

Ezra and Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah belong to the work of the Chronicler, but his source material is different from the royal records used in 1 and 2 Chronicles. As well as various lists of names he also has the personal diaries of both Ezra and Nehemiah, but he is not always sure of the dates to which the lists refer. Modern historians have a more detailed knowledge of the period than the Chronicler did despite his nearness in time and we know that he has not always got his facts in order.

In particular, there is a puzzle about the relationship between the two most important figures in the book, Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah 8 places their activity at the same time, but apart from some lists in chapter 12 this is the only mention of Ezra in Nehemiah and Nehemiah is not mentioned at all in Ezra apart from the list in 2:2. It has been suggested that the Chronicler may have been mistaken in placing them together in Nehemiah 8 and dates for Ezra's mission have been suggested both before and after Nehemiah. Since there is no certainty about the reconstruction, our readings will follow the Chronicler's outline and assume that they were contemporaries.

The Return from Exile

Isaiah of Babylon had predicted that Cyrus would be God's instrument to defeat the Babylonians and allow the return of the exiles to their homeland. Cyrus did come to power in 538 B.C. although the city surrendered peacefully to him and its gods and people were not taken into exile as he pictured in 46:2 and 47:9. The policy of the new emperor was to allow the displaced peoples to return to their homelands. In a document known as the "Cyrus cylinder", addressed to the people of Babylon, Cyrus claimed that their god Marduk had inspired him to take over the city just as in Ezra 1:2 he claimed that the Lord had given him all the kingdoms of the earth. He also asked the Babylonian priests to pray to Marduk for him, just as he asked the priests in Jerusalem to pray to the Lord in Ezra 6:10.

So the prophet was correct in predicting a return under Cyrus, but the manner of it was very unlike the triumphal return through the desert which

he pictured. Only a relatively small number of exiles actually returned and many remained in Babylon, where they had families and businesses, as well as those who had fled to Egypt and others who had travelled even more widely. The returnees found problems of opposition from the native population and apathy among their own people which delayed the rebuilding of the city and the Temple and left them weak and divided for several generations.

This dissatisfaction with the return from exile and their continuing status as vassals of various empires, including Persia, Greece and Rome, led to the reinterpretation of the words of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah by the prophets of later generations. These reinterpretations formed the framework for the hope of the coming Messiah in the time of Jesus and still among the Jews today.

Day 278. Psalm 126; Ezra 1 - 4

The Return of the Exiles

Psalm 126

The worshippers look back to the return of the exiles as a time of hope and rejoicing, and pray for the Lord to restore them again.

Ezra 1 - 4

The opening verses of Ezra pick up the closing verses of 2 Chronicles. Just as the exile had been foretold by Jeremiah and had taken place in accordance with the Lord's will, the eventual return of the exiles was similarly foretold (2 Chronicles 36:21-22). As foretold by Isaiah of Babylon, the emperor Cyrus on coming to the throne in 538 B.C. instituted a new policy of allowing the displaced peoples to return to their homeland. According to the Chronicler, the first return was led by a man called Sheshbazzar, the "prince of Judah," and included the return of the Temple vessels, which were carefully counted out to him.

Apart from Ezra chapter 1, nothing is known of Sheshbazzar. His name disappears from the records to be replaced by those of Jeshua and Zerubbabel who were active in the rebuilding of the Temple in 520 - 515 B.C. The list of returnees in chapter 2 is a copy of that in Nehemiah 7 and may or may not refer to the original return under Sheshbazzar. The names in 2:2 look like a collection of leading men from the following 100 years or more, including besides Jeshua and Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, who was governor of Judaea from about 445 B.C. and Bigvai, who was governor around 410.

The first act of the returnees was to rebuild the altar and begin the regular sacrifices in the ruins of the Temple. There are indications in passages such as Jeremiah 41:5 and Zechariah 7:1-3 as well as the book of Lamentations that worship was carried on in Jerusalem throughout the time of the exile. But for the author of Ezra, the return of the Temple vessels and the properly consecrated priests would mark a new start. The foundation of the altar in the seventh month and the help of Tyre and Sidon in providing material for the rebuilding are both echoes of the building and dedication of Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 2:3). The weeping and rejoicing of 3:12-

13 are both part of an intense act of worship in which emotions of all kinds were displayed. There was nothing stiff and formal about such worship!

In chapter 4, the Chronicler gathers a series of references to opposition from the surrounding nations, especially the Samaritans, who had originally been settled in the north of the country after the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:24-end). Whilst the Jews who remained had established a *modus vivendi* with their Samaritan neighbours, the returning exiles consistently refused to have anything to do with them and, as we know from the gospels, it was their point of view that prevailed in the long term.

The rulers of Persia were Cyrus (538-530 B.C.), Cambyses (530-522), Darius (522-486), Xerxes or Ahasuerus (486-465) and Artaxerxes (465-425), so it can be seen that the references in 4:6-23 span a long period of time. What they do is paint a picture of continual opposition as the background against which the Temple and the city were eventually rebuilt. However, it is also clear from Haggai, Zechariah and Nehemiah that the indifference of both native inhabitants and returning exiles had a part to play in the delay.

Day 279. Psalm 72; Micah 4 - 7

The Hope of God's People

Psalm 72

The hope for a king of Israel through whom all nations will be blessed. He will rule over the surrounding nations and others will bring him tribute. His reign will bring prosperity and justice for the poor. The form of this hope is similar in some ways to those expressed in the second half of Micah.

Micah 4 - 7

Over a century after his death, in the time of Jeremiah, Micah was remembered as the prophet who, in the reign of Hezekiah, had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 26:17-19). Even though his prophecies had not been fulfilled, Micah's words had been remembered. When Jerusalem was threatened once again, and even more when it did eventually fall, Micah's were among the words of the prophets which helped to provide an explanation for the calamity which had befallen God's people. Israel began to recognise the sins which had led to their downfall. But they also began to dream of a future in which the Lord would restore them and bless them once again. The second part of the book of Micah consists of the words of several anonymous prophets of varying dates expressing different aspects of this hope. They have been collected and carefully edited to balance and interpret one another and "complete" the original words of Micah.

Some of the oracles come from the time immediately before the exile and predict the fall of Jerusalem (4:9-10; 5:10-15). Others look forward to the return of the people from exile (4:6-7; 5:3). Some see a future for the "remnant" of God's people, scattered in exile, as destroyers of the nations and as destined to rule in the midst of the peoples (5:5-9). One famous passage (5:2-4) looks forward to the restoration of the dynasty of David, a ruler from Bethlehem who will restore the "shalom" of God's people. His rule will bring peace and security throughout the world. Another (4:1-5) pictures Jerusalem as the place from which the Lord's "torah" of teaching and judgement are given to many nations. Again, the picture for God's people is one of "shalom" with everyone living in peace and security (4:4).

Chapters 6 and 7 consist mainly of oracles from the time of bewilderment which followed the early days of the return from exile, when the great hopes of restoration seemed to have fallen flat. One verse (7:11) looks forward to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, which was eventually fulfilled under Nehemiah. They have been collected in the form of a dialogue between God and the people, expressing God's dissatisfaction with his people, their penitence and his response of mercy.

6:1-8 are about sacrifice. First God accuses the people because they see the demand for sacrifice as a burden, but in fact God is worth far more than this. It is justice, mercy and humility that he really looks for. In 6:9-end God speaks again, calling attention to injustice as the reason for the lack of prosperity. Again the prophet responds, with a lament for the unfaithfulness of Israel (7:1-7). This time the response comes in a series of promises of final salvation (7:8-end). God hears the prayers of his faithful people (7:7) and answers.

Day 280. Psalm 132; Ezra 5 - 6; Haggai

The Temple Rebuilt

Psalm 132

The community remembers the promise to David of a perpetual dynasty ruling in Jerusalem.

Ezra 5 - 6

In contrast to the opposition reported in chapter 4, the intervention of Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai was fair and open. It became the occasion for unearthing Cyrus' original proclamation and getting official help and protection for the rebuilding of the Temple. The Temple was completed in February or March 515 B.C. (6:15).

The mention of Artaxerxes in 6:14 may be prompted by the passage in 4:7-23, but like that passage it is out of chronological order. The reference to the King of Assyria in 6:22 is another chronological oddity. It may be intended to apply the lesson of these events to the writer's own day. If the Lord could change the heart of the Persian emperor, he could change any ruler's heart!

Haggai

The period of Haggai's prophetic ministry was only four months in 520 B.C. (1:1; 2:10,20) but was nevertheless important enough to be included in the collection of the prophets. Stirred by God's Spirit, Haggai discerned that complacency rather than outside opposition was the main reason why the work on the Temple had been so slow. God's people should have been making the worship of God and the rebuilding of the Temple their first priority. Instead they were treating it as something to be fitted in if time allowed. With the eyes of faith and his mind and heart rooted in tradition, Haggai saw the connection between Jerusalem's complacency and its relative poverty. In the Holiness Code, the most recent collection of priestly Law, God had promised that if his people were careful to observe the Law he would bless them (Leviticus 26:3-12). Since they are indifferent about it, he is not blessing them (1:5-11).

As the work proceeded, Haggai brought out further treasures from Israel's tradition to encourage the builders, and by doing so helped to lay the

foundation for her future hope. He saw the nations bringing silver and gold to beautify the Lord's house (2:6-9; see 2 Chronicles 2:11-16; 9:1-11). He saw God fulfilling his promise to grant Jerusalem "shalom", something for which the community prayed continually (2:9; see Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26; Psalm 122:6-9). Moreover, Zerubbabel, a prince of the royal line, was to become the Lord's servant and signet ring, the title of the kings of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 22:24). The hopes of Israel for a king of the house of David were to be revived in him.

With the rebuilding sponsored and protected by the Persian emperor there was little prospect of Zerubbabel ever becoming king, but Haggai, recalling the power of the Lord over all nations and their rulers, saw the Lord's promise as unailing and looked forward to its fulfilment.

Day 281. Psalm 87; Zechariah 1 - 4

The Lord's Jealousy over Jerusalem

Psalm 87

Jerusalem is the object of the Lord's special love. People from all nations join themselves to Jerusalem and are accepted by the Lord as natives of the city.

Zechariah 1 - 4

Zechariah's prophecies began shortly before those of Haggai ended (1:1; Haggai 2:10,20). Haggai had begun the task of stirring up the leaders of Jerusalem for the work of rebuilding and Zechariah continued his work. Zechariah was consciously dependent on the "former prophets" (1:4; 7:7). His appeal to Jerusalem was based on the authority of those who prophesied there before the exile. His message was an echo of Jeremiah, who had called Jerusalem to "return" to the Lord and had prophesied a seventy years duration for the exile (1:3,12; Jeremiah 3:12,14,22; 29:10). The word of the Lord had been fulfilled then and would be fulfilled now (1:6).

Although Cyrus' decree had allowed the exiles to return almost 20 years before and although the Temple was in the process of rebuilding, the hopes of the Jews for the return had not been fulfilled. Many of the exiles had still to return (2:6-7) and Jerusalem was still to be comforted (1:17; see Isaiah 40:1). Zechariah was attempting to dispel the disillusionment with the hopes raised by the return by rekindling the vision that had briefly inspired them.

Most of his messages are in the form of a vision followed by interpretation. The visions are not allegorical and not all the details are important. Instead they are parabolic, each one presenting one main point. In 1:7-23 Zechariah sees the earth at rest (1:11). Despite the poor state of Jerusalem, the nations are secure and it seems that the *status quo* is to be preserved. But the Lord is jealous over Jerusalem and wants to see her situation changed. His anger with her merited a certain amount of punishment but her conquerors have taken things much too far (1:15; see Isaiah 40:2). He will make the nations powerless to resist what he is about to do (1:18-21; see Isaiah 41:11-13).

What God was about to do is shown in a continuation of the same dream in which the first vision was received, the vision of the man with the measuring line in 2:1 taking up the hint in 1:16. Jerusalem is to be repopulated (2:4-5; see Isaiah 49:15-23). She was the apple of the Lord's eye, more important to him than all the other nations (2:8; see Isaiah 43:1-7). He will make Jerusalem the city where he is specially present in the whole world (2:10-11; see Isaiah 52:8; Ezekiel 48:35).

Chapters 3 and 4 introduce special messages for Joshua and Zerubbabel, the leading men of the community. Satan appears here, as in in the prologue of Job, as the enemy of God's people, trying to undermine their righteousness (Job 1:6-12). Joshua's priestly garments appear dirty and defiled as a result of his accusation, making them useless for performing his priestly duties (3:3; Ezekiel 44:17-19). But the Lord vindicates Joshua just as he vindicated Job, ordering his dirty garments to be replaced with clean ones (3:3-5). He was going to remove the sin of Jerusalem at a stroke, so that the priestly sacrifices would become effective again (3:9).

Then the vision moves to the Temple lampstand, which is portrayed as self-renewing. Each of the lamps has a channel for the oil to flow to it (4:12). By its side stand the two olive trees, Joshua and Zerubbabel (4:3,12-14). As the oil flowed uninterruptedly to the lamps so the Lord was going to pour out his Spirit on the two men he had anointed to serve him (4:6,14). The small things of the present are to be the start of great things as the Lord fulfils the promises he is making (4:8-10).

Day 282. Psalm 85; Zechariah 5 - 8

The Coming Joy of Jerusalem

Psalm 85

God's people look for his blessing in the time of his mercy.

Zechariah 5 - 6

Zechariah's visions continue. As in chapters 1 - 4, it is important to avoid getting bogged down in the detail of the imagery. Each vision has a single main point. In chapter 5, Israel's guilt is uncovered, first as a huge flying scroll then as a basket opened. But the basket is taken away to "Shinar" or Babylon. As in 3:9, God has taken away his people's sin.

The four chariots that appear in 6:1 symbolise God's power over the nations of the world. Attention is focused on the one that travels north, into the heart of God's enemies, where it establishes his sovereignty, thus giving his Spirit rest (6:8).

Finally the prophet looks to the future. With the power of their enemies broken, sovereignty will again return to the Jews. The "Branch" was the name given by Jeremiah to the returning king (Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-16). Zechariah anticipates his coming by making the crown with which Joshua will crown Zerubbabel. We should understand verse 13 as saying: "He (Zerubbabel) will rebuild the Temple, while he (Joshua) will bear sacral majesty; he (Zerubbabel) will sit and rule on his throne while he (Joshua) will be priest upon his throne; and there will be harmony between the two." The crown is placed in the Temple (6:14) as a symbol of the coming age of peaceful rule by priest and king.

Zechariah 7 - 8

In 518 B.C. the people of Bethel sent a deputation to ask the prophet whether they should continue the fast of the fifth month, which commemorated the destruction of the Temple (see 2 Kings 25:8-9). The question and its answer, in 8:18-19, are placed in the context of God's whole purpose for his people.

Zechariah appeals to the authority of the earlier prophets (7:7). They had dealt with the same problems, calling Israel to repent and denouncing the

shallowness of their worship (see Hosea 6:1-6; Jeremiah 3:6-10; 4:1-6). True fasting involves obedience to God's law and a society based on justice and mercy (7:8-10). By failing to take heed of the earlier prophets Judah had brought the events they now commemorated by fasting upon themselves.

Then follow eight short oracles, each introduced by the words, "Thus says the Lord of hosts," of which the last (8:20-23) is preceded by Zechariah's answer to the question and forms the climax to the book. Each short saying emphasises God's determination to show mercy on Jerusalem. He is exceedingly jealous for Zion (8:1-2), he will return and make his home there so that Jerusalem becomes known as the "Holy Mountain" (8:3), the coming time will be one of blessing and prosperity (8:4-5; see Jeremiah 31:3-6,12-14,23-25). Nothing is too hard for the Lord (8:6). The exiles will return (8:7-8) and, in a reaffirmation of Haggai's words some four years before, God will renew his blessing as the Temple is rebuilt (8:9-13).

In 8:14-17 the prophet teaches the people how to live in the coming time of mercy before finally answering the question not only about the fast of the fifth month but about all four of the fasts which commemorated the fall of Jerusalem: the fourth month the breach in the city wall (2 Kings 25:3-4), the fifth month the destruction of the Temple (2 Kings 25:8-9), the seventh month the assassination of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:25) and the tenth month the beginning of the siege (2 Kings 25:1). These fasts are to be turned into times of celebration now that the Lord is saving and renewing his people (8:18-19).

Finally, Jerusalem is to become a centre of worship for all nations. The Gentiles will recognise the true revelation of God given in Israel's Law and will come to worship in his holy city (8:20-23; see Isaiah 42:1-4). The vision of Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-4 will be fulfilled.

Chapters 9 - 14 contain a series of oracles from a slightly later period, which have been appended to Zechariah's words.

Prophets of the Sixth and Fifth Century

Third Isaiah, Joel, Malachi

Between the completion of the Temple in 515 B.C. and Nehemiah's first term as governor in 445, three generations passed during which time very little is known about life in Jerusalem. The city and its surrounding area was under Persian rule, which was generally benevolent, but the hopes of sovereignty and greatness and for the return of the exiles were not realised. Instead, the Jews of the Dispersion became even more integrated into the life of the cosmopolitan world of the East.

As for Jerusalem itself, the picture that emerges from the sayings of the prophets is of a community struggling to maintain its identity under threat from the surrounding nations, but weakened by poverty, complacency and division. The hopes of restoration with which the exiles had returned began to be projected more and more on to a time in the future. In one, the more nationalistic scenario, the threat to Jerusalem would become greater and greater until God finally intervened to save the city, judge her enemies and establish his own rule. In another, the righteous among God's people need delivering from the wealthy and complacent rulers who oppress them.

The post-exilic prophets looked for their inspiration to their great pre-exilic predecessors whose words had been fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and the eventual partial return of the exiles. We have already seen how Zechariah explicitly based his authority on the earlier prophets. The chapters known as "Third Isaiah" contain a reinterpretation of the teaching of Second Isaiah for a later generation. The great age of the prophet was passing and giving way to that of the priest. In fact, the editor of the prophetic books has appended to Malachi an exhortation to the readers to live by the Law of Moses (Malachi 4:4). In place of prophecy a new style of reflection on history arose known as apocalyptic. This was both more literary and more visionary. The second half of the book of Daniel is an early example.

Third Isaiah

Isaiah 56 - 66

Although, as Second Isaiah had predicted, the Jewish exiles were soon allowed to return home, it was not the kind of return he had envisaged. Instead of a glorious procession through the wilderness the return was a trickle and many decided to stay on in Babylon. Although the Temple was eventually rebuilt, the nations did not appear to be seeing the glory of the Lord. The Samaritans opposed the rebuilding while the Edomites, Judah's southern neighbours, made frequent hostile raids.

The community covering Jerusalem and the few surrounding square miles were divided among themselves, both between the returnees and the descendants of those never exiled, and between those faithful to the Lord and those indifferent, amongst whom some at least were practising pagan religions.

What were followers of Isaiah of Babylon to do? They could abandon hope and treat him as false prophet. But his prediction of return squared with predictions of Jeremiah and had in fact been fulfilled. Alternatively, they could hold on to his prophecies and look for reasons why their fulfilment was not as glorious as he had predicted.

This is what is reflected in the final chapters of Isaiah. They are obviously influenced by Second Isaiah and contain many of the same words and phrases. Some verses quote him virtually word for word. But the characteristic words and phrases of Second Isaiah have often been given a new meaning. In 57:14 the "way" is no longer the route for the returning exiles but a "way of life" the Lord calls them to live in the returned community. In 59:1 and 16 the prophets are still looking for the "arm of the Lord" for salvation but this salvation is not that of a glorious return. In 60:1 the "light" is not the light which will shine from Jerusalem to the nations but the light that will shine on Jerusalem when the Lord finally brings his salvation.

The prophecies may be the work of single prophet, but are more likely that of a group among whom followers of Second Isaiah were prominent. Like those of Second Isaiah, they were originally given orally one by one, then edited to provide an overall picture.

Day 283. Psalm 36; Isaiah 56 - 59

Why the Lord's Arm Does Not Save

Psalm 36

A lament over the wicked and a prayer of trust in God.

Isaiah 56 - 59

Why had the Lord not saved Jerusalem despite his promises? Why did the exiles not return in strength? Why was the city not rebuilt and its splendour not restored? Why were God's people still ignored and even despoiled by the Gentiles? In these chapters, we see the followers of Second Isaiah pondering on these questions and reinterpreting his prophecies for their own generation.

It was not that the Lord's arm was too short (59:1; see 40:10; 51:5,9; 52:10). It was the sin of Jerusalem which prevented him from acting. Instead of justice, there was oppression and injustice (57:1; 59:3-8), even idolatry and child sacrifice (57:3-9). The Sabbath was ignored (56:2; 58:13) and although fast days were held they did not cause the rich to reflect on their ways; they still continued to oppress the poor (58:3-7; see Zechariah 7:8-12). In these circumstances, those who tried to live upright lives began to see themselves as an oppressed minority (57:1-2; 59:9-11) while the complacent rich and powerful paid no attention to the Lord's demands (58:1-3).

The response to this situation is a message of hope. Instead of the Lord acting to save Jerusalem, he will act to save those within her who patiently wait for him and who live uprightly. Until now he has been silent (57:11; see 42:14). But now he will act to judge the wicked and the oppressors (57:11-12; 59:17-18) and to save those who are humble and penitent (57:15; 59:15b-20). For them, he will be their Redeemer (59:20; see 41:14; 43:14; 54:4-8). For those who respond to his call to repent the light will break forth (58:8; see 42:16-17).

In these chapters, the parched places are no longer the literal dryness of the desert as in Second Isaiah (41:17-18; 43:19-21; 49:10). Now they are places of spiritual dryness, which the Lord will water (58:11). The way through the wilderness of 40:3, 43:19 etc. is to be a way of holiness on which God walks with the humble and contrite (57:14-15). The righteous will rebuild the

ancient ruins (58:12; see 44:28) and receive the land and the holy mountain as their inheritance from the Lord (57:13; see 47:6; Zechariah 8:3; Isaiah 11:9). Foreigners too will come to the holy mountain to worship (56:6-8; see Zechariah 8:22-23), while for the wicked, even among God's own people, there will be no peace (57:19-21; see 48:17-18,22).

Day 284. Psalm 74; Isaiah 60 - 62

The Coming Glory of Jerusalem

Psalm 74

In the ruins of Jerusalem, God's people pray for relief.

Isaiah 60

Despite the hopes kindled by the words of Second Isaiah, Jerusalem still lay desolate and perhaps half-empty with many of its houses derelict. In these chapters, the followers of the prophet reinterpret his words and look for their fulfilment in the future.

Chapter 60 opens with the call to Jerusalem to arise (51:17) and shine (49:6) with the glory of the Lord (40:5). The nations will all come, attracted by her brightness (60:3; 49:7). They will bring with them not only the returning exiles (60:4; 49:17-18,22-23) but also their wealth to beautify the city and its Temple (60:5-9; 45:14). The "cypress, the plane and the pine" in 60:13 are quoted from 41:19. There they are the trees which will spring up in the wilderness when the Lord makes streams flow there. Here, they are the timber which the nations will send to Jerusalem for the rebuilding.

The vision moves to the city ruled by righteousness and enjoying peace. The Lord himself is its light and its glory (60:19) the nations bring their wealth into the city (60:16-17) and all its people are righteous (60:21). This vision for a time to come (60:22) is taken up in Revelation 21:23-27 as a description of the Holy City where God's people are to dwell.

Isaiah 61

The prophet takes up the themes of the first of the suffering servant songs in Isaiah 42. There the servant is anointed with the Spirit of the Lord to bring justice to the nations (42:1-4). Here his mission is to the poor, the broken-hearted and the prisoners (61:1-2). These were the prophet himself and his followers, the ones who mourned over the faithlessness of Jerusalem. Now the year of Jubilee has come (61:2; Leviticus 25:8-28) and they are to be comforted (61:2; 40:1), they will rebuild the ancient ruins (61:4; 58:12) and the Lord will make his covenant with them (61:8; 42:6). When the Lord saves them, all who see it will acknowledge him (61:9).

Isaiah 62

Chapter 62 picks up the wedding imagery of Isaiah 54 which itself goes back to Hosea. The nations are to see the righteousness and the glory of Jerusalem when the Lord marries her. She will be called by a new name, recalling the reversal of the names of Hosea's children (Hosea 2:23).

The watchmen of 62:6-7 are the prophet's disciples, called to proclaim this good news to the city and to intercede with the Lord until he accomplishes it.

Finally, the prophet gives another new interpretation of the opening words of chapter 40. The "way" is now the road for the pilgrims who come to Zion to worship. With them comes the Saviour, bringing his reward with him (62:11; 40:9-10) while the redeemed of the Lord (51:11) are called the holy people (62:12).

Day 285. Psalm 77; Isaiah 63 - 64, 34 – 35

God's People Pray for Salvation

Psalm 77

In the depths of despair the writer calls to mind the power and goodness of the Lord which he showed at the exodus.

Isaiah 63 - 64

The city and Temple are still in ruins (63:18; 64:11) and Jerusalem is oppressed by enemies, particularly their southern neighbours, the Edomites. In 62:6-7, the followers of the prophets were called to pray for the Lord to save Jerusalem. The editor's response is to place the prayer of the oppressed community in 63 and 64 and the Lord's answer in 65 and 66. The inspiration for their prayers is the memory of the exodus when God led his people out of Egypt (63:11-14) and his presence went with them through the desert (63:9; see Exodus 33:12-14). In 63:10,11 and 14 God's Spirit is thought of as the agent of his presence by which he accomplished his deeds of compassion and kindness, and like everything connected with God his Spirit is holy (see also Psalm 51:11).

At the exodus the Lord called Israel his first-born son (Exodus 4:21-23) and in the desert he disciplined them as a father disciplines his children (Deuteronomy 8:5). So the community pray to God as their Father, even though in their present state they do not look much like his people (63:16). Knowing that their sins prevent God from intervening (59:1-2) they confess them (64:5-7) and pray that the Lord will come down to save them (64:1-4,8-9).

Isaiah 34 - 35

At about the same time as the prophecies recorded in Third Isaiah, chapters 34 and 35 were added to the collection in 28 - 33 to apply the words of Isaiah of Jerusalem to the editor's own day. They look for judgement on the nations, especially Edom (34:8-12); the Spirit of the Lord acts as his agent, gathering the desert creatures to inhabit a devastated Edom (34:13-16); and in chapter 35 they look for inspiration to the words of Second Isaiah. The desert springs into bloom like the forested slopes of Lebanon and Mount

Carmel (35:1-2,6-7; see 43:19-21), the eyes of the blind are opened and the deaf hear (35:5; see 42:16), a highway of holiness runs through the desert, holy because the Lord will be travelling along it (35:8; see 40:3-5; 43:19) and the Lord's ransomed people return to Jerusalem rejoicing (35:10; 51:11).

Day 286. Psalm 50; Isaiah 65 - 66

The Prayers of God's People Answered

Psalm 50

God makes a distinction among his people between those who honour him and keep his laws and those whose sacrifices are empty because they ignore the Law.

Isaiah 65 - 66

The prophets give God's answer to the prayers of chapters 63 and 64. It is the wickedness of Jerusalem which prevents him from intervening to save (65:1-7; 59:1-8), but now he will keep silent no longer (65:6; 57:11; 42:14). His answer will be to make a distinction in Jerusalem between those who honour him and those who ignore him. When he judges the city a remnant will be left to be his servants (65:8,13-15; 41:8-10; 43:10; 44:1-2). They are the humble and contrite (57:15; 66:2), the ones who keep to the way of holiness (57:14; 35:8), who go unrecognised in a city dominated by arrogance and self-seeking (57:1; 65:11-15; 66:5). They are the forerunners of those who were waiting patiently for the deliverance of Israel at the time of Jesus (Luke 2:25,38; 23:51) and of the "poor in spirit" whom Jesus commends in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3).

However, the time of God's intervention is gradually being pushed further and further into the future. The "former things" which will not be remembered are now the present time of oppression rather than the works of God in history (65:17; 43:18). Instead of drawing near (51:5; 56:1) salvation waits for the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, which will bring the fulfilment of all the hopes of the righteous. When that time eventually comes, Jerusalem will be glad and rejoice (65:18-19; 51:11; 54:1). There will be no more early death, toil or frustration and the Lord will be so close that prayers will be answered immediately (65:20-24). The last verse of the vision (65:25) is quoted from Isaiah 11:6-9, but significantly without any reference to the restoration of the kingdom under David's successors which is the main theme of that poem (Isaiah 11:1). These hopes are echoed in the pilgrimage prayers of the country people such as psalms 120, 122, 123, 126, 127, 128, 129.

Chapter 66 repeats the themes of 65. The sacrifices of the wicked are unacceptable because they are made with the wrong attitude of heart (66:1-4). The poor and humble will be saved and the wicked judged (66:5-6). The future deliverance God will bring will fulfil the hopes for peace, prosperity (66:12; 48:18) and comfort (66:13; 40:1).

66:17-24 lie outside the editor's pattern for chapters 63 - 66 and so are probably later additions, repeating the themes of the earlier prophecy (66:20) and also looking for a mission from Jerusalem to the Jews in exile (66:19) through which all nations will see God's glory (40:5), the exiles will return laden with wealth (66:20; 60:4-12) and all mankind eventually come to serve the Lord in Jerusalem (66:23; 45:22-25).

Day 287. Psalm 129; Joel

The Day of the Lord

Psalm 129

A prayer for the Lord to deliver Jerusalem from her enemies.

Joel 1

The original occasion of Joel's prophetic ministry was a disastrous plague of locusts, and perhaps also a drought (1:16-end). The crops of wine, olive oil, wheat, barley and fruit were all destroyed and Joel saw in this a spiritual significance. Without food, oil and wine there can be no rejoicing. Without grain offerings sacrifices cease. The people ought to see this as a call to fasting and mourning, a warning of the coming "Day of the Lord" (1:13-15).

Joel 2

As the locust swarm blotted out the sun, the prophet was reminded of the Day of the Lord, traditionally a day of darkness (Isaiah 13:9-11; Zephaniah 1:14-16). The plague came on like an unstoppable army (2:2-11); the sound of the locusts devouring the grass was like the crackling of fire in a field of stubble (2:5), and again Joel called Jerusalem to fasting and repentance (2:12-17).

This chapter is reminiscent of Hosea 14 in which, like Joel (2:17), Hosea gave his people words for a liturgy of repentance (Hosea 14:1-3), followed by an oracle of salvation, the Lord's reply to his people's true repentance (Hosea 14:4-8). Here, the Lord's answer begins in 2:18, promising to restore the fertility of the land and to repay them for the crops destroyed by the locust swarm (2:18-27). Then Joel adds a new interpretation of the Day of the Lord. It will still be a day of darkness and gloom (2:30-31) but it will also be the day when the Spirit is poured out on God's people, fulfilling the hopes of the earlier prophets for a deeper knowledge of God and changed hearts and lives (2:28-29; Isaiah 32:14-18; 44:2-3; Ezekiel 36:24-28). When Peter quotes this passage in Acts 2:16-21 he is warning his hearers that the Day of the Lord is on its way.

Joel 3

The final chapter adds a further element to the Day of the Lord theme: it will be the day when the Lord saves Jerusalem from the enemies who plunder it (see Isaiah 63:1-6; Zechariah 2:7-11). The armies of the nations will be drawn together for battle and there meet their doom (3:11-16). The reference to the "Valley of Jehoshaphat" either recalls Jehoshaphat's victory over the combined armies of Moab, Ammon and Edom in 2 Chronicles 20; or, since Jehoshaphat's name means "God judges", points to the eventual judgement of Judah's enemies. The vision echoes Psalm 46 in which God saves Jerusalem at break of day (Psalm 46:5), breaks the weapons and makes wars to cease (Psalm 46:8-10) and refreshes Jerusalem with a spring of water (Psalm 46:4; Joel 3:18).

With the nations defeated, both the holiness of Jerusalem and the prosperity of Judah will be restored (3:17-18).

Day 288. Psalm 125; Zechariah 9 - 11

The Time of Fulfilment Delayed

Psalm 125

The Lord protects the righteous.

Zechariah 9 - 11

The later chapters of Zechariah come from a time one or two generations later than the words of the original prophet. Like Isaiah 56 - 66 they belong to the period 516-445 B.C. about which very little is known, and have been added to the scroll of Zechariah because of their links with the thought of that prophet. Zechariah chapters 9 and 12 and Malachi each begin with the words, "An oracle," indicating three separate collections.

The prophet of Zechariah 9 - 11 had a vision for the unity of north and south under the rule of God's anointed king in Jerusalem. He not only proclaimed this vision, but even tried to bring it about himself. However, he was eventually disappointed. Despite the vision of Second Isaiah and his explanation of Israel's call to suffer on behalf of the nations, the people of Israel remained as faithless as the exiles had been in his day and failed to respond to their calling. The fulfilment of his vision had to be delayed indefinitely.

In 9:1-8 the prophet sees the Lord's judgement descending on the nations surrounding God's people, particularly in the north. They will be defeated and incorporated into a renewed Israelite state, just as David took over Jerusalem and made it his capital (9:7). God's anointed king will return to Jerusalem to put an end to war and rule over the whole territory of David's empire (9:8-10). 9:10 echoes Psalm 72:8, which describes the ideal extent of Israel under Solomon. Then the exiles will return, in fulfilment of the covenant God has made with his people and their ruler (9:11-end; Isaiah 55:3-5).

Chapter 10 repeats the same theme. Its occasion is a festival in which apparently the governor failed to acknowledge the Lord as the giver of the rains (10:1-2). The people of the north at that time were mixed with descendants of the peoples brought there by the Assyrians and mixed worship would have been common (see 2 Kings 17:24-34). The prophet

foresees God's judgement on these unfaithful rulers. Instead, they will again come under the rule of Judah (10:4-6). The exiles will be rescued from all those who, like Egypt and Assyria, oppress them (10:10), and gathered into their own land. There will be so many returnees that Israel itself will not be able to hold them all. The forests of Lebanon and Bashan will have to be cut down and their pastures cleared to make way for them (11:1-3).

The interpretation of 11:4-end is very difficult indeed. It seems that either symbolically or actually the prophet accepted responsibility for the Israelites of the north. His aims were to rescue them from the complacent foreign governors and to try to bring them to a consciousness of their unity with the south. Exactly who the rulers he replaced were is completely unknown (11:8). However, like the exiles at the time of Second Isaiah, the northerners failed to grasp the vision. Perhaps they resented this intrusion of idealism into their mundane existence (11:9). As a result the prophet broke the first of his two staves, breaking the covenant with the peoples of which Second Isaiah had spoken (11:10; Isaiah 42:6; 49:8). He was paid off with a paltry sum which he brought to the Temple ("potter" of some versions can be amended to "treasury" by a very simple change) since he saw it as money paid to annul the covenant (11:13). The rejection of his vision made hopes of unity between north and south idle, despite the vision of Ezekiel (11:14; see Ezekiel 37:15-end). His final act was a symbolic prophecy of terrible judgment against those who had replaced him (11:15-17).

God's promises through the prophets of the exile, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, had been put on hold. The prophet's own vision of the return of the exiles had been frustrated. Its fulfilment had to wait for the coming of the Good Shepherd himself (John 10:11-18), the humble yet mighty King who was nevertheless rejected by the authorities (John 12:14-19). It still awaits complete fulfilment (John 11:52).

Day 289. Psalm 75; Zechariah 12 - 14

The Final Battle

Psalm 75

God judges the world justly and the wicked drink from the cup of his wrath.

Zechariah 12 -13

Chapters 12 and 13 are from a prophet whose concern was with Judah rather than the north. The background to the message is the theme we encountered in Joel 3 of the final battle of the nations over Jerusalem. The prophet criticises the city for her arrogance towards the country dwellers and predicts that this will turn to compassion.

God, the sovereign Creator will make Jerusalem the cup of his wrath (see Isaiah 51:22-23; Jeremiah 25:15-29). But in the siege the people of the Judaeian countryside will suffer (12:2). They will look towards Jerusalem as their inspiration and rise up against the invader (12:5-6). The Lord will save both Judah and Jerusalem, giving them strength like the strength promised to the king in the royal psalms (12:8; see Psalms 2; 45:2-7; 89:19-29; 110).

After the battle, the people of Jerusalem will repent of their arrogance. They will recognise that like the servant of Isaiah 53:5-6, Judah has suffered so that Jerusalem might go free. When their hearts are changed all the orders of Jerusalem, king, prophets, priests, Benjaminites and all the others will mourn (12:12-14). The fountain of Psalm 46:4 will cleanse them from their sins (13:1). Idols and false prophets will be banished (13:2-6). The prophets will disown their ritual wounds (see 1 Kings 18:28), claiming they are the result of a friendly brawl (13:6). Even the king must submit to judgement, though it means a refining judgement on the whole people (13:7-9).

In the New Testament these prophecies are taken up in two ways:

1. The suffering and kingship of Jesus. He fulfils the role of the "pierced one" of 12:10, the one whose suffering leads to the freedom of others (John 19:37). His blood is the fountain which cleanses his people from impurity (13:1; John 19:34-35). He is the shepherd who is struck and the sheep scattered (13:7; Mark 14:27).

2. In Revelation the final battle takes place at Megiddo, perhaps referring to Zechariah 12:11, and leads to the universal kingship of God on earth, the theme of chapter 14.

Zechariah 14

This chapter again takes up the theme of the final battle and its outcome, announcing the Day of the Lord in 14:1, but there are some differences from chapter 12. There Jerusalem was spared while Judah suffered, but here Jerusalem is actually plundered and half taken, in a graphic recollection of the actual siege of 587 B.C. (14:2). But then the Lord goes out to fight for his people, providing them with a way of escape before intervening with his heavenly army (14:3-5).

In the aftermath of the victory, God reigns as king in Jerusalem over the whole earth, a frequent theme in the psalms (Psalms 93:1-2; 97:1-9). The city enjoys everlasting light (14:6-7; Isaiah 60:19-20). Living water flows from it all year round (14:8; Ezekiel 47:1-12). Jerusalem is raised on a high mountain (14:10; Ezekiel 40:2). Plague will strike all who fight against her (14:12-15; Isaiah 37:36) while the survivors come on pilgrimage to worship at the Feast of Tabernacles, the festival of God's Kingship (14:16-19; see 8:18-end). The holiness of the Temple will extend to the whole city and every object within it (14:20-21).

Day 290. Psalm 68; Ezekiel 38 - 39

Gog's Attack

Psalm 68

A psalm for a victory procession, celebrating the power of God over his enemies.

Ezekiel 38 - 39

Ezekiel 37 ends with a promise that God will make his sanctuary among his people and dwell among them for ever (37:27-28). This sanctuary is described in visionary detail in chapters 40 - 48, ending with the declaration, "The Lord is there" (48:35). Chapters 38 and 39 interrupt Ezekiel's prediction of the exiles' return and resettlement under God's blessing (36:24-30) with a prediction of a gigantic battle in which the nations attack Jerusalem and are decisively routed. The time of this battle is the far off future, after the return from exile when God's people are living safely in their land (38:8,14-16). The style of the chapters suggests that they come from Ezekiel's disciples of a later generation, who, like the prophets of Isaiah 56 - 66 and Zechariah 9 - 14, were frustrated with the weakness of the returned community and the attacks of its neighbours. This impression is reinforced by the reference to the prophets of former days in 38:17. They long to see the Lord intervene to judge the nations and fulfil his promises once and for all.

The effect of this insertion is tremendously important for the development of biblical prophecy. It transfers Ezekiel's vision of the peace of the restored community with God dwelling among them in the Temple from the near to the distant future. It means that the vision of Ezekiel and Second Isaiah for a glorious return and the vindication of God's holiness among the nations must wait for a day in the far future when God will intervene once again to judge the nations and save his people.

The writer draws on the material of legends for the name of Israel's chief enemy and his land. He comes from the far north (38:15), the legendary source of all the oppression of God's people. With him come nations from all over the world, whose names are taken from the list of Tyre's trading partners in chapter 27. It is God who brings them for his final judgment

(38:4). Their intention is to plunder and to trade the loot (38:10-13). Before they can carry out their purpose, however, God intervenes (38:18-20). The invasion is halted by a divinely appointed panic like those of the time of the judges (38:21; Judges 7:22) and plagues like those of Egypt and Sodom and Gomorrah (38:22).

Chapter 39 begins by briefly restating all that has gone before, introducing the familiar theme of the Day of the Lord (39:8). Then follows a series of gruesome vignettes emphasising the scale of the conflict and of God's judgement. The removal of the weapons and dead bodies emphasises the holiness of God, which has been vindicated by the destruction of his enemies. In the wake of his final victory both Israel and the nations will understand his holiness and acknowledge him as Lord.

Day 291. Psalm 76; Isaiah 24 - 27

The Final Judgement

Psalm 76

The Lord demonstrates his power over the nations and puts an end to human conflict.

Isaiah 24 - 27

These chapters are probably the latest to have been added to the scroll of Isaiah. They consist of a collection of songs and prophecies in the tradition of Isaiah, calling on the themes of his words to interpret the present day. The situation is similar to that which lies behind Ezekiel 38 - 39 and Zechariah 9 - 14. The exile and return are now past (27:8-9) but in the eyes of most of the Jews they do not seem to have achieved very much (26:17-18). So they look to the future for another decisive act of judgement to bring to fruition all that God desired to achieve.

Chapter 24 begins with a picture of total destruction reminiscent of the opening of Zephaniah (24:1-3; Zephaniah 1:2-3). The earth is to be brought to judgement for the wickedness of its people (24:4-13). The vision is of disaster on a cosmic scale, similar to what happened at the Flood (24:18b; see Genesis 7:11). The earth itself is broken (24:19) and the powers of the heavens shaken (24:21) but all this is a prelude to the now familiar vision of the Lord himself ruling on earth from Jerusalem (24:23).

Chapter 25 describes the overthrow of a foreign city, which is not named (25:2). The city stands for any foreign nation which oppresses God's people. Instead God will become a refuge for the poor and needy when he rules from his own city. Now God's rule from Jerusalem becomes a vision of the far future when God's people are vindicated at last (25:8b-9), all nations come to feast at Jerusalem (25:6) and death is destroyed for ever (25:7-8a). The short oracle against Moab (25:10-12) matches the earlier theme of the destruction of the foreign city.

In chapter 26 Jerusalem is again a place of refuge for the poor and the oppressed. It is a place of peace and trust (26:3-4; see 30:15; 32:17-18), a place where the arrogant are brought low (26:5; see 2:10-19). 26:7-11 look forward to the coming judgement when God will make a distinction

between the righteous and the wicked. 26:12-19 anticipate the fulfilment of the hopes kindled by the return from exile. Now it seems as if it has all been for nothing. God's people have been ruled by others and generations have died without seeing his salvation (26:13-14). But when the Lord comes to judge (26:20-21) then the nation will rise (26:19) and the exiles return and fill the land (26:15).

Chapter 27 opens with another picture of God's judgement on the forces of chaos and rebellion (27:1) leading to the salvation of Jerusalem, God's vineyard (27:2-6; see 5:1-7). The guilt of Israel has been atoned by the exile, even if they do not believe it (27:7-11). One day the remaining exiles will return and worship God in Jerusalem (27:12-13).

Day 292. Psalm 65; Malachi

The Last of the Prophets

Psalm 65

A celebration of God's goodness at harvest time.

Malachi

The situation to which Malachi is addressed matches in several ways that which Nehemiah found when he arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C. suggesting that the prophet must have been active in the generation immediately before this. Religious life is at a low ebb and the priests complacent, injustice abounds and the practice of mixed marriages is beginning to grow (Nehemiah 5:1-18; 13:10-13,23-end). The name Malachi means, "my messenger" and the messenger of God is a recurring theme: priests are to be the Lord's messengers as teachers of the Torah (2:7) but because they are unfaithful a specially appointed messenger will come to purify them (3:1).

It seems that in the years since Third Isaiah Edom had been destroyed and was now lying desolate (1:2-5). It is not known how this came about, whether as a result of a revolt against Persia or from the attacks of Arab tribesmen, but Malachi uses the destruction of Edom as a sign of the Lord's love for Israel and his rejection of his brother Esau. Yet Judah, and particularly the priests, are not behaving as God's chosen people should. They show their contempt for God and the Law by bringing blemished animals for sacrifice, contrary to Deuteronomy 15:21 (1:6-end) and the priests are content to allow this to happen (1:6; 2:1-9). This attitude and behaviour contrasts starkly with the psalms they sing, which exalt God as the King of the whole earth (1:11,14; Psalms 95:3; 99:1-3; 113:1-4).

Malachi then protests against mixed marriages, especially the practice of divorcing Jewish wives in order to marry rich foreigners. His view of marriage is a high one. God makes man and woman one flesh and one spirit so to break the marriage tie is a breach of faith, an act of violence against the wife who is divorced and results in a wound to the spirit (2:14-16). Jesus endorsed this high view of marriage in his answer to the Pharisees (Mark 10:1-9). God wants pure children as his treasured

possession (2:15; 3:17) and mixed marriage is the surest way of diluting the loyalty of Israel to the covenant.

God's answer to the complacency and injustice of his people will be to send another messenger who will purify the Levites so that their offerings become acceptable and root out the perpetrators of injustice (2:17 - 3:5). No longer is the Saviour identified as a king in David's line. Beyond the title of messenger he is not named, but later tradition identified him as a returning Elijah (4:5-6).

Like Haggai before him, Malachi sees that when Israel neglects the proper tithes and offerings they lose the blessing God promised (3:6-12; see Deuteronomy 26:12-end). Instead of honouring the Law they seek their own pleasure and advantage (3:13-15). In response, God will make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous will be included in his treasured possession (3:17-18) while the wicked will suffer God's judgement (4:1,3). The idea of a distinction within Israel between those who were chosen and those rejected was taken up by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:7-10) and forms the background to Jesus' preaching.

4:4-6 are probably later additions to the whole collection of prophetic books. In the days when prophecy had ceased, the first urges the reader to pay attention to the Torah. The second identifies Malachi's "messenger" of 3:1 as Elijah, a hope fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist (Luke 1:17; Matthew 17:9-13).

Day 293. Psalm 44; Nehemiah 1 - 3

Prayer and Action

Psalm 44

A prayer of the community in time of defeat.

Nehemiah 1 - 2

Nehemiah takes the form of a personal diary, which has been edited and incorporated into the Chronicler's history. It provides a fascinating insight into the personal devotion of Nehemiah, as well as his actions. He was both a man of prayer and action. He not only prayed but was ready to be part of the answer to his own prayers.

The date was 445 B.C., the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes, and Nehemiah's brother Hanani brought news that Jerusalem's gates and walls had been broken down, probably as a result of an attack by raiders from one of the surrounding nations. Nehemiah's response is a model for Christians today as we face both problems in the Church and the needs of the world. He knew that before anything can be moved on earth it is necessary to move God in heaven, so he turned to prayer, fasting and confession, appealing to God's character and reminding him of his promises. This prayer is an example of "representative confession": Nehemiah puts himself in the place of sinful Israel: it is "we" rather than "they" who have sinned.

By the time he had finished his prayer, Nehemiah had resolved that he himself would do something about it by speaking to the king. The next lesson he had to learn was patience. Despite praying for success "today" he had to wait four months from Kislev (1:1) to Nisan (2:1) before the opportunity came. His fear when the king spoke to him (2:2) may have been because it was forbidden to look sad in the king's presence, but if so he used even this possible set-back as the opportunity for which he had prayed. Sending up an "arrow prayer" at this crucial moment is an acknowledgement that the outcome of his prayers lay in God's hands rather than the emperor's.

2:7-9 show that he had not been idle since hearing the news. He had been planning as well as praying, thinking about the kind of help he would

need, and was ready with his request. As a result of this conversation, Nehemiah was appointed governor of Jerusalem, so Nehemiah the man of prayer became the man of action. His first action was to assess the size of the task (2:11-16) so that when he faced the nobles and officials he knew what he was asking them to take on. His next step was to rally others (2:17-18), inspiring them with a sense of the need and what could be achieved. He also took steps to build up the self-consciousness of the people as God's chosen people (2:19-20). His approach was not simply pragmatic, but based on a deep sense of the identity of Israel and her relation to God.

Nehemiah 3

Like the Body of Christ, in which each member plays its part (1 Corinthians 12:12-end), the citizens of Jerusalem and the surrounding area shared the task of rebuilding. Some came from a distance (3:2,5,7 etc.) while others built next to their own houses (3:10,23,28,29). All kinds of people took part - priests, Levites, nobles and merchants (3:1,8,9,17,31-32) and women were also involved (3:12). Some were reluctant to work (3:5), some took on only a little but others a great deal, and the existence of the list also shows that while each family or group took care of their own task someone else, presumably a member of Nehemiah's staff, organised and had a sense of the whole enterprise.

Day 294. Psalm 86; Nehemiah 4:1 - 7:4

The Wall Completed

Psalm 86

The servants of God often encounter opposition. Here, the psalmist prays both for inward guidance and outward protection.

Nehemiah 4

The attempt to rebuild the wall aroused the opposition of the surrounding nations. Sanballat was governor of Samaria in the north, Tobiah of Ammon in the east. Before long, they were joined by Arabs from the south and the men of Ashdod from the west (4:7). The city had recently been raided from at least one of these directions, which was the reason Nehemiah had been sent in the first place (1:3; 2:3). His first response to the insults and threats of his opponents was to pray and commit his cause to the Lord. The prayer of 4:4-5 is based on the "cursing psalms" such as 58 and 109, which ask for judgement against unjust oppressors.

His second response was to take measures to counter any threat, posting a guard, issuing weapons and organising the defence in such a way that the work on the wall could continue while the builders were defended. Here again there is a lesson for those involved in Christian work. We too must be ready to fight opposition both by prayer and by practical measures without allowing the essential work to stop. The result of Nehemiah's action was that the threat evaporated for the time being (4:15).

Nehemiah 5

A further threat to the completion of the task arose from division within the community. By taking interest on loans and enslaving the poor who could not pay, the Jerusalem nobles had been acting against the letter and spirit of the Law (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Leviticus 25:35-43). Nehemiah did not see his task as simply to rebuild the wall or even to maintain justice but to bring the inhabitants of Jerusalem to a proper sense of their heritage as God's people (see above on 2:19-20). His actions were rooted in his consciousness of the Law and the calling of God's people.

In contrast to previous governors, Nehemiah did not burden the people he governed, but instead gave freely, another example to the Christian leader (Mark 10:42-45).

Nehemiah 6:1 - 7:4

Having failed to discourage the workers, the opponents now realised that they had to target the leader. First they tried to entice him away, probably reckoning that the work would stop without him (6:1-4), then they tried open threats (6:5-9). When these also failed they enlisted the help of false prophets to add a spiritual element to the threat (6:10-14).

However, the wall was finished in remarkably quick time (6:15) and the enemies of God's people were discouraged. Harder to deal with, however, was the compromise and complacency within (6:17-19).

Day 295. Psalm 19; Ezra 7 - 8; Nehemiah 7:5 - 8:end

Ezra's Mission

Psalm 19

A song to precede the study of the Law in the morning. The rising sun speaks of the glory of God, but the Law reveals him to perfection. The Law also reveals our own failings and leads us to repentance.

Ezra 7 - 8

After Ezra 6, which deals with the events of 515 B.C., there is a gap of many years. But the date of Ezra's mission is uncertain. If the Artaxerxes mentioned is Artaxerxes I, the same emperor as in Nehemiah 1, the date is 458 B.C. If he is Artaxerxes II the date is 398. Either way, it is difficult to fit this chronology in with that of Nehemiah.

Ezra was clearly an important and influential man. He traces his ancestry back to Aaron (7:1-5), which was crucial for anyone who wanted to be accepted as a priest (2:62), and was well versed in the Torah (7:6). He was in a position to ask favours of the emperor (7:28), was given authority to appoint judges and teachers (7:25) and he could call on a body of Levites for the journey to Jerusalem (8:15-20). All this makes it extremely probable that he held an official position of responsibility for those who adhered to the Jewish faith and that his title in 7:12 and 21 should actually read "the teacher of the Law of the God of Heaven", as translated in the NRSV. The purpose of his mission was to bring the Torah to be set up as supreme teaching authority in Jerusalem and in all the Jewish communities in the region (7:25-26).

There are echoes of both the exodus and the return of the first exiles in the gifts of money and articles for the Temple which Ezra's party took with them (7:16-24; 8:28-30,33-34). The journey began with prayer and fasting (8:21-23) and ended with resting and sacrifice (8:32,35) and God's blessing rested on the party throughout their journey (7:27; 8:31).

The Chronicler has transferred the account of what happened when Ezra reached Jerusalem to Nehemiah 8. The genealogies in chapter 7 are the same as those in Ezra 2 and 7:53 is an echo of the opening verse of Ezra 3:1.

Nehemiah 7:5 - 8:end

The seventh month was the month of the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-40) and the month in which a seven yearly reading of the Law had been commanded (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). According to Leviticus 23:24 the first day was to be one of solemn rest, which today is the Jewish New Year, but this provision is probably later than the time of Ezra. Nevertheless, the book from which he read would have been an early version of what we now have as the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

The people displayed their devotion to the Law and to the Lord by standing as the book was opened (8:5-6). The Levites performed their teaching office by interpreting and explaining the Law (8:7-8). The people, on hearing, were moved to tears of penitence, but Nehemiah urged them to rejoice (8:9-11). They had received the words of God himself which he gave to Moses (Ezra 7:6) and this was cause for rejoicing. How much more should Christians both weep and rejoice at the death of Jesus for our sins.
