

# A Remnant Returns



*"Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come let us build the wall of Jerusalem, ...'"*

*Nehemiah 2: 17*



## Chapter 14

# A Remnant Returns



### Read

**Daniel 5:1 - 30**

**Isaiah 45:1 - 4**

**Ezra 1:1 - 7**

**Nehemiah 8:1 - 12**

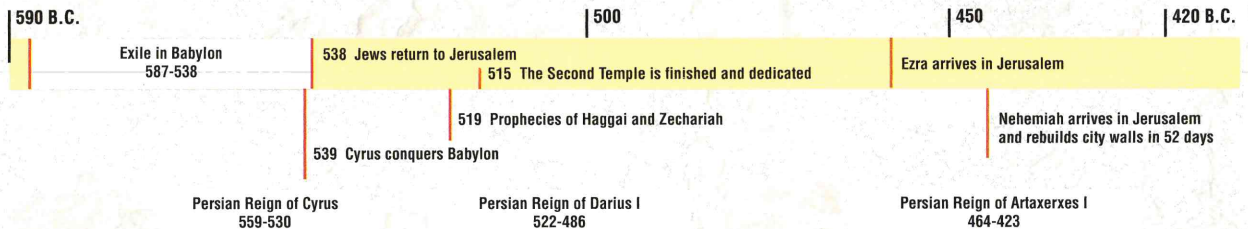
**Malachi 1:6 - 14**

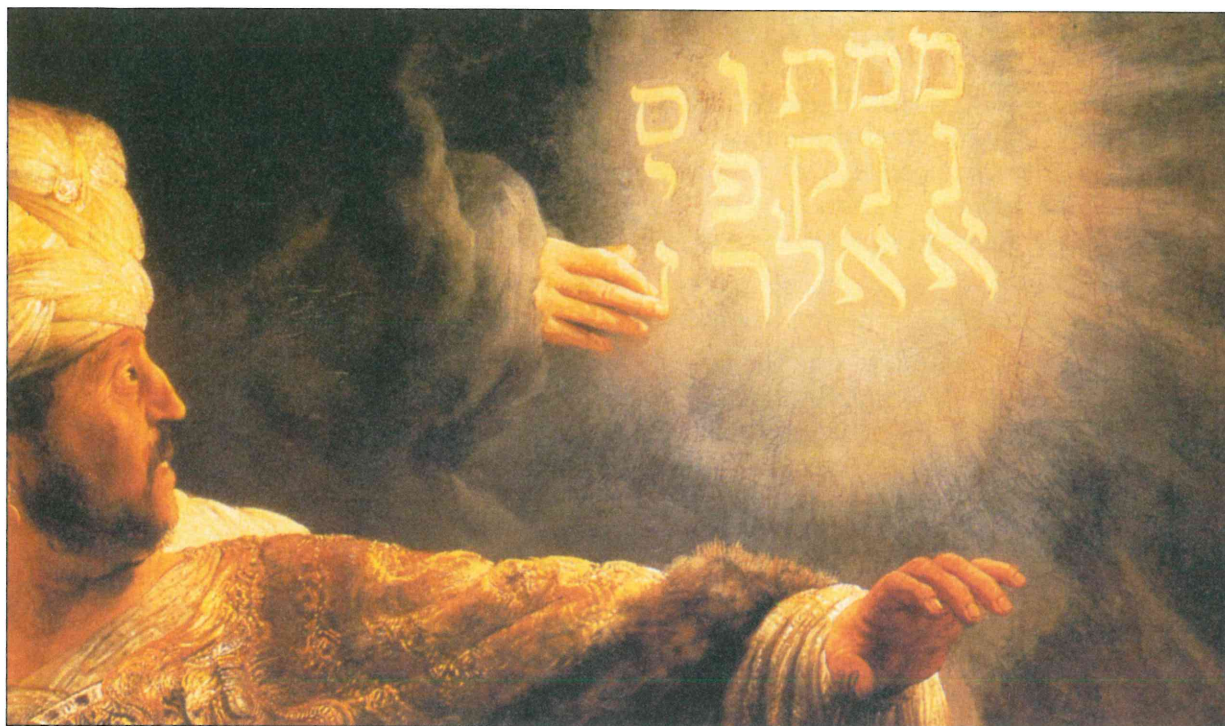
Nebuchadnezzar was one of the great conquerors in history. But his empire was never governed very well, and his successors did not have Nebuchadnezzar's military genius. It took a surprisingly short time—about a generation—for the Babylonian empire to fall from world domination to the brink of destruction.

## Belshazzar's Feast

**B**elshazzar was the son of the reigning Babylonian king, but the king had gone off to fight foreign wars and left Belshazzar in charge to rule as king in his place. From the account in Daniel, we can guess that Belshazzar was a poor regent. From sources outside the Bible, we know that the Persian army was advancing on Babylon. All the pagan idols from surrounding towns had been brought into Babylon for safekeeping. Piece by piece, the Babylonian empire was falling apart. Yet here was Belshazzar having a feast for a thousand of his closest friends, inviting them to eat and drink from the best silver—namely, the silver that had been looted from the Temple at Jerusalem.

**Then they brought in the golden and silver vessels which had been taken out of the temple, out of the house of God in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.**





Immediately the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand; and the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way and his knees knocked together. (Dn 5: 3-6)

No one could read the writing. The king offered a huge reward to any of his astrologers and magicians who could read it, but they all shrugged. Then the queen remembered Daniel, who had been so good at interpreting dreams back in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

When Daniel came in, Belshazzar offered to make him prime minister if he could interpret the writing on the wall. Daniel refused the reward right away: he knew it would do him no good. Belshazzar would be gone soon.

The writing, Daniel explained, came from the Most High God. Nebuchadnezzar had learned his lesson, Daniel told Belshazzar, reminding him of Nebuchadnezzar's years of madness.

**And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the LORD of heaven; and the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.**

**Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; PERES [the singular of PARSIN], your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. (Dn 5: 22-28)**

Belshazzar gave Daniel a purple robe and gold chain and declared him third ruler of the kingdom, in spite of Daniel's refusal. But that night Belshazzar was killed, and Babylon passed into the hands of the Medes and Persians.



## Cyrus The Messiah

**B**abylon fell without a fight. There was no long siege, no wholesale destruction, no massacre. The Persians simply marched in and took over everything in an orderly fashion. Cyrus, the Persian king, took no delight in bloodshed. He won his empire by war, but he kept it by inspiring loyalty in his subjects. All the conquered peoples were allowed to keep their own customs and worship in their own ways. After the oppressive policies of Babylon, Persian rule seemed like a breath of freedom. To the Jews in exile, Cyrus was more than another conqueror. He was a liberator. In the very first year of his reign, he issued a decree that allowed any Jew who wished to go to return to Jerusalem.

**Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem. (Ezr 1: 2-4)**

The exile was over, at least for anyone who wanted to return. The benevolent Cyrus did not force all the Jews to return; he simply gave permission to anyone who wished to go back to Jerusalem. Not only that, but he took responsibility for rebuilding the Temple of God! Cyrus was more than a liberator; he was the conqueror chosen by God to restore God's people. In fact, he was the Lord's Anointed—a title that had never before been given to anyone but an Israelite.

**I am the LORD... who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose;" saying of Jerusalem, "She shall be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus... (Is 44: 24, 28-45: 1)**



### Rulers of the Persian Empire B.C.

Cyrus II (the Great) . . . . .	550-529
Cambyses II . . . . .	529-522
Darius I . . . . .	522-486
Xeres I . . . . .	486-465
Artaxerxes I . . . . .	465-425
Xerxes II . . . . .	425-424
Darius II . . . . .	423-404
Artaxerxes II . . . . .	404-359
Artaxerxes III . . . . .	359-338
Arses . . . . .	338-336
Darius III . . . . .	336-330



The monumental tomb of King Cyrus II at Pasargadae in south-central Iran.

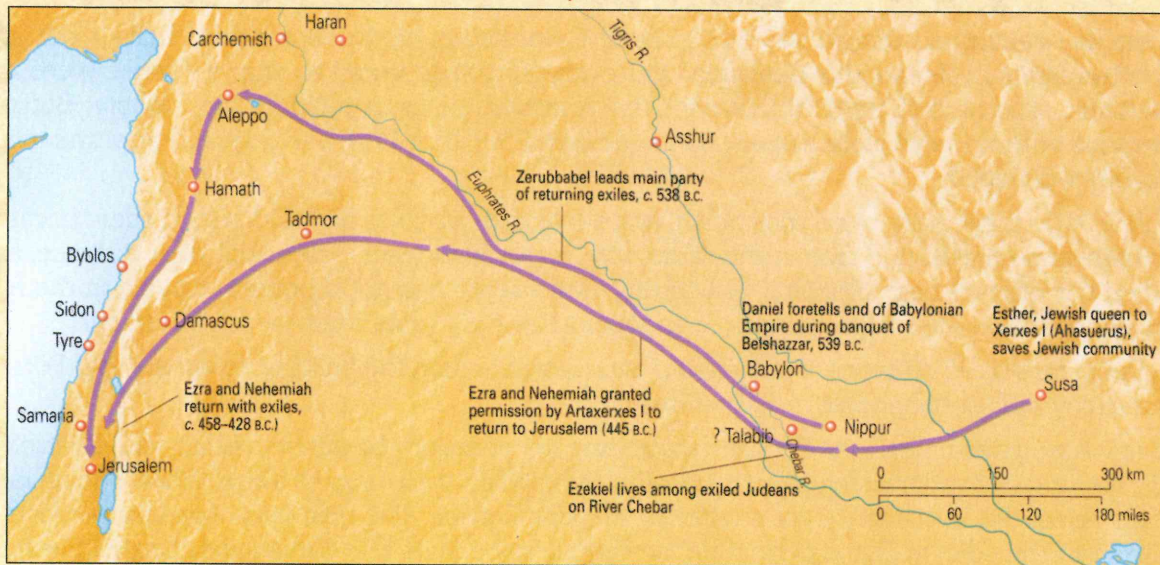
*"O man, whoever you are and wherever you come from, for I know that you will come—I am Cyrus, son of Cambyses, who founded the Empire of the Persians and was king of the East. Do not grudge me this spot of earth which covers my body."*



A Persian gold coin from the time of Cyrus II or Darius I.



## The Return of the Exiles, 537 B.C.



## Beginning The New Jerusalem

A remnant returned to Jerusalem. Many—probably most—of the Jews stayed in Babylon. This business of moving back to the burnt-out towns of Judah was a difficult enterprise. It was hard to see how the returning exiles could make it work. But the ones who went back were full of enthusiasm. They were determined to have a new Jerusalem with a new Temple.

*In spite of the holy Law that again and again their Holy God gives them—"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy"—and although the LORD shows patience for the sake of his name, the people turn away from the Holy One of Israel and profane his name among the nations (Ez 20: 9, 14, 22, 39; cf. Lv 19: 2). For this reason the just ones of the old covenant, the poor survivors returned from exile, and the prophets burned with passion for the name. (CCC 2811)*

The Jerusalem they found was a wreck. Nothing had been done to it for half a century. The great houses were still ruins, and the Temple was still a charred open space.

After they had settled in the towns and in Jerusalem, the returning exiles came together to lay the foundations for a new Temple. But it quickly became clear that it would be nothing like Solomon's original. They had neither the money nor the resources to build anything nearly so magnificent.

*And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard afar. (Ezr 3:11-13)*

It is not surprising that the people had mixed reactions. Some of the people who had seen the first Temple must have realized at that moment that there would be no real restoration. They would have a Temple, but it would be a pale thing compared with the first one. And the Ark of the Covenant would not be there. The Holy of Holies would just be an empty space.



## Trouble With The Samaritans

**E**ven that diminished Temple was hard to build. Cyrus had given the command to build it, but “the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” did everything they could to stop it. Those were the Samaritans, who at first tried to join with the returned exiles in building the Temple. But the Samaritans of those days were pagans: they worshiped the True God, but only as one of the many gods they worshiped.

The Jews who came back were very much aware that their troubles had all come on them because they had been unfaithful to God in the same way as the Samaritans. They kept their distance, and rejected the offer of help. Knowing that mixing with pagans had got them into trouble in the first place, the returned Jews kept themselves as separate as they could from the local women.

The Samaritans were offended. They started a campaign to stop the building, using the vast Persian bureaucracy against the people in Jerusalem.

Like any large government, the Persian empire was full of major and minor officials who controlled things like budgets and building permits. Most of the officials were easy to bribe. When bribing local officials failed, the Samaritans sent a letter to the king himself. The new king, Artaxerxes, was not familiar with the edict of Cyrus permitting the Temple to be built. The Samaritans accused the Jews of planning to rebuild Jerusalem’s defenses and then rebel against Persia. Artaxerxes had a search made in the great Persian government archives and found that Jerusalem did indeed have a history of rebelling against its overlords. He ordered building to cease.

For years the project sat half-finished, a constant embarrassment to the city. Even more embarrassing was the way prosperous men of Jerusalem were building splendid new houses for themselves, while the Temple was still a half-built ruin.

The deadlock was finally broken by the enthusiasm of some of the prophets, notably Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai brought a forceful message to the rich men in their splendid houses:

**Thus says the LORD of hosts: This people say the time has not yet come to build the house of the LORD.... Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?... Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the LORD. (Hg 1: 2, 4, 8)**

Spurred on by the prophets, the Jewish remnant began to rebuild the Temple without waiting for permission from Persia. When local officials demanded to know where they got permission to build, the Jews pointed to the original edict from Cyrus.



The new Persian king, Darius, had another search made of the archives, and the decree of Cyrus was found. It was a principle of Persian law that a king’s decree could never be revoked, not even by the king himself. The building was allowed to continue, and Darius himself paid for the work out of the taxes from the province that included Jerusalem.

At the summit of Mount Gerizim are the ruins of a Samaritan temple. The Samaritan community, which today only numbers in the hundreds, still carries out its traditional Passover sacrifices on this mountain.





*Ezra prays: “But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant, and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, . . .” (Ezr 9: 8)*

## Ezra The Scribe

The Temple was finished, and the people celebrated the Passover with joy and thanksgiving. But they were still a tiny remnant of the Jews who had been deported, and they were surrounded by powerful enemies. How would they make their little colony a success?

A certain priest and scribe named Ezra was in favor with the Persian king, who put him in charge of the official Persian subsidy for the Temple, and gave him authority to appoint judges and magistrates in Judah. Ezra’s dream was to restore a purified Israel in the Promised Land. But when he got to Jerusalem, he found that the priests and leaders of the people had been marrying pagan women from among the surrounding people. It looked as though the cycle of infidelity was beginning all over again.

By prayers and arguments and his very forceful personality, Ezra persuaded the people to put away their foreign wives. To Ezra, it was a matter of life or death. The whole success of the restoration depended on keeping Israel free from pagan entanglements.

Ezra quickly became the moral leader of the Jews. He was the one who taught them the Law. He edited the Hebrew Scriptures, and his edition of the Torah became the standard version. He had the Law read to the people in a great assembly—with interpreters to translate it, since most of the common people now spoke Aramaic, a language closely related to Hebrew that was the standard language throughout the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

With Ezra as the spiritual leader, the rest of the responsibility fell on Nehemiah, who shared Ezra’s dream of a pure Israel restored. Nehemiah persuaded the Persian king to make him governor in Jerusalem, and he set about restoring the city’s defenses to protect against attacks by the surrounding Samaritans. Although Nehemiah could legally have taken a large salary for his position, he took nothing and paid for his expenses out of his own pocket.



## What God Really Wants

**N**ehemiah's good example was necessary because many of the rich citizens of Jerusalem were making themselves richer by cheating the poor. Having escaped slavery in Babylon, some of the poor Jews were now forced to sell themselves back into slavery to pay off the rich loan sharks. Pagan worship was no longer the main problem facing Jerusalem. The main problem was hypocrisy. Rich men bought and sold their neighbors, then went to make a small offering to God at the Temple, as though that made everything all right.

Even the sacrifices they offered were often taken from the worthless animals of their flocks. The prophet Malachi brought an angry message to the hypocrites who profaned the altar with worthless sacrifices: "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that no evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that no evil? Present that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor?"

But even perfect sacrifices were not what God really desired from his people. Righteousness was what God wanted. Would God be pleased with the sacrifice of a rich man who had just sold his poor neighbor into slavery?

**Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in his heart. (Zec 7: 9-10)**

These were the things God really wanted from his people. But it was so much easier for them to sin a lot and sacrifice a little.

### The prophet Malachi announces the theme of salvation:

*"... Veniet ad templum sanctum suum dominator dominus quem vos queritis, et angelum testamenti quem vos vultis..."*

*"... the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight,..."*

*(Mal 3: 1)*





## The Promise Unfulfilled

Jerusalem was restored, and the Temple was a center of worship again. A remnant of God's people were back in the Promised Land.

But God had promised much more than that.

**"Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors.  
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.  
At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you together;  
yea, I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the LORD.**  
(Zep 3: 19-20)

A few of the people had been brought back. But they were hardly renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth. They were barely surviving, a little colony of Jews surrounded by enemies.

**Your gates shall be open continually;  
day and night they shall not be shut;  
that men may bring to you the wealth of  
nations, with their kings led in procession.**  
(Is 60: 11)

The gates of Jerusalem were closed fast at night to protect against raids from the countryside, and the kings who were not enemies simply ignored the place.

It became clearer and clearer that the glorious promises had not been fulfilled yet. And it seemed impossible that they would ever be fulfilled. Jerusalem was to be mistress of the nations; instead it was a little provincial town. God's glory would fill the Temple; instead, the Temple was a pale imitation of the original, with an empty space at its heart. David's line would rule forever; instead, Judah was just a small part of the Persian province called Beyond the River.

Yet the prophets still promised that all those glorious things would happen. The restoration of the Jewish remnant was only the beginning. The ideal Davidic king, the Anointed One, would still come.



*Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion! Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem!  
Look, your king is approaching, he is vindicated and victorious,  
humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*  
(Zec 9: 9, *New Jerusalem Bible*)



SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**Commentary, Introduction to Ezra and Nehemiah § 3-4**

**3. Message**

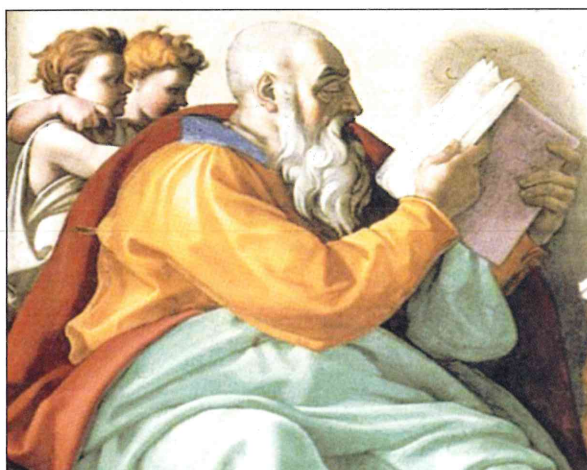
While the city walls and the temple were being rebuilt, the national and religious life of the Jewish people also underwent reorganization. In this context it was important that they should be aware of the links between old and new institutions. The altar and the house of God were built on the same site as before (cf. Ezr 3: 3; 6: 7). The sacred vessels that the returned exiles brought back to Jerusalem were the same ones as Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon as plunder (Ezr 5: 14). The priests and the other personnel involved in the liturgy were descendants of the men who had had these functions prior to the exile (Ezr 2: 36-63; Neh 7: 39-65).

This continuity between the new and the old is something that these books are at pains to point out, for it bears witness to the fact that God guides the course of salvation history, providing new answers to fit changed circumstances, but ensuring that the link with the people's origins is never weakened.

**4. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Light of the New Testament**

Within the canon of Holy Scripture, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as recording

God's dealings with his people on the return from exile, also show the inspired writer's understanding of God and of the chosen people, and the sort of teachings he wanted to get across to his contemporaries. In this sense, Ezra-Nehemiah evidences a particular point in Old Testament revelation; contrary to what the Jewish canon of the Bible might lead us to think (for it ends with these books and Chronicles), that revelation was ongoing and it is to be found in later Jewish (and also canonical) books, such as 1 Maccabees or Wisdom, and it reaches its climax in the book of the New Testament. From this perspective, Ezra-Nehemiah should be seen and read as dealing with a preparatory and transitory stage of revelation prior to the New Testament. Preparatory, because both books allow us to see to a considerable extent (but not entirely, because there were other tendencies in Judaism not reflected here) the religious circumstances and mentality of the Jewish people, centered on obedience to the Law, in the period in which Jesus lived and the Church came into being. Transitory, in so far as the teachings in Ezra-Nehemiah about the Law being the only way to draw down the mercy of God, and about segregation from Gentiles as a way to protect the identity of the Jewish people, will undergo profound changes in the New Testament. For, according to the New Testament, although the Law still holds, God's mercy reaches man, all mankind, be they Jews or not, through Jesus Christ, the Messiah; the identity of the Church, the new people of God, is not a function of segregation from Gentiles: it derives from the fidelity and holiness of its members in the midst of the world.



*Ezra-Nehemiah should be seen and read as dealing with a preparatory and transitory stage of revelation prior to the New Testament.*



## VOCABULARY

### ARAMAIC

A language closely related to Hebrew that was spoken throughout the Middle East. After the Exile, most Jews probably spoke Aramaic as their everyday language.

### BELSHAZZAR

The last king of Babylon. He lost the kingdom to the Medes and Persians.

### BEYOND THE RIVER

The Persian name for the province that included Judah.

### CYRUS

The Persian king who conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

### EZRA

A priest who led the returned exiles in Jerusalem, and who put together the standard edition of the Old Testament scriptures.

### HOLY OF HOLIES

The inner sanctuary of the Temple. In the rebuilt Temple, it was empty; the Ark of the Covenant had been hidden.

### JEW

Originally a member of the tribe of Judah, but used from the Exile on to refer to any inhabitant of the old territory of Judah, including the remnants of the tribes of Benjamin and Levi. In a religious sense, it came to mean anyone who was committed to the Temple, including those who were scattered through other parts of the world.

### NEHEMIAH

A wealthy Jew who persuaded the Persian king to make him governor of the province that included Jerusalem. He rebuilt the city's defenses.

### PERSIA

The great empire that conquered Babylon and freed the Jews from exile. The Persians allowed their subjects to keep their own customs, and the Jews prospered under Persian rule.

### SAMARITANS

The mixed population that inhabited the old territory of Israel during the Exile. They were hostile to the returning exiles.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- Who was Belshazzar?
- Where did the gold and silver drinking vessels used at Belshazzar's feast originate?
- What occurred during Belshazzar's feast?
- What did Daniel explain to Belshazzar that the writing on the wall meant?
- What army was advancing on Babylon?
- What important edict did Cyrus issue in the first year of his reign?
- What surprising title is given to Cyrus in the book of Isaiah?
- According to CCC 2811, what is the failure of the Israelites?
- Why did the people have mixed reactions toward rebuilding the Temple?
- What group opposed the rebuilding of the Temple?
- How was Artaxerxes convinced to order the Jews to stop building the Temple?
- What was the prophet Ezra's dream?
- Who edited the standard version of the Torah after the return from exile?
- Why was Ezra so adamant about the people not taking pagan wives?
- How much did Nehemiah take for his salary as governor?
- What did God desire from the Israelites at the time of Zechariah?



## PRACTICAL EXERCISES

**1.** Belshazzar used the silver from the Temple of God to entertain his wives and concubines at his feast. This was an example of sacrilege: the sin of violating or profaning something sacred. As a result of this sacrilege, God delivered the writing on the wall foretelling the fall of Belshazzar's kingdom. What are some ways in which people still show a lack of respect for sacred things today? At Mass, when we receive our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, it is especially important to show our respect. What are some ways we can show more respect for God in our dress and behavior when we receive Holy Communion?

**2.** Ezra was very effective in addressing the priests and leaders of the people about their pagan wives. He knew that pagan wives would lead the priests and leaders away from God and that the rest of Israel would follow. Ezra made sure that he was preaching what God wanted him to by prayer and listening to God's

word. How did knowing God's word help to make him such a forceful teacher? The truth is a powerful weapon. List some ways in which you can learn more about the truth. Who might be in need of knowing this truth? How could you help them?

**3.** In the Old Testament, a great amount of importance was given to the many laws which needed to be followed in order to be faithful. Unfortunately, many people acted only to fulfill these laws and forgot about the importance of their intentions and their love for God. This resulted in many hypocrites who followed the rules minimally and acted against God's law outside of their religious lives. What are some examples of hypocrisy in today's society? How can this topic relate to Catholic politicians and their belief in the dignity of life? How can this relate to Catholics and their belief in the Holy Eucharist?

## FROM THE CATECHISM

**1081** The divine blessings were made manifest in astonishing and saving events: the birth of Isaac, the escape from Egypt (Passover and Exodus), the gift of the promised land, the election of David, the presence of God in the Temple, the purifying

exile, and return of a "small remnant." The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, interwoven in the liturgy of the Chosen People, recall these divine blessings and at the same time respond to them with blessings of praise and thanksgiving.

*"Immediately the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand; and the king saw the hand as it wrote."  
(En 5: 5)*

### Endnote

1. Neh 8: 8.

