

The Book of Nehemiah in Its Biblical and Historical Context

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One may only begin to understand the significance of the events in the book of Nehemiah when one looks at God's words to the children of Israel in Moab through his servant Moses just before the nation entered into the Promised Land. Moses foretold of exile and return in Deuteronomy. Moses said to the people,

All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you. They shall be a sign and a wonder against you and your offspring forever. Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish. They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the LORD your God has given you

(Deut 28:45-52).

And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul (Deut 28:65-66).

All the nations will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. Therefore, the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book, and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day' (Deut 29:24-28).

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will

gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers (Deut 30:1-5).¹

Moses foretold of judgment, exile, and restoration in Israel's future. In truth, the book of Nehemiah recounts what was already foretold by the Lord to Moses many years earlier thus underscoring the fact that the God of Israel is the sovereign judge of the nations, including Israel, as well as the God of amazing grace. The purpose of this article is to set the historical background to the book of Nehemiah by recounting the historical circumstances surrounding, first, the fall of Israel and, second, the fall and restoration of Judah.

The Fall of Israel

The first deportations took place in the eighth century at the hands of the Assyrians. Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel attacked Judah in an effort to coerce Judah into joining an anti-Assyrian coalition. However, Ahaz was determined not to become a part of the coalition. Instead, he sent a plea to the Assyrian king for help. At the request of Ahaz, Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria attacked Aram and Israel in 732 B.C. (cf. 2 Kgs 15:29; 16:5-9). Aram-Damascus was burnt to the ground, and the same might have happened to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, were it not for Pekah's assassination by Hoshea who then took the throne of Israel as a vassal of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser III took at least 13,520 people into Assyrian captivity.² Most of these deportees came out of the Transjordan (cf. 1 Chr 5:26).

Hoshea's allegiance to Assyria was short-lived, and he withheld tribute to

the Assyrians hoping that he could stand up to the Assyrians with the help of the Egyptians. Therefore, Shalmaneser V decided to deal with Israel's rebellion and laid siege to Samaria in 724 B.C. Samaria capitulated to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. without having received any evident help from Egypt.³ Shalmaneser V died near the time of the end of the siege, and his son, Sargon II, claimed the victory.⁴ Sargon boasted that he carried 27,290 Israelites into captivity, and he replaced them with deportees from other conquered regions (cf. 2 Kings 17:1-6).⁵ The northern tribes lost their national identity and for the most part appear to have intermingled with foreigners.

The foreign deportees who came into Samaria were from a variety of places such as Babylon, Cuthah (twenty miles northeast of Babylon), Avva (on the Orontes River in northern Syria), Hamath (north of Palestine), and Sepharvaim (near Hamath in upper Syria) (cf. 2 Kgs 17:24).⁶ These deportees brought into Samaria quite a mixture of languages, customs, and religious practices.⁷ When these new cults were brought into Samaria, the Lord God brought judgment upon them by sending lions to kill some of them. When Sargon II heard of this he sent an Israelite priest back to Bethel to teach these foreigners "how they should fear Yahweh" (2 Kgs 17:25-28).⁸ Nevertheless, they continued to make gods of their own and worshipped them alongside of the Lord God (2 Kgs 17:29-40). This lasted at least to 550 B.C. because the writer of 2 Kings says, "these nations feared Yahweh and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day" (2 Kgs 17:41).⁹ Ezra and Nehemiah give every indication that they

encountered these syncretistic religious practices among the Samaritans when the Jews returned to Judah. These religious practices help explain the seemingly harsh responses of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of the families of Israel to the people already settled in the land when the people asked if they could be permitted to join the Jews in the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 4:1-3). These polytheistic Samaritans might better be thought of as “Samaritans” because they should not be confused with the monotheistic Samaritans of Jesus’ day.¹⁰

In 701 B.C., the Lord God once again used the Assyrians to discipline his people for their sins. Sennacherib defeated the combined forces of Egypt and Judah at Eltekeh. Then he laid siege to several cities in Judah including Jerusalem. Sennacherib boasted of having taken forty-six cities in Judah and of having shut up Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage” in Jerusalem.¹¹ The city would have fallen were it not for God’s intervention, killing 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Sennacherib then returned home only to be assassinated by his sons (cf. 2 Kgs 19:35-37).¹²

The Last Days of Judah

In its last days of monarchy, Judah found itself in a precarious position with four superpowers of that day vying for power and determining the political landscape in which Judah found herself. These nations were Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Media.

The Assyrians reached their height of power in 663 B.C. under Asshurbanipal with the sacking of Thebes completing their conquest of Egypt.¹³ However, Asshurbanipal died in 627 B.C., and the Babylonians declared independence from Assyria under the leadership of

Nabopolassar in 626 B.C.¹⁴ It took Nabopolassar about ten years to establish control in Babylon, but then he began pushing north against the Assyrians. In 615 B.C., he attempted to take Asshur but was defeated. However, when the Assyrian army followed the retreating Babylonians south, it opened up the heartland of Assyria for an invasion by the Medes probably at the instigation of the Babylonians. Under Cyaxeres, the Medes destroyed Asshur in 614 B.C. Nabopolassar brought his army up to join them, and the Babylonians and Medes made a pact to join forces against the dwindling army of the Assyrians. This pact was later sealed by the marriage of Nabopolassar’s son Nebuchadnezzar to Cyaxeres’s daughter or granddaughter.¹⁵ In 612 B.C., Nahum’s words of prophecy came to pass as Ninevah was reduced to rubble by the combined forces of the Babylonians and the Medes. The Assyrians retreated back west to Haran where they were joined by a small Egyptian force, but the Babylonians drove them out in 610 B.C. The Assyrians and Egyptians retreated about fifty miles further west to Carchemish.

Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt decided to bring a much larger contingent of Egyptians to fight alongside the Assyrians because he feared the might and expansion of the Babylonians and Medes. On his way north to Carchemish, Neco was intercepted by Josiah of Judah at Megiddo in 609 B.C. Josiah wanted to prevent or delay Egypt’s ability to help the Assyrians who had brought such devastation upon Israel and Judah.¹⁶ Josiah disguised himself and fought in the battle, but archers mortally wounded him. His people took him back to Jerusalem to be buried, and Josiah’s son Jehoahaz became king (2 Kgs 23:28-31; 2 Chr 35:20-36:2). Along with the Assyrians,

Neco tried to take back Haran but was repulsed. On his way back to Egypt, he stopped in Jerusalem and took Jehoahaz captive and made Jehoiakim, Jehoahaz's brother, king of Judah.

The fighting between these two alliances continued until 605 B.C. when the Babylonians and Medes under the leadership of the crown prince of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, launched a surprise attack on Carchemish and decidedly defeated the Egyptians and Assyrians. The Assyrians ceased to exist as a force, but the Egyptians retreated and regrouped at Hamath on the Orontes River.¹⁷ Nebuchadnezzar pursued the fleeing Egyptians and defeated them again. At that time, Nebuchadnezzar's father died so he returned to Babylon to bury his father and take the throne of Babylon, allowing the badly decimated Egyptian army to return home.

Nevertheless, Babylon emerged as ruler over "the whole of the land of Hatti" as the Babylonians referred to all of Syria and Palestine including Judah.¹⁸ Before Nebuchadnezzar went back to Babylon, he made Jehoiakim swear allegiance to Babylon. It was somewhere near that time that Daniel and his companions were taken into Babylonian captivity (Dan 1:1-2).¹⁹ Jehoiakim remained loyal to Nebuchadnezzar for three years, but in 601 B.C. Jehoiakim decided to rebel. Nebuchadnezzar responded quickly with auxiliary troops (2 Kgs 24:1-7). The writer of Chronicles says that Nebuchadnezzar brought Jehoiakim into submission and bound him with shackles. He also carried many of the sacred utensils of the temple back with him to Babylon (2 Chr 36:6-7).²⁰ However, Nebuchadnezzar's main objective was the subjugation of Egypt, the objective he earlier was forced

to call to a halt because of the death of his father. Once again he met Neco in battle at Migdol on Egypt's border.²¹ Both sides suffered heavy casualties, and Nebuchadnezzar was forced to retreat back to Babylon.²² Jehoiakim saw this as another opportunity to withhold tribute from Nebuchadnezzar and pursue friendly relations with Neco.

Nebuchadnezzar took about two years to gather his forces, and in 598 B.C. his army began the march west to deal with the treachery of Judah.²³ As the Babylonians started their journey, Jehoiakim died, and his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin, became king of Judah.²⁴ After a month's siege, Jerusalem capitulated to the Babylonians.²⁵ According to 2 Kgs 24:14-16,

[Nebuchadnezzar] led away into exile all Jerusalem and all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. So he led Jehoiachin away into exile to Babylon; also the king's mother and the king's wives and his officials and the leading men of the land, he led away into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. All the men of valor, seven thousand, and the craftsmen and the smiths, one thousand, all strong and fit for war, and these the king of Babylon brought into exile to Babylon.²⁶

Jeremiah 52:28 indicates that only 3,023 captives were taken, but the smaller figures of Jeremiah probably only represent men of the most influential families.²⁷ Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, king in his place. Egypt could not come to Judah's aid because they were occupied with military activities in the south.²⁸

Contrary to Jeremiah's instruction, Zedekiah involved himself in plans

to rebel against Babylon, and with the promise of Egyptian support he withheld tribute from Nebuchadnezzar in 589 B.C. (cf. Jer 38:14-23). Nebuchadnezzar acted quickly by dividing his army, sending one part to the Mediterranean coast to meet the Egyptians and sending the other part to Jerusalem to begin a siege on the city. The Egyptians attempted to help Judah, but they were outnumbered forcing their withdrawal. In 588 B.C., the siege began, and Jerusalem fell in 587/586 B.C.²⁹ Zedekiah attempted to flee but was captured and forced to watch the execution of his sons before his eyes were gouged out. Zedekiah was taken into captivity along with the people who had deserted over to the Babylonians and those who were left in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:8-21). The Babylonian's system of deportation was different from that of the Assyrians: (1) The Babylonians did not resettle deportees from other conquered lands in areas from which they had deported people; the deportation was one-way. (2) The Babylonians appointed a local governor to oversee the land they had just laid waste.³⁰

Jewish Life in Exile

During the exile, there were basically three communities: those who fled to Egypt, those who remained in Judah, and those who were deported to Babylon.

The Community in Egypt

Jeremiah reported that those who fled to Egypt consisted of important military officers, members of the royal family, and Jews who had fled and recently returned after the appointment of a governor in Judah (Jer 43:1-7). They took Jeremiah with them against his will (2 Kgs 25:25-26; Jer 41:16-18). The people turned to a

syncretistic worship as stated by Jeremiah and supported by the Elephantine papyri. The Elephantine papyri tell of a Jewish military colony in Upper Egypt that was probably founded some time in the sixth century B.C. The papyri consist of personal letters and legal documents from the fifth century B.C. They even constructed a temple for their community.³¹ Historians and archaeologists know little else about the Jews who fled to Egypt.

The Community in Judah

Since we do not know what the population was in Judah before the siege, the number of casualties from the siege, or the total number of people who went into Babylonian captivity, it is impossible to know how many people remained in Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem. Ackroyd suggests, "It is reasonable to suppose that there was still quite a substantial population in Judah after 587."³² Albright says the remnant numbered no more than twenty thousand.³³ Nehemiah says that there was not a large population in Judah when he returned a little over one hundred years later (Neh 7:4). The archaeological evidence also seems to support this fact.³⁴ Moreover, those who were left behind were the poor—those who, for the most part, had not been in positions of leadership. They continued to have some sort of worship, but given the destruction of the temple and the deportation of many of the priests, it would have been much different than it was before.³⁵ Those who remained seem to have had a difficult existence.

The Community in Babylon

For the most part, the Jews in Babylonian exile appear to have had a peaceful if not prosperous existence. Some were

forced into a variety of forms of manual labor for the Babylonian government projects. But most were settled with their families not far from Babylon onto land that had been newly irrigated as a part of Nebuchadnezzar's scheme of public works. There they raised crops to help feed Babylon's growing population. Only the king's family and closest advisors suffered actual incarceration.³⁶ The people were settled in a number of communities such as the one Ezekiel mentions on the river Kebar near Nippur, sixty miles southeast of Babylon (Ezek 1:1-3; 3:15; cf. 2 Kgs 24:10-16; 25:8-12; Jer 52:28-34; Ezra 2:59; 8:17).³⁷ Those exiles that returned to Judah brought with them numerous livestock and were able to make contributions for the sacred services (Ezra 2:65-69; 8:26; Neh 7:67-72).³⁸

The prosperity of the Babylonian exiles may be a primary reason many chose to stay in Babylon rather than return to Judah when they were given the opportunity.³⁹ The Murushi Sons was a business and lending house in the fifth century B.C. Among their customers are listed sixty Jewish names from the time of Artaxerxes I and forty from the time of Darius II. They participated in a variety of business ventures.⁴⁰ There seems to have been no social or commercial barriers between the Jewish exiles and their Babylonian captors.⁴¹

The Jewish exiles experienced other changes also. For instance, they adopted a new calendar while they were in Babylon that still remains the basis for the Jewish calendar today. The changes to their calendar are evident in the postexilic writings.⁴² The exiles also were influenced by the dominant diplomatic and commercial language of that time. By the time the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they were using

the Aramaic language. However, while portions of the exilic and post-exilic writings contain Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4b-7:28; Jer 10:11), the majority of the writing in Scripture coming from this time period appears in Hebrew.⁴³ A number of later Judaism's customary practices such as praying three times a day and the rules and specific dates for fasting seem to have developed during this time. Furthermore, the practice of meeting in synagogues may have begun during the exile since they had no temple.⁴⁴ It was during the exile that the descendants of Abraham came to accept the designation "Jew," which remains today.⁴⁵ The greatest change concerns idolatry. Before the Babylonian exile, the Israelites were prone to worshipping idols, but being exiled into a land of idolatry seems to have cured them of the problem.

The Rise of the Persian Empire

By 650 B.C., a group of Persians took control of the southeastern section of the Zagros Mountains.⁴⁶ These kings traced their descent from an ancestor named Hakhamanish or, in Greek, Achaemenes. Therefore, historians often refer to them as the Achaemenians. Herodotus asserts that King Phraortes of Media forced Persia to become a vassal and that it remained one until Cyrus the Great became king of Persia (559-530 B.C.). Cyrus overthrew the Medes to the north in 550 B.C. Instead of making the Medes his slaves, he integrated them into Persian society and appointed many Medes into important positions in the government and military. As a result, the Medes came to view Cyrus as their legitimate king, and outsiders found it difficult to make a distinction between the Persians and Medes. The Greeks went so far as to use the two ethnic

designations interchangeably.⁴⁷ Unlike many of the powerful leaders that had preceded him throughout the ancient Near East, Cyrus learned that it was in his best interest to treat those he conquered and ruled with respect. Once total control in Media was established and he had successfully expanded into other territories, Cyrus turned his attention west toward Babylon.

Meanwhile in Babylon, when Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C., the empire began to erode under the leadership of his son Evil-merodach (Amel-Marduk). During his reign, he went against just about anything his father had done and is best known for having released Jehoiachin from prison after having been captive for thirty-seven years (2 Kgs 25:27-30). However, after two years on the throne, Neriglissar, his brother-in-law, assassinated him and took the throne, reigning over Babylonia from 560-556 B.C. The Babylonian empire continued to erode under the leadership of Neriglissar and his son Labashi-Marduk, who did not even last a year on the throne, probably because he was too young to rule.⁴⁸ Next to take the throne was Nabonidus (555-539 B.C.).⁴⁹

Nabonidus was unlike his Babylonian predecessors in at least two ways.⁵⁰ First, Nabonidus was particularly interested in antiquities. He uncovered a number of statues, monuments, and inscriptions of past kings and put them in a "museum" at his daughter's residence in Ur. Second, because of his mother's religious beliefs, he was more devoted to the moon god Sin than he was the sun god Marduk, the traditional god of the Babylonians.⁵¹ The leading priests in Babylon resented Nabonidus' elevation of Sin over Marduk, and when plague, famine, and high inflation struck Babylon proper,

Nabonidus interpreted the difficulties as punishments for the murmurings of those Babylonians who opposed him. Because of his increasing interest in antiquities and his growing disillusionment with the religious establishment in Babylon, he lost what little interest he had in overseeing the administration of the government and appointed his son Belshazzar co-regent in 549 B.C.⁵² Nabonidus moved to Tema, an oasis in the Arabian Desert just east of the Red Sea, and lived there the next ten years.⁵³

In 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great was ready to invade Babylonia. A major battle took place at Opis on the Tigris with a Babylonian defeat. Then Cyrus ordered the conquest of the city of Babylon, and it fell quickly in late October. Nabonidus came to lead the defense, but he was too late.⁵⁴ Daniel describes how Babylon fell while Belshazzar was having a feast (Daniel 5). The historian Xenophon corroborates Daniel saying the attack happened at a time when "all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long."⁵⁵ And Herodotus states, "The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses."⁵⁶ The Persians executed Belshazzar and imprisoned Nabonidus.

The Return of the Exiles

Cyrus's policy pertaining to conquered peoples allowed them to worship their own gods and establish some semblance of autonomy as long as they paid their taxes to the empire and remained loyal citizens. He encouraged people who had

been uprooted from their homelands and religions to return home and reestablish the worship of their gods with the blessing and support of his government. The Edict of Cyrus as recorded in Ezra 1:2-4 demonstrates this Persian policy. Shortly following this edict, a group of close to fifty thousand Jews returned to Judah under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (Ezra 2:64-65). Zerubbabel became their governor, while Joshua served as the high priest.

Cambyses II (530-522 B.C.) became king when his father Cyrus died from wounds inflicted in battle. While involved in a military campaign, Cambyses received word that someone had usurped the throne, but on his way back home to deal with the treachery he died.⁵⁷ Darius I (522-486 B.C.), one of Cambyses's officers dealt with the insurrection and became the next king of Persia. Cambyses must have been the king who supported the enemies of the returnees and put a stop to the reconstruction of the temple. However, Darius I upheld the Edict of Cyrus, and under his rule the Jews completed the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 515 B.C. (Ezra 4-6).⁵⁸ The next Persian king was Xerxes (biblical Ahasuerus, 486-465 B.C.). He is the Persian king to whom Esther was married.⁵⁹ He spent a great deal of effort in completing the palace at Susa and waging war on the Greeks.⁶⁰ He was assassinated in his bed chamber in 465 B.C. by an influential courtier named Artabanus.⁶¹

Artaxerxes I followed Xerxes (464-424 B.C.). Artaxerxes was the third son of Xerxes and Amestris, his queen. His older brothers were Darius and Hystaspes. His father's assassin convinced Artaxerxes that his oldest brother Darius had murdered his father.⁶² Therefore, the eighteen year

old Artaxerxes plotted and killed Darius after a number of months.⁶³ Artabanus then attempted to kill Artaxerxes, but Artaxerxes killed him first. Then Artaxerxes defeated his other older brother who was serving as a satrap in Bactria to the east near the Hindu Kush Mountains and became the king of Persia.⁶⁴ He was nicknamed Longimanus. Plutarch says, "The first Artaxerxes, among the kings of Persia the most remarkable for a gentle and noble spirit, was surnamed the Long-handed, his right hand being longer than his left, and was the son of Xerxes."⁶⁵

Nehemiah the Royal Cupbearer

Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes I (Neh 1:1; 2:1), and it was in his seventh year on the throne that Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458/457 B.C. according to the traditional view (Ezra 7:7).⁶⁶ Yamauchi cites various sources indicating what traits Nehemiah had as a royal cupbearer:

He would have been well trained in court etiquette (compare Dan 1:4, 13, 15; Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.230). He would certainly have known how to select the wines to set before the king. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Qamma 92b) states: "The wine belongs to the master but credit for it is due to his cupbearer." He would have been a convivial companion with a willingness to lend an ear at all times. Robert North is reminded of Saki, the companion of Omar Khayyam, who served wine to him and listened to his discourses. Nehemiah would have been a man of great influence as one with the closest access to the king, and one who could well determine who got to see the king (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.3.8-9). Above all Nehemiah would have enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king. The great need for trustworthy attendants is underscored by the intrigues that were endemic to the Achaemenid court.⁶⁷

At least four of the Persian kings had been murdered, and at least a half dozen of them reached the throne by way of some conspiracy.⁶⁸ Therefore, a most trusted individual had to fill the position of royal cupbearer.

Nehemiah the Governor of Judah

In 460 B.C., Egypt revolted against the Persians with the help of the Greeks from Athens. They defeated and killed the Persian satrap who happened to be Artaxerxes' uncle and gained control of most of Lower Egypt in the north by 462 B.C. In 459 B.C., the Athenians sent two hundred ships to Egypt and helped the Egyptians capture Memphis, the administrative center of the delta region. In 456 B.C., the Persians responded by sending Megabyzus, the satrap of Syria, with a large fleet and army to Egypt. By the end of eighteen months he was able to trap the Athenian fleet, capture Inarus, the leader of the revolt, and restore Persian rule in the region. Megabyzus had promised to spare the life of Inarus, but at the instigation of Amestris, the mother of Artaxerxes, he was impaled. Megabyzus was so angered by the deed that he revolted against the king from 449-446 B.C. but then was reconciled with him.⁶⁹

The instability in the region may account for the reason Artaxerxes was in favor of Ezra's reforms and Nehemiah's appointment to be the governor of Judah. The province of Judah was much smaller than the nation of Judah had been, but Artaxerxes probably thought he could use some loyal supporters in the area given the instability in that region of the empire.⁷⁰ Ezra's commission to administer the Torah to his people was in line with Persian policy. The Persians hoped it would bring order to the people and

pacify their religious concerns. Nehemiah was a perfect choice to go to Judah given his loyalty to the king. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445/444 B.C. Artaxerxes needed someone he could trust in the area, and he appreciated Nehemiah's service. Artaxerxes gives this impression when he wanted to know when Nehemiah could return to him (Neh 2:6).

As governor, Nehemiah faced an economic crisis (Neh 5). Non-land owners were short of food, landowners had to mortgage their properties, many were forced to borrow money at extremely high interest rates, and some were compelled to sell their children into slavery. While the Persian kings were kind when it came to matters of faith and local administration, they were quite severe when it came to money and taxation. Their economic policies led to inflationary conditions where the rich got richer, the middle-class became poor, and the poor became poorer. The economic conditions Nehemiah faced were prevalent throughout the Persian Empire.⁷¹ As governor, Nehemiah was in a position to enjoy the spoils that Persian aristocrats enjoyed at the expense of the people under them, but he refused to do so. Instead he lent money and grain to those in need without interest and did not take of the royal food allotted to him as an appointed governor of the king (Neh 5:10, 14). Most governors became very prosperous in their positions at the expense of the people (Neh 5:15), but by his example and leadership Nehemiah helped his people in a time of dire need and withstood any temptation to take advantage of them (Neh 5:17).

Conclusion

The events leading up to the exile, the exile itself, and the return all point to

God's sovereignty and grace. The Lord God is not only the God of Israel, but he is the God of the nations. Kings and leaders plan their courses of action, but it is the Lord who raises them up and brings them down for his own glory and purposes. God has always been and always will be faithful to his word and to his people.

ENDNOTES

¹All quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995).

²J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 283-84 (hereafter referred to as *ANET*).

³While the vast majority of scholars believe the fall of Samaria was in 722 B.C., Rodger C. Young argues for a date of 723 B.C. ("When Was Samaria Captured? The Need for Precision in Biblical Chronologies," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 [2004]: 577-95).

⁴A. T. Olmstead, "The Fall of Samaria," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 21 (1904-1905): 170-82.

⁵*ANET*, 284-87.

⁶Thomas Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 139.

⁷Eugene Merrill, *A Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 401. Concerning the Assyrian practice of imposing foreign cults on newly acquired lands like Israel see Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 105-10.

⁸For an extra-biblical parallel of this edict, see Shalom Paul, "Sargon's Administrative Diction in II Kings 17:27," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 73-74.

⁹Concerning the date of the writing of 1 and 2 Kings, see Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 228-30.

¹⁰Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 267.

¹¹*ANET*, 287-89.

¹²Concerning Sennacherib's assassination, see Simo Parpola, "The Murderer of Sennacherib," in *Death in Mesopotamia*, ed. Bendt Alster (*Recontre assyriologique internationale* 26; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 171-82.

¹³A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1923.; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), 440-52.

¹⁴Nabopolassar founded what is known as the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire. Bill T. Arnold argues that the use of "Chaldean" may be misleading because there is no "unambiguous evidence" that Nabopolassar's dynasty was ethnically Chaldean. Biblical and classical writers use the term synonymously with "Babylonian" with no ethnic significance ("Babylonians" in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994], 61).

¹⁵William H. Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2003), 279.

¹⁶For discussions concerning Josiah's motives, see Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1992), 448; and A. Malamat, "Josiah's Bid for Armageddon: The Background of the Judean-Egyptian Encounter in 609 B.C.," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 5 (1973): 267-78.

- ¹⁷Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 152.
- ¹⁸Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 401.
- ¹⁹See D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings, 626-556 B. C.* (London: British Museum, 1956); and idem, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London: Tyndale, 1956), 16-18.
- ²⁰Wiseman suggests that the reason Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Judah is not mentioned in the Babylonian records is because Nebuchadnezzar's main objective was to deal with the Egyptians (*Chronicles*, 31).
- ²¹Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 160.
- ²²Wiseman, *Chronicles*, 131.
- ²³*Ibid.*, 31, 70.
- ²⁴According to 2 Chr 36:9 in the MT, he was eight years old; yet according to 2 Kgs 24:8 and the LXX, he was eighteen years old. The Babylonian records indicate that in 592 B.C. Jehoiachin had five sons, that is five years after he went into Babylonian exile. Therefore, he must have been eighteen years old when he took the throne of Judah. See Wiseman, *Chronicles*, 220.
- ²⁵A. Malamat, "Last Kings," *Israel Exploration Journal* 18 (1968): 144.
- ²⁶Having been from a priestly family, Ezekiel was taken into captivity at this time.
- ²⁷Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (vol. 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 567.
- ²⁸Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 460-62.
- ²⁹It is difficult to know with certainty which year Jerusalem fell because historians are not sure which dating system was being used in Judah. See A. Malamat, "The Last Years of the Kingdom of Judah," in *World History of the Jewish People*, vol. 4, part 1, *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History*, eds. A. Malamat and I. Ephal (Jerusalem: Massada Press, 1979), 218-20.
- ³⁰Kaiser, *History of Israel*, 405; Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 483.
- ³¹See B. Porten, "Elephantine Papyri," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:445-55; B. Porten and J. C. Greenfield, *Jews of Elephantine and Aramaeans of Syene* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1974); R. K. Harrison, "Elephantine Papyri," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-82), 2:58-61.
- ³²Peter R. Ackroyd, *Israel Under Babylon and Persia* (London: Oxford University, 1970), 9.
- ³³William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper, 1963), 87.
- ³⁴S. Weinberg, "Postexilic Palestine: An Archaeological Report," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities* 4 (1971): 78-97.
- ³⁵For various suggestions concerning the nature of the Israelite cult in Judah at this time, see Ackroyd, *Israel Under Babylon and Persia*, 27-28; and Solomon Zeitlin, "The Origin of the Synagogue," in *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology, and Architecture*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York: Ktav, 1975), 14-26.
- ³⁶James C. Newsome, *By the Waters of Babylon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 70.
- ³⁷Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 159.
- ³⁸Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 569.
- ³⁹M. D. Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora: Jews in Nippur in the Fifth Century BC," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 (1974): 6-12.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 6-12. See also Hermann V. Hilprecht and Albert T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murashu Sons of Nippur Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes I (464-425 B.C.)*, Babylonian Expedition 9 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1898).
- ⁴¹Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 569.
- ⁴²Kaiser, *History of Israel*, 412-13.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, 413.
- ⁴⁴Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*, 289.
- ⁴⁵Kendell H. Easley, *The Illustrated Guide to Biblical History* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 127.
- ⁴⁶Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 164.
- ⁴⁷Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*, 289-97.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 285.
- ⁴⁹See Sidney Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts Relating to the Capture and Downfall of Babylon* (London: Methuen, 1924).
- ⁵⁰See Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556-539 BC* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989).
- ⁵¹Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 88.
- ⁵²ANET, 313-14.
- ⁵³Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 164-65.
- ⁵⁴A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Baby-*

- Ionian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975), 109-11.
- ⁵⁵Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 7.5.15.
- ⁵⁶Herodotus, 1.191.
- ⁵⁷Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 125-26.
- ⁵⁸See Hag 1:1, 15; 2:10; Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1.
- ⁵⁹Robert Dick Wilson has shown that "Ahasuerus" is the proper Hebrew rendering of the Greek "Xerxes" (*A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody, 1959], 69, n. 25).
- ⁶⁰For a complete discussion of Xerxes, see Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 187-239.
- ⁶¹*Ibid.*, 248.
- ⁶²Ctesias, *Persica*, 29-30.
- ⁶³Diodorus, *The Eleventh Book of Diodorus*, 11.69.1-5.
- ⁶⁴Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 168-69.
- ⁶⁵Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 1.1.
- ⁶⁶For arguments concerning the chronological order of Ezra and Nehemiah see F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 5-9 and Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," 583-86.
- ⁶⁷Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 259-60.
- ⁶⁸I. Gershevitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran II: The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 227.
- ⁶⁹Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," 571.
- ⁷⁰John M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 128.
- ⁷¹See M. Dandamyev for conditions described in Babylon that are similar to that which Nehemiah describes in Jerusalem ("Achaemenid Babylonia," in *Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. I. M. Diakonoff [Moscow: Nauka, 1969], 309).