemies (9:1). Individual verses in the later chapters repeat vocabulary and themes in earlier chapters to illustrate the reversals the author wanted to highlight (cf. 3:1 and 10:3; 3:7 and 9:24; 3:10 and 8:2; 3:12-13 and 8:9-11; 3:14 and 8:13).

- I. Vashti Is Replaced by Queen Esther (1:1–2:18)
 - A. Vashti Challenges Xerxes' Authority (1:1-22)
 - B. Esther Becomes Queen (2:1-18)
- II. Haman's Decree to Destroy the Jews (2:19–3:15)
 - A. Mordecai Saves the King's Life (2:19-23)
 - B. Mordecai Will Not Honor Haman (3:1-6)
 - C. Haman's Decree to Get Revenge (3:7-15)
- III. Esther Must Try to Reverse Haman's Plot (4:1–5:14)
 - A. Esther Bravely Risks Her Life (4:1-17)
 - B. Esther's Banquet for Xerxes and Haman (5:1-8)
 - C. Haman's Pride and Hatred of Mordecai (5:9-14)
- IV. Mordecai Is Honored and Haman Is Impaled (6:1–7:10)
 - A. Haman Must Honor Mordecai (6:1-14)
 - B. Haman Is Exposed and Impaled (7:1-10)
- V. Haman's Decree Is Reversed (8:1–9:19)
 - A. Esther Saves the Lives of the Jews (8:1-14)
 - B. The Enemies of the Jews Are Killed (8:15-9:19)
- VI. The Festival of Purim (9:20-32)
- VII. The Greatness of Mordecai (10:1-3)

COMMENTARY ON *Esther*

◆ I. Vashti Is Replaced by Queen Esther (1:1–2:18) A. Vashti Challenges Xerxes' Authority (1:1–22)

These events happened in the days of King Xerxes,* who reigned over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia.*²At that time Xerxes ruled his empire from his royal throne at the fortress of Susa.³In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. He invited all the military officers of Persia and Media as well as the princes and nobles of the provinces.⁴The celebration lasted 180 days—a tremendous display of the opulent wealth of his empire and the pomp and splendor of his majesty.

⁵When it was all over, the king gave a banquet for all the people, from the greatest to the least, who were in the fortress of Susa. It lasted for seven days and was held in the courtyard of the palace garden.⁶The courtyard was beautifully decorated with white cotton curtains and blue hangings, which were fastened with white linen cords and purple ribbons to silver rings embedded in marble pillars. Gold and silver couches stood on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and other costly stones.

⁷Drinks were served in gold goblets of many designs, and there was an abundance of royal wine, reflecting the king's generosity.⁸By edict of the king, no limits were placed on the drinking, for the king had instructed all his palace officials to serve each man as much as he wanted.

⁹At the same time, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

¹⁰On the seventh day of the feast, when King Xerxes was in high spirits because of the wine, he told the seven eunuchs who attended him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas—¹¹to bring Queen Vashti to him with the royal crown on her head. He wanted the nobles and all the other men to gaze on her beauty, for she was a very beautiful woman.¹²But when they conveyed the king's order to Queen Vashti, she refused to come. This made the king furious, and he burned with anger.

¹³He immediately consulted with his wise advisers, who knew all the Persian laws and customs, for he always asked their advice.¹⁴The names of these men were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan—seven nobles of Persia and Media. They met with the king regularly and held the highest positions in the empire.

¹⁵"What must be done to Queen Vashti?" the king demanded. "What penalty does the law provide for a queen who refuses to obey the king's orders, properly sent through his eunuchs?"

¹⁶Memucan answered the king and his nobles, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also every noble and citizen throughout your empire.¹⁷Women everywhere will begin to despise their husbands when they learn that Queen Vashti has refused to appear before the king.¹⁸Before this day is out, the wives of all the king's nobles throughout Persia

and Media will hear what the queen did and will start treating their husbands the same way. There will be no end to their contempt and anger.

¹⁹“So if it please the king, we suggest that you issue a written decree, a law of the Persians and Medes that cannot be revoked. It should order that Queen Vashti be forever banished from the presence of King Xerxes, and that the king should choose another queen more worthy than she. ²⁰When this decree is

published throughout the king's vast empire, husbands everywhere, whatever their rank, will receive proper respect from their wives!”

²¹The king and his nobles thought this made good sense, so he followed Memucan's counsel. ²²He sent letters to all parts of the empire, to each province in its own script and language, proclaiming that every man should be the ruler of his own home and should say whatever he pleases.*

1:1a Hebrew *Ahasuerus*, another name for Xerxes; also throughout the book of Esther. Xerxes reigned 486–465 B.C. 1:1b Hebrew *to Cush*. 1:22 Or *and should speak in the language of his own people*.

NOTES

1:1 King Xerxes. In the Persian language the king's name was *Xshayarsha* or *Khshayarshan*. The name “Xerxes” is drawn from the Greek transliteration of this name, while the name *Ahasuerus* (cf. KJV) is drawn from the Hebrew rendering of it, *'akhashwerosh* [TH325, ZH347]. King Xerxes ruled from 486–465 BC and was the son of Darius I Hystaspes (521–486 BC; mentioned in Hag 1:1, 15; 2:10; Zech 1:1; 7:1).

reigned over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. Xerxes reigned over an expansive world empire that stretched from India (*hodu* [TH1912, ZH2064]) to somewhere in southern Egypt (*kush* [TH3568, ZH3932]; “Cush” may refer to Ethiopia or Sudan). These 127 “provinces” (*medinah* [TH4082, ZH4519]) were smaller divisions of territory within the 20 to 30 major satrapies in the empire (Laniak 2003:196; Herodotus *Histories* 3.89). The Behistun Inscription refers to 21 satrapies, but later in the same document it mentions 23, and towards the end it speaks of 29 satrapies. These political divisions of the empire were responsible to collect taxes, raise troops for the Persian army, and administer and police each local area. Jerusalem was in the province of Yehud, which was a small part of the “Satrapy beyond the Euphrates” (cf. Ezra 4:10–11).

1:2 the fortress of Susa. Susa (*shushan* [TH7800, ZH8809]) was formerly the capital of the nation of Elam, but at this time it functioned as the winter palace for the Persian king (Jobes 1999:59). He ruled from other palaces at Babylon, Ecbatana, and Persepolis during the other seasons, for it was too hot to stay in Susa in the summer. This palace (cf. NLT, “fortress”) was set on a hill about 75 feet high (the “citadel, acropolis”) with a strong wall all around it (Paton 1908:126).

1:3 In the third year . . . he gave a banquet. The third year was 483–482 BC. The reason for this banquet is not stated. At the beginning of his reign, Xerxes put down uprisings in Egypt and Babylon (Olmstead 1948:234–237), so it was probably not until his third year that he could sit securely on his throne and celebrate his power. The word “banquet” (*mishteh* [TH4960, ZH5492]) comes from the root meaning “to drink” (*shathah* [TH8354, ZH9272]), thus hinting at the main activity.

military officers . . . nobles. The word for “army” (*khayil* [TH2428, ZH2657]) is usually understood to refer here to “military officers” (so NLT), for the whole army could not come at once, leaving the nation unprotected. But how could these military officials abandon their responsibilities of running the army and navy for six whole months? It seems more likely that the “nobles” (*happartemim* [TH6579, ZH7312]), a term borrowed from

Old Persian) and officials probably took turns attending different events during this period of celebration, thus maintaining the nation's political and military capabilities throughout the celebration. Jobes (1999:60) concludes that this event in the third year of Xerxes' reign was a "great war council" held to plan the Persians' next attack on Greece, because Herodotus (*Histories* 7.8) describes Xerxes as announcing his plans to destroy Athens. But taking advantage of a large gathering to motivate people to support the king's military causes is different from a small group of army generals planning a military strategy for the next battle.

1:4 *The celebration lasted 180 days.* Various events took place over a period of half a year, not every day for 180 days. Could this really be suggesting that "all" the military commanders spent all six months, while they left the troops in the field to defend the nation against the attacking Greek forces without any leadership? It seems the nation would have fallen into total chaos if all the nobles had spent all six months at the palace drinking. Thus an overly literal interpretation seems unlikely. One can reduce this problem by suggesting that small groups of officers came in rotations over a six-month period or by suggesting that all the officers came periodically (not every day) over six months. Bush (1996:346-347) calls this reference to a six-month banquet a "sardonic hyperbole," and he also believes the word that refers to "military leaders" (*khayil*; see note on 1:3) is a reference to "nobility, aristocracy" in postexilic texts; thus he avoids the problematic idea of having all the military officers at this banquet for six months.

1:5 *banquet for all the people . . . in the courtyard.* Everyone in Susa, rich or poor, was invited to this additional banquet, at an open house (*bithan* [TH1055, ZH1131], an open colonnaded pavilion, according to Moore 1971:7)—a reception held in the paved courtyard and lush garden area around the palace.

1:6 *beautifully decorated.* Emphasis is placed on the lavish decorations. White and violet (better than NLT's "blue") were the royal colors that hung from silver rings on marble pillars to form an awning that shaded guests from the sun. The mosaic design on the floor was an exquisite example of the opulence of the palace.

1:7 *in gold goblets . . . an abundance of royal wine.* Ancient historians (Herodotus *Histories* 1.133; Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.8.10, 18) testify to the king's wealth and excess, including the golden wine goblets and an unlimited supply of wine for everyone. Although this may seem excessive and hardly believable to people today, when Alexander the Great finally defeated Persia and took control of the palace at Susa, he was astonished to discover 40,000 talents (1,200 tons) of gold and silver and 9,000 talents (270 tons) of gold coins in the king's treasury (Diodorus Siculus *Library* 17.66).

the king's generosity. Lit., "according to the king's hand" (*keyad hammelek* [TH3027, ZH3338]), which could mean "to drink when the king tipped his hand to drink" or "a decree the king's hand wrote that regulated drinking" (1:8).

1:8 *By edict.* The word *dath* [TH1881, ZH2017] (law, edict) probably refers to a special rule imposed at this event: At this feast people could drink without restraint or not at all (Huey 1988:799; cf. Josephus *Antiquities* 11.188). This would still have produced a large crowd of fairly drunk men, so it is not surprising that the queen would not want to parade herself in front of this large group.

1:9 *Queen Vashti.* The word "Vashti" means "the best, desired, beloved" (Paton 1908:66). It may be an honorary title for the favored wife rather than her actual name, which may have been Amestris (Herodotus *Histories* 7.61, 114; 9.109-113). Others have suggested that Amestris was her Greek name, while Vashti was her Persian name. On the other hand, Amestris may just be another wife (Xerxes probably had many).

a banquet for the women. It was the queen's duty to entertain the wives of important guests. Laniak believes this banquet was for the 360 concubines of the king (2003:197).

1:10 seven eunuchs who attended him. These eunuchs have Persian names and were castrated because they would have ongoing access to the women of the royal harem. The listing of the names suggests that the author had firsthand information. These seven men probably would carry the queen into the banquet as she sat on her royal litter. All this royal pomp would make her coming a grand entrance that would impress the audience and hopefully inspire their loyalty to the king.

1:11 He wanted the nobles and all the other men to gaze on her beauty. The king was displaying her as another one of his possessions (Fox 2001:167). Jobs suggests that Xerxes was possibly trying to "inspire patriotism and loyalty, as appearances of the British queen do today" (1999:67). The Aramaic Targum suggests that she was asked to wear nothing but her royal crown, but this is reading into the text.

1:12 she refused to come. The queen's refusal is not explained, but Josephus (*Antiquities* 11.6.1) suggests that she did not want to break the protocol that women were not to attend the men's banquet. Was she fearful of being in front of a bunch of drunken men? Was the king asking something that was improper for a woman of her status? She showed courage in standing up against the king's wishes, a desire to maintain her dignity as a noble queen (Jobs 1999:73), and a willingness to stand for what was right for her to do in this situation (according to Persian custom or normal royal protocol).

This made the king furious. The king's self-centered, intemperate, cruel, and fickle character was displayed. The king's anger (*qatsap* [TH7107, ZH7911]) was probably heightened by his drunken state and by the scornful laughter of his male friends. He was furious because he had been publicly shamed by his wife's unwillingness to comply with his every wish. Vashti's action demonstrated that the supposedly all-powerful king did not have as much control as he thought (McConville 1985:157).

1:13 his wise advisers, who knew all the Persian laws and customs. The king did not react immediately; he followed the custom of checking with key advisers (Herodotus *Histories* 3.31). The Hebrew has the king asking about "the times" (*ha'ittim* [TH6256, ZH6961]), which could refer to court astrologers (Levenson 1997:50; Bush 1996:350 strongly rejects this interpretation) or to men who understood what to do in situations like this (Clines 1984b:280; see 1 Chr 12:32). Some unnecessarily emend the text to refer to those who knew the Persian "laws" (*haddathim* [TH1881, ZH2017]), which would parallel the inquiry about "laws and customs" later in the verse (Moore 1971:9).

1:14 seven nobles of Persia and Media. Ezra 7:14 also mentions the king's seven counselors. These were his closest advisers (lit., "those who see the face of the king") who held a high rank. The author of Esther probably knew them by name (they may have been famous in their time) or had access to official records that listed their names.

1:15 What penalty does the law provide. Lit., "according to the law (*kedath* [TH1881, ZH2017]), what to do with the queen." The king wanted to punish Vashti to the full extent of the law, but it is odd to have a despot like Xerxes worried about the Persian legal system when dealing with a family matter. One would expect this powerful king to handle these issues with his wife behind closed doors. Bush believes that this odd behavior "is intended to be farcical and humorous" (1996:350) to a Jewish reader, a satirical mockery of the Persian king. Admittedly, this behavior does put the king in a bad light, but it makes sense that he would want to know legal precedents ("the law") followed by other kings so that he would handle this embarrassing situation with what might be considered an appropriate course of action. Nevertheless, in a real sense Bush is correct in seeing this action as

reducing the stature of the king. He is the king; does he not know the laws of the land? Why does he let others tell him what to do? Why doesn't the king object and prefer some reconciliation process?

1:16 Queen Vashti has wronged. No Persian law is quoted as a precedent to guide the king in making a decision; thus these words represent the judgment of the men in the council. They believe that the king has not been treated according to proper protocol. Memucan does not attempt to justify how Vashti's action somehow wrongs the king's seven councilors or exactly how it harms all the people in the provinces. Apparently, he believed that the potential for disorder and disrespect (mentioned in 1:17) justified this conclusion.

1:17 Women everywhere will begin to despise their husbands. Fear motivated the council's advice, rather than the law. They exaggerated this event into a hypothetical national crisis that negatively impacted the authority of husbands (*ba'al* [TH1167, ZH1251], "lord, master") throughout the empire. Later Esther would disobey Persian laws but be dealt with mercifully (5:1-4).

1:19 issue a written decree . . . that cannot be revoked. Memucan was quite deferential to the king ("if it please the king"), but his suggestion was unbending. This written decree would become a law that could not be changed (8:8; Dan 6:8, 12, 15), though there are no references in Persian literature that characterize Persian laws as unalterable (Huey 1988:803). Vashti, who refused to see the king at the banquet, would never see the king again.

another queen more worthy than she. This hints at the rest of the story of Esther. How would the new queen differ from Vashti? "Good, better" (*hattobah* [TH2896, ZH3202]) could point to being more beautiful, more worthy (so NLT), or possibly more obedient.

1:20 decree. The word *pithegam* [TH6599, ZH7330] is borrowed from Aramaic, which derived the term from the Old Persian *patigama*. Jobes finds irony and even humor in the king's acceptance of Memucan's suggestion, for the king's decree ends up publicizing his embarrassing personal problems with his wife to people throughout the nation (Jobes 1999:80; Fox 1991:253).

1:21 this made good sense. Lit., "The thing was good (*yatab* [TH3190, ZH3512]) in the eyes of the king." This does not mean that it made logical sense or fit the legal requirements of Persian law.

1:22 in its own script and language. Royal scribes translated the decree so that it could be disseminated to every linguistic group (Paton 1908:161 lists 21 different languages). The efficient Persian postal system would distribute these decrees. Rather than accepting this at face value, Clines takes this as a conscious hyperbole, which ironically contrasts the super-efficiency of the Persian administration's fantastic ability to publish and disseminate this decree with the fact that they cannot keep their wives in order (1984b:253).

every man should be the ruler of his own home. In that culture it was unnecessary (and almost humorous) to make a decree that each man should be the ruler (*sorer* [TH8323, ZH8606]) of his house. This was already the cultural norm throughout the ancient Near East.

should say whatever he pleases. Lit., "speaking according to the language of his people." NIV removes this clause from the proclamation of the decree and puts it earlier in the sentence ("proclaiming in each people's tongue"), LXX omits this phrase, and the Targum suggests that husbands do not have to learn the language of their wives. Others unnecessarily emend the vowels of the text (Clines 1984b:283), changing *kilshon* 'ammo [TH3956/5971A, ZH4383/6639] (according to the language of his people) to *kol-showeh* [TH7737, ZH8750] 'immo (whatever suits him). It is best to accept the unemended text and interpret this as the right and authority of the husband of the family to determine what language would be spoken

in each household. When people intermarried with wives from other communities, the wife would want the children to learn her native language, so the second part of this decree establishes another domain where the male determines what will happen in the home. Fox (1991:23) thinks this phrase represents a Jewish concern over the lack of use of Hebrew in the postexilic period, when it was common for Hebrews to have a mixed marriage (Neh 13:23-28). This approach is unacceptable, for it removes historical value from the narrative and attributes the main theological point to a later editor's manipulation for purposes unrelated to this story.

COMMENTARY

Esther 1 provides a setting for the story of Esther in the Persian era and introduces one of the key characters in the book. This introduction reveals important facts about key people that help to create tension in the drama and hint at ways of resolving the tension (i.e., the king will seek a new wife) in the following chapters. The reader discovers the king's attitude toward his own wealth, how drinking and a quick temper lead to dire consequences, the king's feelings about women in general, and specifically how he will treat his wife if she does not do what the king thinks she is supposed to do (creating tension when Esther follows a similar pattern in chapter 5).

The extent of the king's enormous empire (127 provinces) proves that he was one of the most powerful men in the world at that time (1:1). The events at the king's drinking feast show that this monarch was prone to pride and loved to make an ostentatious display of his riches. In this situation, he showed a great ability to manipulate his followers and advisers, demonstrated rather erratic behavior when he was drunk, and exhibited a penchant to have extreme fits of irrational anger if his every whim was not responded to positively. The depravity of Xerxes' soul exposed his fleshly pleasures and his foul moods, as well as the vindictive motives behind his actions.

Although few people today can match the wealth or power of Xerxes, both poor and rich are frequently tempted to strut a new car, a new pair of shoes, a new ring or dress, or some other material object to demonstrate to others how great they are. Pride is an especially frequent temptation for the wealthy heads of companies, sports heroes, and Hollywood stars, but almost everyone is tempted to do extraordinary things to get some attention or to gain respect or honor. People will foolishly go into debt to keep up with others in their social class or with friends at church. They will display their possessions and flaunt their status to gain honor, to save face, and to show that they are important. The danger is that the desire for glory and honor can be so strong that some will even act immorally, or ask others to act immorally for them, in order to maintain their air of superiority. This contrasts with the biblical call to humble ourselves as Christ did (Phil 2) and to serve others rather than lording it over them (Luke 22:25-27).

God opposes the proud and arrogant person (Prov 3:34; Jas 4:6), for God is the one who deserves the glory and honor for everything people have or are able to do. The voice of a great singer is a gift of God, and the speed of great athletes is something they were born with. People do not make themselves powerful or rich; God does. God raises up kings to rule (Dan 2:20-23), and he gives people the ability to

make wealth (Deut 8:18-20). All glory should be directed to God, who freely gives people everything they have.

King Xerxes' excessive display of wealth and opulence was a means to bring greater honor and glory to himself (Laniak 1998:36). He flaunted the "splendor of his majesty" (1:4) to the top military leaders, the highest politicians, important civic leaders, and the general population so that everyone would have an opportunity to admire him. The richly colored cloth decorations, the shining marble pillars, the exquisite mother-of-pearl mosaic (1:6), the elaborate gold cups, and an unending flow of wine all screamed a message that the king was important and a person of great glory. True greatness, of course, is not dependent on wealth, and real importance is not based on how much money one has. The royal road to success and influence in this world is firmly based on a leader's love for his people and willingness to serve them. Loyalty cannot be bought for long, and true respect comes from an admiration of a person's character, not from being dazzled by a three-karat diamond ring or a million-dollar house. Like this king, many people today pride themselves in their riches and flaunt their wealth and power, but when trouble comes, the true self is exposed with all its warts and wrinkles.

The king's goal of bringing honor to himself backfired when Vashti chose not to obey the king and refused to display her beauty before the drunken men at his feast (1:12). This simple refusal to glorify every whim of the king brought his superior status into question; it also demonstrated that it takes more than money to impress some people (especially one's wife). Vashti's behavior demonstrated that people did not have to submit to the manipulation of riches and that there were principles far higher than pleasing the whims of an arrogant, drunken king. One cannot know Vashti's motives (see note on 1:12), but it appears she determined not to be treated as just another object in the palace that displayed the king's greatness. Her presence at the king's banquet would only confirm and add to the king's high status, for what other man could attract such a beautiful woman? Consequently, she refused to enhance his glory and refused to honor the king.

Her reaction is one which may appear to be stupid—perhaps the response of a spoiled spouse who had everything—but she saw this as something that would bring shame to herself and only feed the arrogance of the king. Her decision is one that employees, politicians, and family members are faced with when an arrogant superior asks them to do an inappropriate favor that they should not do. Does one honor a drunken father and obey him, or should one refuse to cover up for his alcoholic behavior? Does one lie or fix the financial books of the company to hide the sins of a boss, or refuse to cooperate and risk being fired? Does a person heap accolades of praise on someone who has a hidden record of sexual sins, or reveal the truth and lose a friend? Vashti is an exemplary model in chapter 1, who refuses to be put in a position inappropriate for the queen and suffers great harm for her courage.

The king's reaction to Vashti was an attempt to maintain his honor by removing the problem person from the palace. Everyone would honor the king if the king simply eliminated the problem individuals (he agreed with a similar solution when Haman wanted to rid the kingdom of all Jews; 3:8-9). The king did not take

decisive action against Vashti by himself, but looked to the group support of his seven counselors and then followed their advice without hearing any past precedent from law or past protocol in similar situations. He does not say no to those who make requests of him, revealing some of his inability to make decisions on his own (Laniak [2003:200] believes it is humorous that the king had to check with his advisers regarding how to deal with his wife). Jobes believes that this story mocks the inability of this great worldly power to make decisions and thus "its ultimate inability to determine the destiny of God's people" (1999:83). The king asked for a legal ruling, but his counselors' answer appears to have no basis in the laws of the kingdom. Vashti was condemned as one who "wronged" the king and every other citizen in the kingdom, a charge that was greatly exaggerated beyond anything that could be logically defended from a law. In fact, Vashti was never accused of breaking a law. The fear elicited by this one act of Vashti is evident, for it is characterized as a despising of her husband and as an act of contempt. The decree that went out to banish Vashti from the king's presence was motivated by a desire that all men throughout the kingdom should receive the "proper respect" and honor from their wives (1:20). The decree allowed a man to "be the ruler of his own home" and to "say whatever he pleases" (1:22).

The language of rule, respect, and power indicates what the true problem was. Some people in this world want to have absolute authority for themselves and at the same time remove anyone who might question their authority. They want respect, but respect is not something that one can command; it is earned. This arrogant and controlling approach to life stands in stark contrast to the leadership ideals in the Bible. The legacy of Moses that God and Joshua remembered was that he functioned as the humble "servant of the LORD" (Josh 1:1, 2, 13, 15), who never displayed any hint of glory or touted his riches. When God promised David that he would make of his dynasty an eternal house, David's prayer of thanksgiving constantly referred to himself as God's humble servant (2 Sam 7:19-21, 25-29). Christ himself did not come to earth with the glorious trappings of a world emperor but emptied himself and took on the role of a servant (Phil 2). The chief end of mankind is not to bring honor to itself, but to give all glory to God.

◆ B. Esther Becomes Queen (2:1-18)

But after Xerxes' anger had subsided, he began thinking about Vashti and what she had done and the decree he had made. ²So his personal attendants suggested, "Let us search the empire to find beautiful young virgins for the king. ³Let the king appoint agents in each province to bring these beautiful young women into the royal harem at the fortress of Susa. Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the harem, will see that they are all given beauty treatments. ⁴After that, the young woman who

most pleases the king will be made queen instead of Vashti." This advice was very appealing to the king, so he put the plan into effect.

⁵At that time there was a Jewish man in the fortress of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair. He was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. ⁶His family* had been among those who, with King Jehoiachin* of Judah, had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. ⁷This