

## **2 CHRONICLES 36:14–21 / EZEKIEL 2:1–7; 3:10–21; 36:22–36**

Ezekiel 11:14–17

### **JEWES IN BABYLON / EZEKIEL THE WATCHMAN**

#### **Story Notes**

File no. 89

*(Notes for surrounding material is in italics)*

The people of Israel, that is, its two remaining southern tribes, show that reforms under King Josiah have not turned the moral and spiritual tide of the nation. Their idolatry is entrenched. They do not hear the prophets' warnings about God's coming judgements, including, most recently, by Jeremiah and Habakkuk. Into this situation, Ezekiel is born. As a teenager, he sees his contemporary, Daniel, together with other key people, taken into captivity by the assertive Babylonians.

In 597 BC (10 years after Daniel has been deported), the Babylonian army surrounds Jerusalem. King Jehoiachin and some 10,000 of the more prominent citizens are taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:14–17), and this includes young priest in training, Ezekiel, removing any aspirations he may cherish of serving in the temple.

The earlier part of the book (chs. 1–24) relates to the time between 598 BC and the final captivity in 586 BC and is largely denunciatory—because of the rebellion of the hearers. Ezekiel's fellow captives fondly expect to be repatriated to their homeland before very long, while those still in Jerusalem still blithely trust that their enemies, and God's judgements, will soon disappear. Ezekiel in Babylon has a similar task to Jeremiah in Jerusalem during this period (Jer. 28:1–4).

#### **Ezekiel 1:1-28**

*Ezekiel tells us when, and how, and to whom he came to be a prophet (1:1—3:27). Five years into the time when he was taken into captivity, possibly at 30 years of age (1:1), the time when otherwise, he would be eligible for priestly service, he is called to be a prophet.*

*Ezekiel is given a number of visions (1:1; 8:3; 40:2; 43:4). In this first one, a wild wind comes from the north, and a cloud from which emerges winged creatures, and wheels. The spirit (or wind—as in v. 4?) directs the creatures and the creatures the wheels, and the wings of the creatures make a noise like the sound of 'the Almighty'. Except, that is, when the creatures stop moving (1:15, 24-25). Above the creatures is the likeness of a throne, and on it, the likeness of a man, gleaming like metal above the likeness of a waist and like fire below it. The brightness has the beauty of a rainbow and Ezekiel knows this is the glory of the Lord. In place of the settled throne of God in the temple in Jerusalem, Ezekiel sees the majestic mobility of God's reign! The noise of the winged creatures stops and God speaks to him.*

*Like Isaiah before him (Isa. 6:1-8) he sees the Lord, high up on a throne (v. 26), but Isaiah saw him in the temple, in Jerusalem. Ezekiel is in Babylon! The status of people removed from Jerusalem and from their temple is ambiguous. Who are they! The Lord begins to answer this question by showing Ezekiel his glory, in Babylon.*

#### **Ezekiel 2:1-7**

Ezekiel is addressed as a son of man, not like the magnificent human faced creatures he has just seen, and not like the one on the throne! He falls on his face. But if he is to be a prophet, he must stand before God and hear what is said. But it is the Spirit of God who stands him up (as in 11:5, 24) to hear what God will say.

Israel must know that their God still regards them as his. He is the God of grace, even while rebuking them. Ezekiel must not fear the rank weedy growth of their ungodly living or the sharp scorpion like sting of their criticism. He must speak whether they hear him or not (v. 7; also 3:7, 11).

#### **Ezekiel 2:8—3:11**

*But first, Ezekiel must make this proffered word his own—that is, eat it (2:8) or take it into his heart and hear it (3:10-11)—even though its implications are grievous. He eats, and finds it sweet (cf. Rev. 10:8-11), clearly because it is the way God will deal with his people rather than because of the pain it will*

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*cause. The vision will not preserve Ezekiel from pain but equips him for it. He will experience the rebellion and transgressions, the impudence and stubbornness of the exiles—they have not yet been humbled by their captivity.*

*The difficulty he will have will not be because of language or culture (cf. Gen. 11:7-9) but simply because of Israel's rebellion against God. Foreigners would be more likely to listen to his word. Ezekiel must stand for God and suffer with him. Just as God stood Ezekiel up by his Spirit, and fed him his word, so now, he makes his forehead hard—a way of saying he will be just as stubborn in obedience to God as the captives are in their disobedience. He has been equipped with determination to match that of the rebels. He won't (indicative rather than imperative—cf. 2:6) fear them or their words or their looks.*

*Ezekiel must speak to the 'house of Israel', now clearly identified as 'the exiles'. God is dealing with them just as much as he dealt with them while in their own land.*

### **Ezekiel 3:12-15**

Now, for the first of six times, the Spirit 'transports' Ezekiel and shows him something by means of a vision (described in 8:3). A thunder voice gives blessing to God and this is accompanied (or the same as) the sound of the angel wings—who are now on the move again—meaning God is on the move again because they seem to be transporting or accompanying God's throne.

Is this 'Spirit' the 'wind' (same word in Hebrew) from the North, the spirit of the creatures that is in the wheels? Whatever, to Ezekiel it is all of one piece. He is caught up in the movement of God in this strange new way. But he finds it bitter because God's hand is showing him things he would rather not know—things about the people to whom he must now go. It is in this way that he arrives among his people, but now, as a man who has met with God. He simply sits among them for seven days, but is overwhelmed. Seven days of sitting is the period prescribed for mourning (Gen. 50:10). It is also the period of consecration of a priest.

### **Ezekiel 3:16-27**

Ezekiel must come with God's words (2:7) so he has nothing to say until that word comes. This first word is for him. He is a watchman to give warning of disaster. People are responsible for their own sins but Ezekiel is responsible for warning them, and if he fails to warn them, and they die, God will consider Ezekiel the murderer. On the other hand, they may hear and save their lives. Whatever, he must save his life by warning others. The apostle Paul has the same thing in mind at a later time (2 Cor. 5:11).

Ezekiel was among the exiles by the Chebar canal when his first vision was given (1:1), and now he returns, in the vision, to those with whom he lives (3:14-15). But now, he must move away from them to a valley and there he sees the glory of his earlier vision and again, falls down. Again the Spirit stands him up in God's presence to hear his word. He must remain in his house, he will be bound, perhaps metaphorically or as something acted out, and he will be unable to speak until God gives him a word. Then, it will be over to them: if they hear, they will hear, but if not, so be it.

Jesus also came to a rebellious house of Israel and said 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43)!

*Chapters 33-39*

*Prophecies of restoration—a brief introduction*

After being commissioned as a prophet and watchman for Israel, Ezekiel was told he would be bound and mute apart from brief words of rebuke (3:24-27). So it has been for some 6 years (593-586 BC). The Lord has continued to speak to Ezekiel, sometimes requiring him to act out an aspect of God's judgement on Jerusalem (chs. 4-7). The elders in captivity recognise him as a prophet (8:1; 14:1; 20:1) but don't heed what he says. Then, the Spirit takes him in a vision to witness the departure of God's glory from the temple (chs. 8—10). There are brief words of hope (chs. 11, 16, 20) but mostly words of judgement. He is told that his mouth will be opened, freed from these years of restriction, when a messenger calls to say that Jerusalem has finally fallen to Babylon (24:25-27).

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After prophecies concerning the nations (chs. 25-32), the latter part of the book (chs. 33-48) relates to the period when the Jerusalem temple has been razed and Israel's king deposed. It begins with a restatement of Ezekiel's calling to be a watchman for Israel, and the unsealing of

his lips. But now, there is hope that the sinner will repent (ch. 33). It continues with condemnation of Israel's kings (shepherds) but now, with the assurance that God will lead them and appoint a new David to deliver them (ch. 34). Israel's enemies, represented by Edom, will be desolated, but the mountains of Israel will be made fertile and will be repopulated (ch. 36).

### **Ezekiel 36:16-38**

All the recent past and then the future of Israel is now summed up in one prophecy—the name that Israel has defiled among the nations, God himself will come and sanctify. Fifteen times, he affirms, 'I will...'

Israel defiled God's name by violence amongst themselves, and by idolatry (vv. 17-18). They defiled his name in the sight of the nations too because God's judgements had removed them from the security of their land and surrounding people's drew the conclusion that the Lord was not strong enough to look after them (vv. 19-20).

So now, God will act to make his name and his holiness known—with no human defilement. His concern here is not for the plight of his people (though that is not in doubt) but for himself, and for the nations who need to know him. If there is no true God there can be no true humanity. There can be no higher value than the sanctity of God, as Jesus teaches us to pray—'Hallowed by your name.'

God will sanctify himself by bringing his people home to their land, cleansing them from their idols (using ceremonial language as in Exod. 30:17-21), giving them a heart to love him and putting his Spirit in them to enable them to keep his laws. He will be God to them and they will *be*, that is, *live* as his people (vv. 21-28; also 11:20). This means God's covenant with his people is renewed (Lev. 26:12; 2 Cor. 6:16-18).

The coming of the Spirit is linked to the coming Messianic age (37:14; 39:29; also Isa. 42:1; 44:3; 59:21; Joel 2:28-29) so Christians now live under the reign of Jesus Christ by whom this prophecy is being fulfilled.

This inner renewal will be accompanied by a renewal of the land, and the promise that this will never happen again (vv. 29-30). It will be accompanied also by deep shame that they have behaved as they have (vv. 31-32). This renewal of the land will be directly related to the renewal of heart (v. 33; also 11:19).

Other nations will recognise what God has done—making Israel like the Garden of Eden (vv. 34-36). The Lord will also let his people ask for a population explosion (vv. 37-38) so that Israel looks like Jerusalem when it is full of sacrificial lambs. Perhaps the inference is that this is what Israel is to be—wholly offered up to the Lord.

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**DANIEL 1:1–21**  
**DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS**  
**Story Notes**  
**File no. 90**

Daniel is a young man from one of Israel's leading families when the assertive Babylonians, under their commander Nebuchadnezzar, besiege Jerusalem. They are the rising power and Judah falls victim to the power plays between the Babylonians, the weakening Assyrians and the ineffective Egyptians. Judah is allied with Egypt and Babylon must humble them.

But more is going on. Our reading says '*the Lord* gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand...' (v. 2). Prophets had warned that Judah would suffer defeat, not because the Babylonians were too strong but because Israel had given way to idolatry (e.g. Jer. 7:13-15).

In fact, at this stage, only certain leading young men are taken captive to Babylon, among them, Daniel. He sees his king subdued (though still remaining as king), but also, the temple of his God plundered and some of its vessels added to the treasury of Babylon's god.

This cohort of well endowed young men are brought to 'the land of Shinar', an ancient name for Babylon, recalling that this is the place where men sought to build a tower to challenge God (Gen. 11). God intervened on that occasion but what will God do now, given that his temple has been pillaged?

The astute Nebuchadnezzar (now king in place of his deceased father) has his young captives trained in all that Babylon can teach them so that their powers may be employed for the benefit of his kingdom. They are well-endowed naturally, but now must spend three years studying the religion, magic, astrology, philosophy, crafts and mathematics of this ungodly nation. In a further challenge to their identity, their names are changed from those that reflect their faith in God (e.g. Daniel = God is my judge) to names that reflect Babylon's religion and culture. Giving new names to captives was common and intended to reflect their new ownership and destiny.

Daniel has grown up under God's covenant with Israel. He knows David's throne is eternal and 'the law for mankind' (2 Sam. 7:19). What then of the failure of his people and his incarceration as a captive of a deeply idolatrous nation? He is now immersed in all the learning of Babylon (we could compare Joseph, and later, Moses in Egypt), but he is not inundated.

In fact, Jeremiah says it will be good for a man to bear a yoke in his youth (Lam. 3:21-36), meaning that the bitterness of captivity would not negate the loving kindness of the Lord and that they should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Jeremiah's word proves right in the case of Daniel and his friends.

Daniel's humiliation and re-education does not compromise him. He can study material that has no acknowledgement of God, and he can serve a foreign ruler and still remain faithful to God. All the earth and its peoples belong to God (Ps. 24:1). However, he finds a problem with sharing the king's cuisine. Being fed sumptuously may sound harmless but, as the quip goes, 'there is no such thing as a free lunch'. Daniel senses this. (We get the meaning of 'rich food' when the phrase is repeated later in the book— about people who break an alliance with a superior—11:26). The king is astute in this also— securing the loyalty of these young men by treating them royally. But Daniel is already loyal to his God and may not be able to oblige him. He chooses not to be beholden to the king by feasting indiscriminately at his table.

In contrast with Daniel, King Jehoiachin who is taken captive when Jerusalem falls in 596 BC is, some 34 years later, released from prison by a new king of Babylon and treated to fine fare from the royal table (2 Kin. 25:27-30). He doesn't see the same compromise in this that Daniel sees.

For a second time, we are told that God acts: he gives Daniel favour with his chief minder, enabling Daniel to negotiate a change of diet. There is no embattled stridency in Daniel; he acts considerately to those who don't share his faith and suggests a practical plan for keeping the matter out of the notice of the king. God will need to vindicate Daniel in this situation, and so it transpires.

After three years, Daniel and his friends top the class and are added to the king's counselors. He finds them ten times better in knowledge than the retinue of consultants he already has. He fulfills the proverb: 'Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings' (Prov. 22:29).

Now, a third act of God is hidden in the closing remark. Daniel remains until the first year of Cyrus, that is, until Babylon falls to the invading armies of Cyrus. Daniel has been captured, made a eunuch, lost the

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outward sign of his Jewish identity, his name, and become expert in a foreign culture. This is his whole adult life. But he remains faithful to Yahweh, and is still standing when the kingdom he serves is gone.

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## DANIEL 2:1–49

### THE DREAM THAT FRIGHTENED THE KING /

### DANIEL EXPLAINS THE DREAM

#### *Story Notes*

File no. 91

Nebuchadnezzar, in only his second year as king, barely has time to savour his blistering military success against the Assyrians and Egyptians (at Carchemish) when a dream unsettles him. Accomplishment, respect and power have not secured him. He seems to have forgotten the content of the dream (or makes out that he has) but knows it is a matter of state importance and calls in his advisors. These men are not ‘wise’ as defined in *Proverbs* but have studied various means of interpreting dreams, making sense of signs and influencing outcomes with magic arts. Because the Babylonians believe gods may reveal the future in dreams, the role of these men is critical in the governance of the state.

This chapter may fit inside the time frame of chapter one because this is the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign but he has allowed three years for the training and approval of his new recruits (1:5, 19). The approval of chapter one and adulation of chapter two may overlap in some manner.

Does the king know that the unremembered dream is about the replacement of his kingdom with others? Whatever, his fear quickly turns to distrust of his counselors, irrational expectations, and then, cruelty. It is possible that he is eager to know if the dream is really from a deity and that this is why he demands his counselors tell him the dream. This will confirm that their interpretation is also valid. The severity of his threat suggests that, in the light of this unsettling revelation, he is disillusioned with what they can offer him.

The counselors know their limits. They have no real miraculous powers or any assurance that their gods will give them what is demanded. They argue that no man can do what is being asked, that no king usually asks this kind of thing, and that only inaccessible gods can operate in this way. Understandably, they play for time or for the king to become more reasonable. The scene is set for the arrival of Daniel, or rather, of God.

Daniel is summoned for execution, but God’s revelation to Israel has given this young man more than the power of Babylon can take from him—in particular, the Lord’s mercies (v. 18) that never fail. He knows that it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord, as Jeremiah says a few years later (Lam. 3:22-33) rather than try to vindicate himself.

Knowing God as the God of mercy has made him *prudent*, not just now, but by reputation; both Arioch and the king are willing to hear him out and grant him time. Knowing God also leads him to gather his friends to *pray* for mercy for themselves—a revelation of the dream and its meaning so they will not die. And God grants his request. His mercy has not failed, even here in Babylon. Now Daniel *praises* God. Knowing the dream and its meaning will not only save these young men; it will reveal the God who alone establishes earthly authority (as Jesus noted later at his trial—John 19:11) and who can announce what is to come.

Those who stand confidently before God can also stand confidently before human authority. Daniel asks for stay of execution for all the counselors (mercy is to be shared!) and for an audience with the king.

When the king asks if he can tell the dream and its meaning, Daniel compares the impotence of the counselors, not with himself, but with God in heaven—God who reveals mysteries (not the inaccessible gods of the nations). And this interpretation is not given to Daniel because he is great, or to make him so, but to help Nebuchadnezzar (v. 30).

The dream is about the future, a future God wants the king to know. Daniel can accurately report the dream of his king, so the king is ready to hear how this God of Daniel will interpret his dream. Taking dream and interpretation together, Nebuchadnezzar is the golden head of a magnificent and forbidding statue. So appear the kingdoms of this world to us all. God has given

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the king this power and glory. Man and beast are subject to him. But other kingdoms will replace his (as he has just replaced other super powers), albeit, not as glorious as his own. In fact, future super powers may be strong but suffer instability, division, and incompatibility. In those days, this whole structure—*the* kingdom of this world (cf. Rev. 11:15), clay and gold together, will be tumbled by a stone quarried by no human hand (cf. Isa. 28:16). As for the stone, it is the kingdom God will establish, to destroy all human kingdoms and become a mountain filling the earth. Its whole power and shape will be Christ as King. God will set up his everlasting kingdom and there will not remain a trace of any other kingdom.

Daniel says to his king, 'You have seen a stone cut without hands, and what it did. The non-human is God himself showing you the dream you demanded to know, and its meaning. Because it is from God, all that I have said can be trusted!'

Daniel is now honoured and his God acknowledged as greater than Nebuchadnezzar and his gods—a God of gods and a Lord of kings. Daniel is also promoted to senior commander of Babylon and chief of his counselors. Immediately, Daniel ensures that he will be able to focus on being chief of counselors and makes room for his friends by asking that they be made responsible for the management of Babylon. There is no indication at this stage that Nebuchadnezzar is changed in heart. He acknowledges the superior power of Daniel's God but thinks he will acquire the benefit of this God by appointing Daniel to advise and administer for him.

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## **DANIEL 3:1–30**

### **DANIEL'S FRIENDS IN THE BURNING FURNACE**

File no. 92

Nebuchadnezzar raises a massive gold image in the city of Babylon. The way he goes about this shows that the centre of his pantheon of gods is not the Lord he has just acknowledged (2:47), or even this 27 metre high image. It is Nebuchadnezzar himself. He 'sets up' the image (mentioned 6 times in this opening paragraph), he designs the ostentatious and comprehensive summons to worship and the cruel sanctions for non-compliance, and he refers to 'my gods' and 'the golden image I have set up' (v. 14). The whole empire is regimented, all levels of office are implicated, culture is corralled into service and heralds are sent to ensure complete submission. Nebuchadnezzar, far from secure in himself, requires complete devotion to his demands.

The Statue of Liberty in New York is 93 metres tall, and the tallest statue in the world is a cast bronze Buddha in China, 153 metres tall. The present world's largest solid gold Buddha is the Golden Buddha in Bangkok Thailand. It weighs 5.5 tons and is 3 metres tall. The image in Babylon would have been plated with gold.

This presents problems for Jews. They are in captivity because they have given way to idols and are now being pressed to be part of the deep idolatry of this city. While the meaning of this image is ambiguous, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego cannot give homage to a man or god in this way.

An image in the ancient world was seen as a representation of a king's authority or a god's presence. For Jews, God alone held this position. They were to have no images of God. Rather, they themselves were to be the image of God, exercising authority over the creation in his name.

The scene is set for jealous Chaldeans (astrologers or what Babylon regarded as wise men) to act. They may be those who have been replaced by the newly arrived Jews, even though it is because of Daniel that their lives have been spared. Perhaps Daniel is too valued to be attacked, or is one step removed from public gaze, but his friends manage affairs in Babylon and are on public view. They are reported as non-compliant with the new orders and Nebuchadnezzar summons them in a fury. Their only option, according to the king, is submission or certain death. He is playing God when he says 'what god can deliver you out of my hands?' He has already called Daniel's God a 'God of gods' (2:47) but now sets himself above all gods.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego regard the king's question as beyond debate. If there is a God able to deliver them, it is their God, and if the Lord chooses not to, their allegiance to him remains. He is worthy of their lives, worthy of their trust, and unable to be manipulated in the manner the king attempts with his gods.

Here is a direct challenge to his authority and to all he has raised up to bolster his self-image. His fury mounts to explosion point and he requires the furnace to be super heated—needlessly of course—flames of any temperature will kill his victims.

There is an element of humour in this story, and rightly so. The prophets characteristically mock the gods who are no gods (e.g. Isa. 44:9-20). To give worship to what is no god is folly. God made us to stand before him and to represent him.

The extreme heat and haste kills the king's soldiers but Daniel's friends, thrown bound into the furnace suffer no hurt. In fact, they are attended by what the king calls 'a son of the gods'. He approaches the flames and summons his victims out again—calling them servants of the Most High God. Not even their hair or clothes have any sign or smell of flames. Officials from across the empire see the works of a God who has proven himself greater than Nebuchadnezzar. God has caused the wrath of man to praise him (Ps. 76:10).

Nebuchadnezzar has been bested at his own game—power. But more has happened. The king knows the Lord looks after his servants, and that his servants regard him as worthy of their lives. For the moment, they are safe and they can proceed with their task as Babylon's

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managers. However, Nebuchadnezzar is still about his power thing, promising death and devastation to any who dare defy this God. He still thinks he is in charge.

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**DANIEL 4:1–37**  
**A PROUD TREE CUT DOWN**  
*Story Notes*  
File no. 93

Nebuchadnezzar begins his own story with a confession of God's greatness and he addresses it to all nations, wishing them peace. Although his story will announce his pride and how God humbled him, he says he will record what 'the Most High God has done *for me*' (v. 2). He calls the events that follow signs and wonders, the ways in which God had earlier revealed himself to the world through what he did for the Jews in Egypt (Exod. 7:3). Now Nebuchadnezzar knows that Daniel's God reigns over all kingdoms—forever.

With everything at his feet, this king could be at ease, but not at night when God drew near. If he was troubled before (2:1-3), he is now fearful and alarmed (v. 5). As a man of state affairs, he is accustomed to giving orders and getting answers to problems so he summons his wise men. Daniel has been made their chief but the local wise men arrive first. They are familiar with Babylon's idols but can offer no help. The scene is set for Daniel who now arrives and is greeted with deference—a man 'in whom is a spirit of the holy gods' (v. 8; 2:11, 46f).

Nebuchadnezzar's wars were over for the moment and he had completed the building of his capital (v. 30).

The King recounts his dream (unlike his earlier lapse of memory, intended or otherwise). A tree grows luxuriantly and becomes visible to all, sufficient in fruit to feed the world and to protect man and beast. In Israel's literature, this signifies a king and a kingdom responsible, and sufficient, to meet the needs of vast numbers of people—like the renewed kingdom of David (Ezek. 17:22-24). But then, it could also signify a kingdom failing to do this and being chopped down (Ezek. 31:3-12).

So it happens here. Nebuchadnezzar describes a divine messenger calling for the tree to be felled and for those it protected to be scattered, but for a stump to be left in the ground. The tree changes to the figure of a man who has been reduced to the level of an animal—in location, in diet, and in thinking—for 'seven times' (probably years). The messenger says he and his fellow 'watchers' (probably watching over God's kingdom) have decided to demonstrate that only 'the Most High' rules the earth and that he entrusts its affairs to whoever he chooses, particularly to its lowliest men. Can Daniel interpret this dream?

Daniel's alarm is natural enough, yet it is doubtful that it is for his own welfare. He has already told the king that God removes and establishes kings (2:21), but now it is going to happen, and what will this mean for the whole kingdom? Encouraged to continue he says he wished the interpretation would be for the king's enemies, but it is for the king. Madness will overtake him, for a period, but then he will be restored, that is, when he knows that God rules and that he entrusts the kingdom to whomever he wills (vv. 25-26). 'Accept my advice' Daniel says. 'Stop doing wrong and start caring for the poor! You may yet preserve your prosperity!' This is what all leaders must do.

All this is to no avail. The king is still full of himself a year later and is addressed directly from heaven—and all that was announced occurs. Until, that is, the time appointed comes. The order is important: Nebuchadnezzar raises his eyes to heaven, and his reason returns. His former life was 'madness' and there could be no return to true sanity until he knew that God reigned.

This message to all nations ends as it began, with praise to God. Only he deserves all honour, only his kingdom endures and only his will prevails. Again Nebuchadnezzar says, 'my reason returned to me'. Worship is the true basis of sanity. It is also the true basis of worldly authority and God gives him back what he had foolishly squandered. 'God', he says, 'does what is true, and he can humble the proud'.

Given that Babylon becomes a symbol or byword for worldly power without God (Rev. 17:5), we should be warned that conversions such as this are events in world history but not an end to its troubles. The next story shows how shallow and short-lived the effect of such conversions can be.

## **DANIEL 5:1–31**

### **BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST**

*Story Notes*

**File no. 94**

Nebuchadnezzar has reigned for 43 years, all of them with Daniel among his courtiers. We would love to know if and how his worship of Israel's God changed him and the nation, but we don't. In the 23 years between his death (562 BC) and the fall of the Babylonian kingdom (546 BC), his son and then his son-in-law reigned, then the latter's son and then Nabonidus for 17 years. It appears that this king's son, Belshazzar, is vice regent while Nabonidus is fighting battles in Arabia. Our text says Belshazzar has Nebuchadnezzar as his father (vv. 2, 11, 13, 22)—either in the sense of ancestor or one who went before (cf. 2 Kin. 2:12). The queen enters uninvited (v. 10), suggesting she is part of the king's family, and she remembers the times of Nebuchadnezzar some 23 years earlier. She may be his wife or daughter.

Belshazzar's lavish feast seems strange because we know from secular history that the kingdom is not in good shape. The extravagance is not a celebration and may have more to do with buying the loyalty of his nobles (remember Daniel's care on this point), or sedating them. Belshazzar has won no battles, conquered no new territory and will not have any other favours to bestow! He also wishes to show his bravado by taking Israel's sacred vessels from the temple and using them to honour his gods, made of mere wood and stone. These vessels may have been sacred to Nebuchadnezzar, either because they represented his triumph over the Jews or because he had come to reverence their God. But now, Belshazzar needs to enlarge his image and does so by distaining something sacred to his predecessor. But he offends God—they were vessels holy to him (1 Chron. 22:19). The irreverence and insubordination of Belshazzar have come to full expression (cf. Rom. 1:18-23).

Like his father, Belshazzar is confronted, and terrified (cf. 4:5) by a mystery—by God. The phrase, 'the writing is on the wall', has now passed into our common language but here, the terror caused by this writing hand is profound (vv. 6, 9-10). His controlled world, in fact, is fragile and he must find an explanation. The confrontation is in daylight and before his assembled leaders. The courtesy of privacy is gone and the message holds no hope.

As before, wise men are summoned and promised third place in the kingdom (after himself and Nabonidus) if they can explain what is happening. At all costs, the king must regain control. But neither the wise men nor their gods can interpret the dream. God is showing, at the end as at the beginning of this Babylonian kingdom, that every nation needs the wisdom he alone can provide.

It is then that the queen enters, without invitation, to remind the king of the heritage he has ignored: the aged Daniel (he must now be in his eighties) is still available and able to interpret mysteries. In all these years, he appears to have fallen from favour but is still embedded in the nation. The queen must remind Belshazzar of what he and his predecessors have chosen to forget. She is profuse in her praise and her trust of this man of God.

Daniel enters. He has no use for the king's gifts but will read and interpret the message on the wall. During the reign of Belshazzar, Daniel has already been given the revelations recorded in chapters 7 and 8. He knows that in the midst of this world's power struggles, and regardless of the harsh treatment the Lord's people receive, a 'son of man' will receive power to reign over the nations, a reign that will be shared by all of God's saints (7:13, 18). What could Belshazzar add to him!

Daniel begins with 'the Most High God' (v. 18) who gave Nebuchadnezzar his greatness among the nations, a greatness Belshazzar has inherited. Nebuchadnezzar could do whatever he wanted with his subjects but failed to acknowledge the God who placed him in that position. Pride and arrogance invited God's humbling of him. But he was humbled, and this is what Belshazzar should have remembered and copied (v. 22).

## **BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST** con't

The words on the wall identify three coins—a big one, a very small one and one half the value of the first. But it is the related verbal forms that constitute three puns to signify 'numbered', 'weighed', 'divided'. Daniel now knows the three things God is saying to this king: there is no time now for him to change; he is the reason for his own downfall; his kingdom will be divided, as it turns out, between the Medes and the Persians.

Daniel is given the empty honours of an emptied man. Belshazzar dies that very night as the Medes, under Darius (probably another name for Cyrus) divert the course of a river and enter Babylon under the wall to bring the 70 years of Babylonian rule to an end.

This famous fall, brought about by God's response to irreverence and insubordination, has been predicted (Isa. 21:9; Jer. 51:29) and is recalled in Revelation 17—18. 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!' (18:2). This city becomes a code word for all world power that does not acknowledge God as the giver of all good gifts, including power. It persecutes God's people, courts demonic powers, glorifies profit, sensuality and happiness but will surely fall because the King of Kings and Lord of Lords will reign (Rev. 19:15-16).

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**DANIEL 6:1–27**  
**DANIEL WITH THE LIONS**  
*Story Notes*  
File no. 95

The kingdom of Babylon falls to ‘Darius the Mede’, which may be a throne name for Cyrus (1:21). He could be a co-regent with Cyrus, but then, he organizes the whole kingdom into 120 satrapies (like Ahasuerus or Xerxes 1 in Esther 1:1) so it appears more likely that he really is *the* king of the new Media-Persian empire. So, as the end of the chapter may be translated, Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius, *that is* the reign of Cyrus the Persian’ (v. 28, NIV margin).

Daniel, rather than being executed along with his previous king (5:30), is retained. As noted earlier (1:21), Daniel outlived the kingdom whose demise he predicted. Spies may also have reported his judgement of Belshazzar showing that he is not a man whose allegiance is primarily to Babylon! His wisdom is great enough to survive the fall of one regime and be co-opted by another. Quickly Daniel rises to preeminence among the king’s administrators and he is being touted for promotion to the top job.

Just as quickly, opposition is mounted against Daniel but his integrity allows for no corruption enquiry. They find a strategy however by linking two facts: Daniel’s religion is known to be non-negotiable, and Darius needs to secure his authority among this newly captive people. ‘Make a law that no god or man be invoked for favour except you for a month’, they propose. ‘Let breakers of this law be fed to the lions.’ Their proposition includes a lie however—not all administrators have agreed to the proposal. But Darius has no idea his preferred candidate for promotion will be compromised by this.

The trap is set, but Daniel sees no reason to change his pattern of seeking the favour of the God of Israel and giving thanks to him at his Jerusalem facing attic window. He must know Solomon’s prayer that if Israel is given over to their enemies because of sin, and if they pray from there towards Jerusalem, that God would hear and give them favour with their captors and return them to their promised land (1 Kings 8:46-52). More is at stake than Daniel’s life. The promise of God concerning his people is the issue on his mind.

So Daniel is caught. But so is the king. He has been foiled by his own men, and by the unnecessary severity of not being able to change laws. Only God has no reason to change his law. Our legislation must always be provisional. A whole day of maneuvering cannot change the resolution of the nobles to have Daniel dead, and they claim their prize at the end of the day. But the king breaks his own law and makes a petition to someone other than himself—he says to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you serve continually, preserve you’ (v. 16). Then he throws him to the lions and seals the den closed with his own seal and the seal of his nobles—ensuring that the king will not be able to do some rescue job secretly. The king retires, but won’t eat, or be entertained, or sleep all night.

At day break, Darius, in anguish, calls out to Daniel to see if his God has been able to deliver him. Daniel says God sent his angel to protect him because he is blameless before God as he is also blameless before the king (v. 22). He is taken out and his protection is attributed to the fact that he trusted in God (v. 23). The writer of Hebrews says some ‘by faith...shut the mouth of lions’ (Heb. 11:33). Like all other men of faith, he pleased God first by trusting him and this was the righteousness he treasured (Heb. 11:6-7) and the righteousness that led to his integrity in everyday affairs.

Two actions follow. The plotting nobles and their families suffer the fate they planned for Daniel. God had shut the mouths of the lions, not removed their appetites. Then promulgation is made throughout the lands of the Medes and Persians that all must fear the God of Daniel. It must be recognised that this God is alive, that he endures (from one king’s reign to another’s—not like human kings who come and go) and that his authority will never be destroyed. A second kingdom (as in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream) has been put on notice that God is the God of all nations and that he is to be served with justice and humility.

## **EZRA 1:1–11; 3:1–4:5; chs 5 & 6**

Isaiah 44:28; 45:1–5, 13; Ezra 2:1, 2, 64–70; 4:24; Haggai 1:1–15

## **THE JEWS ARE SET FREE / STARTING TO BUILD THE TEMPLE**

### **Story Notes**

File no. 96

### **1:1-11**

Judeans have been in captivity since Nebuchadnezzar ransacked Jerusalem in 597 BC and again in 586 BC. They have settled into life in Babylon, except that some, like Daniel, cannot forget promises God made—that he would make Israel a blessing to the nations, and that he would raise them up again to worship him. To enable this to happen will require an international intervention by God similar to what happened at the time of the exodus. As this simple narrative of Ezra opens up, we find this is what is happening. God is again manifesting his power among the nations to show that he has an unalterable plan for his people and the world. The exiles have been 'spewed out of the land' (Lev. 18:24-30) by God because of their idolatry, but are now, some 50 years later, led by this same Lord 'from Babylon to Jerusalem' (v. 11).

The Persian king Cyrus rises to power quickly and marches without struggle into the weakened Babylon around 539 BC. He soon announces that he wants Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple.

The event is also recorded in Daniel 5:31 where 'Darius the Mede' is probably another name for Cyrus and different from the Darius 1 mentioned in Ezra 4:5 and elsewhere. Cyrus has already absorbed the kingdom of the Medes and the whole kingdom could be referred to as the Media-Persian Empire (Dan. 5:28; 6:8).

History suggests the inhabitants of Babylon welcomed Cyrus' arrival! Their city had become dysfunctional under Belshazzar.

From one point of view, Cyrus pursues his own policy (we may call it 'enlightened' today) because he also allows captives of other nations to go free and re-establish themselves with their own gods. But our writer knows Jeremiah's prophecy that God would stir up the heart of a Mede to destroy the Babylonians (Jer. 51:1, 11). He may also reckon that the 70 years predicted by Jeremiah was up (25:11-12; 29:10), and would remember the prophecies of Isaiah about Cyrus (Isa. 41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1-13). The heart of kings can be turned by the Lord to do his will (Prov. 21:1). The Lord who promised Israel at the time of the exodus to be with them always (Hag. 2:4-5 with Exod. 14:19) is still with them.

Cyrus frames his command as though he himself acknowledges Israel's 'Lord, the God of heaven'. 'He has given me my triumphs, and commanded me to have a temple erected in Jerusalem'. In fact, we know that he used religion for political purposes: he worshipped Babylon's chief god, Marduk, to humour the people he had conquered, and also respected the gods or God of other nations (according to the famous 'Cylinder of Cyrus'). He couched his edicts in the terms of the people he was choosing to re-establish, all with the object of gaining their political acquiescence.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, has stated that the Cyrus cylinder, discovered in 1879, was "the first attempt we know about running a society, a state with different nationalities and faiths — a new kind of statecraft." (Wikipedia).

The King requires the neighbours of returnees to provide for their travel and with a view to them making a 'free-will offering' to their God when they arrive in Jerusalem. 'The men of that place' (v. 4) or 'all those about them' (v. 6) could be fellow Jews, but may well be their Gentile neighbours. Haggai later tells Zerubbabel to take courage because God will shake the nations and take the wealth of all nations to fill his house with glory (Hag. 2:4-8).

The gifts are called 'free-will offerings', recalling the building of the tabernacle (Exod. 35:29) and the gifts brought by Israel throughout their worship (Lev. 22:18). Cyrus also returns the sacred vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the Jerusalem temple so that the worship can be recommenced.

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This return is described in ways that evoke the earlier exodus of Israel from Egypt (cf. Isa. 43:14-21). In both cases, the king of a foreign nation commands that Israel should leave (Exod. 12:30-31). In both cases, 'silver and gold' is freely given to the departing people (Exod. 11:2-3; 12:35-36) and their task is with a view to worship (Exod. 3:18).

God has not forsaken his people but is fulfilling what he promised his prophets. The returnees are called 'survivors', that is, what Isaiah has called a 'remnant' that would return to their land (Isa. 10:20-22).

The conquered tribes still remember their distinctive life as the people of God and are able, for the most part, to recall their heritage. Their leader, Sheshbazzar, is entrusted with the temple treasure and also appointed governor (5:14, 16). His identity is obscure and seems to merge with the leadership of Zerubbabel (2:2) who is also called governor soon after this (Hag. 1:1)—perhaps the same person, or two people with interlinking roles.

If the names refer to different people, Sheshbazzar may be a Babylonian sent to oversee the new project and whose name is used in official communications. Zerubbabel is a relative of the previous monarchy and would be the person the Jews would more naturally look to for leadership.

So, the return of Israel to their land is the work of Cyrus, well organized and provisioned, but then it is the work of God who has stirred the spirit of the king (v. 1) and the spirit of the people (v. 5). This certainty will be important as challenges come to the work in hand. And the fact that a formal pronouncement has been made by the king will need to be appealed to later (chapters 5—6).

### 3:1—4:5

All the returned Jews gather on the month appointed for the Feast of Booths (v. 4), probably in the first year of their return. They come heartily and in obedience to the command of Moses (Exod. 23:17; 34:23; Deut. 16:16). But first in importance is to re-establish the sacrifices that were at the centre of Israel's worship. It is over 50 years since the Lord scattered the nation and razed their temple, but the temple with its sacrifices is the place he has sworn to meet with them (Exod. 29:38-46) and it is here that Israel could find assurance of forgiveness (Lev. 1:2-4) and where they could offer their worship. Rebuilding the altar and re-establishing the sacrifices are vital, not least because they are surrounded by enemies and can only succeed with God's help.

Jeshua (there are several Jeshuas in Ezra-Nehemiah) seems to be the chief priest and joins with Zerubbabel in leading the people. Together, they see that the altar is built and that the daily offerings begin. These offerings then continue and the annual festivals provide the rhythm of their new life. But all this happens in the open air, and so a collection for the temple begins, as directed by Cyrus, and involving help from neighbouring nations.

Some 6 months later, they have the resources and work begins, supervised by Levites together with other tribal leaders. Care is taken to look after the work (3:8) and the workmen (3:9).

The word for laying a foundation means to fix or establish so the level of work begun is not clear. Haggai (some 20 years later) makes it sound as though nothing had happened at this earlier time (Hag. 2:15, 18) but he is speaking comparatively rather than as a building supervisor.

Israel worships as the work begins, using the same words and instruments as in Solomon's day (2 Chron. 5:13). The foundation of all Israel's faith is that the Lord is good and that his loving kindness on Israel is forever. The people shout their praises, as the Psalms have prescribed (e.g. Ps. 32:11; 33:3; 35:27) although this is mixed with the wailing of some who remember the first temple—perhaps with regret at its meager beginnings (Zech. 4:10) or because of gratefulness.

Some local people who claim to worship Israel's Lord offer to assist. They are the remnants of an earlier Assyrian deportation of northern Jewish tribes but who are now well intermarried with other nations. Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the other leaders recognise that they are enemies

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who are resenting the new power base in the area and who will frustrate rather than aid the work. Zerubbabel and Jeshua plead the authority of the edict under which they are working—Cyrus has told them to do the work, not others. The rest of this chapter shows how their suspicions are well founded as it recounts incidents that happen some 50 and 70 years later in the reigns of Persian kings Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes. While the enemies have been rebuffed, it seems that the Jews become discouraged, or prefer to build their own homes, and the work ceases for some 15 years, the second year of the Persian king Darius (i.e. 520 BC).

### 5:1—6:22

Haggai and Zechariah begin their prophesying in 520 BC (Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1) and things begin to change! The real reason why building has stopped (taking Haggai as our guide) is pre-occupation with their own homes (Hag. 1:4), thinking that their efforts are too meager to be bothered with (Hag. 2:3), thinking they are unclean rather than blessed (Hag. 2:14-15) and forgetting that God is helping them (Hag. 2:5-9, 20-23). Zechariah's message is longer but similar in effect. The two prophets encourage Zerubbabul and Jeshua and soon the work is rolling along.

But opposition is not finished. The Persian governor for these Western provinces, Tattenai, is also concerned that a new fervor is brewing in his area and asks what authority they have to proceed. This external questioning (as distinct from the internal lack of motivation earlier) does not stop the builders because God's 'eye' is on them (cf. 2 Chron. 16:8-9; Psa. 33:18-19). Tattenai must check the facts.

Tattenai's letter to Darius (5:6-10, 17) reveals the diligence and success the Jews are having in building a temple to 'the great God' (unless he is exaggerating for effect).

The testimony of the Jews (5:11-16) is that they worship the God of heaven and earth and that their God has been right to take their temple away from them for a period. They emphasise that their rebuilding is being done under the authority of Cyrus and has been delegated to the people who are carrying it out, and that they are happy for this to be checked.

The search made by Darius and his response to Tattenai (6:1-12) mean that Tattenai must get out of the way of the workers and give more help instead—with strict penalties for non-compliance! He has no choice but to do this with diligence (6:13)!

So, the temple is completed in the sixth year of Darius (6:14-22)—after four years of building. It is God's word through Haggai and Zechariah that has moved the Jews; it is God's command to build that has told them the day of judgement is over; and it is the decrees of three Persian kings that have been (or will be) God's instruments to enable this restoration to proceed.

The inclusion of Artaxerxes who reigns some 50 years later, picks up the earlier reference to him—in 4:7, and prepares us for the coming of Ezra during his reign (7:7-26).

From the beginning, Israel's worship—their access to God, assurance of forgiveness, and participation in his promise—have been God's gift. For a time it has been withdrawn, but now, is fully restored by God himself. Hence their joy (6:16, 22)! Their sacrifices may not be as numerous as at the dedication of Solomon's temple but a generous number of bulls, lambs and rams are offered. Those who have returned from Babylon do not see themselves as just Judah but all Israel, so a goat as a sin offering is made for each of the 12 tribes.

Priests and Levites are all given their scheduled duties. By the first month of their national year (Exod. 12:2), priests and Levites have purified themselves and are ready for the Passover, followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread (as in Exod. 12:12-15). All who have returned from Babylon and have separated themselves from idolatry so as to seek God now participate in the feast. They remember their Exodus from Egypt, the establishment of their nation and look to God for the fulfillment of all his promises.

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God has turned the heart of Cyrus to release the captives (1:1). Presumably, 'the king of Assyria' is another of his names because conquerors took over the titles of those they replaced. Perhaps this highlights that the demise of the Northern tribes and then the Southern tribes is all being encompassed in this renewal and this thanksgiving.

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## **ESTHER 1:1–10:3**

### **ESTHER**

#### ***Story Notes***

**File no. 97**

The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are very different from other Old Testament history in that they describe how God's people, whether still in the land of their captivity or as returnees to Jerusalem, are living under the authority of various Persian kings. In this book, neither God nor prayer nor any other Old Testament leader is once mentioned, and yet, the book describes how God preserves his own people—the Jews, and likenesses to previous leaders of Israel are clear. No miracle is recorded, but the flow of events reveals the sovereign hand of God acting for the welfare of his people and the spread of his truth. All this is recounted to us against the background of an ambitious Persian man who trusted chance for his greatness.

#### **Chapter one**

Some 56 years have passed since captives first began returning to Judea. Ahasuerus, or Xerxes 1 (probably different renditions of the Persian name) now reigns over the vast Media-Persian kingdom from his capital in Susa. (Some correspondence to him from enemies of the Jews in Jerusalem is recorded in Ezra 4:6.) The Persian kings, since Cyrus, have allowed the religions of their various subject people to continue and have even provided materials for temples to the various gods or God, but the interest of Persia remains itself. So the welfare of God's people cannot be secured by this state power and requires the immediate intervention of God.

The book begins with the king entertaining his local officials, servants, military commanders and the governors of his far-flung dominions. For some six months, this feasting continues, all with a view to impressing his retinue. Then all Susa is invited to a seven-day lavish banquet with freely flowing wine. Vashti, his queen, entertains the women of the palace. The emptiness of this will be seen when we come to the end of this book where an annual Feast of Purim is inaugurated for Jews to celebrate, not the greatness of a man or nation, but the greatness of the God described in this book.

Queen Vashti refuses to honour the drunken king and he, furious with being ignored, takes advice from his counselors and Vashti is banished—for the 'benefit' of all men across the kingdom!

#### **Chapter two**

The king's young attendants see the King's need for a new consort and a plan is hatched to gather beautiful women from across the kingdom. This event takes us straight to Mordecai who comes from the same tribe as King Saul and whose great grandfather, Kish had been taken captive in 597 BC. He has learned how one must live in an alien environment but remembers well what it means to be a Jew.

Mordecai has raised his young relative, Esther, and when she is chosen to join the women in Susa, instructs her to keep her nationality a secret. He keeps enquiring after her welfare. During this period of enormous uncertainty, she lives with respect to her upbringing and seeks no extras to enhance her prospects. Still, she pleases the official in charge of the women and all who see her, and importantly, the king. So, he crowns her as queen and, with another feast for his nobles and holiday for the provinces, announces his pleasure in having a beautiful wife. Unlike her predecessor, Esther will have great influence over the king.

Mordecai may have some official position in the court because he hears of a plot to assassinate the king while waiting at the king's gate. He is able to get word to Esther about the plot, and through her, to the king, and when the plan is verified, Mordecai's deed is acknowledged in the official records. So begins a series of 'chance' happenings whereby God looks after his own people when it looks as though others are in charge.

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### **Chapter three**

Esther has been queen for five years (v. 7 with 2:16) when Mordecai comes to the attention of the king's servants. A certain Haman has been made chief of all the king's men and everyone must bow to him. But Mordecai refuses. He cannot hide his reason—he is a Jew and bows to the Lord alone. The king's servants want to see if his 'reason' will stand and tell Haman what is happening.

Haman (like his king) cannot stand what he sees as insubordination and waits his chance to rid the world of the race that acknowledges a higher authority than him. Being superstitious, he seeks a propitious time to reveal his plan to the king by 'casting Pur' (Persian for 'stone') or drawing lots (v. 7; cf. 9:24) and the lot says it must be the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adan or the last month of the year. It is still the first month so he waits all year, and then, on the lucky day, tells the king of a problem with 'a certain people', unique among the nations because their laws make them rebellious to the king's commands, and he offers to pay the enormous sum required to fix the problem.

The 'lot' will become key to the outcome of this book and will show the truth of Proverbs 16:33—'The lot is cast into the lap, but its decision is wholly from Yahweh'. Even after the dice has fallen, the Lord is powerful to reverse its outcome to deliver his people.

Ahasuerus does not check the validity of the claim and has no idea of the extent of its ramifications. It won't cost him anything and he gives entire control of the affair to Haman. As the new-year dawns, laws are drafted and dispatched across his kingdom with the edict that on the nominated date, any citizen may freely kill any Jew they know. Then, while the king and Haman dine, Susa reels with the news. They, unlike their king, seem to know the extent of Jewish involvement in their city and see no reason for the edict. The claim of Haman that the Jews are disrupters of the peace is clearly false. Clearest witness of this is Mordecai whose deed is already inscribed in the king's records.

### **Chapter four**

Mordecai knows what is at stake—not just his life, or just the life of many Jews. The truth of the God who has revealed himself to Jews is at stake, and the promise that through them there would be a blessing for the world. His mourning is public and seems designed to attract the attention of Esther. In fact, like Moses who opposed Pharaoh, Mordecai is standing up to Haman, knowing God will surely save his people (v. 14). Mordecai is also continuing a centuries old conflict of Israel with Amalek (Exod. 17:8-16) in the person of Haman (regularly called 'the Agagite'—Agag is a former king of the Amalakites).

Mordecai is a Benjaminite, like Saul, and son of a different Kish. Unlike Saul who was told to destroy Agag (1 Sam. 15), Mordecai declares holy war on this enemy of God's people.

Esther's agitation is extreme. Why such behaviour? She sends him some proper clothes. This doesn't work so she enquires about his reason for such grief. A series of messages travel between the two through her attendant Hathach.

Mordecai relates Haman's scheme and the extent of his funding and asks Esther to intercede with the king. Esther explains that she has no automatic entrée to the king, hasn't seen him for a month and knows the risk of coming unbidden. Mordecai says deliverance will come to them from 'another place' anyway, that she won't escape by avoiding her responsibility and that she may be where she is for this particular moment. Esther asks for a three day fast of all Jews in Susa, together with herself, and then, whatever may happen, she will go to the king. As with the exodus, deliverance from God will not come without dangerous encounters with a foreign power.

### **Chapter five**

Esther presents herself to the king and is not only received but offered whatever she asks, to the value of half his kingdom. She wants the king and Haman to come to a banquet that very

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day. And so it happens. Again, the king offers her whatever she asks, to the value of half his kingdom. But Esther simply asks for a further banquet.

Esther's reason for delay is not clear but the story shows how significant the extra time becomes. Haman has more time to indulge his fantasies of greatness, one more occasion to get furious with Mordecai, more time to rehearse to his family the favours he has with the king and queen and, particularly, time to build a gallows and plan to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it.

### **Chapter six**

Between the queen's two feasts, there is also time for the king to have a sleepless night and to hear again about Mordecai's faithfulness to the king some years before. He finds he has not been rewarded. Haman, who now comes seeking the death of Mordecai, unwittingly tells the king how such a man may be honoured, thinking it will be him. What mortification for Haman, to lead the procession honouring Mordecai! What terror to report his dismay at home and find that his wife and wise men see no future for him now that Mordecai has begun his rise! A massive reversal is happening in the middle of this book, a reversal that will reverberate across the whole of the kingdom. With all this in his ears, Haman must scurry off to the second banquet.

### **Chapter seven**

Unaware of Haman's thoughts, Esther makes her request to the king: nothing less than her own life and the life of all her people—for them to be saved from genocide. Esther has identified herself as a Jew. The king is furious against anyone who would dream of hurting his wife and is eager to please her. Esther points to Haman as the rogue in question.

Further seemingly chance events seal his fate. The king needs to leave the room in distress, Haman pleads for his life and the king returns to find him at Esther's feet. An attendant of Esther reveals Haman's intent to hang Mordecai from a gallows that very day, and Haman is led out to his own execution.

### **Chapter eight**

Immediately, the king gives Esther the house of Haman. In the rush of events, she has revealed that Mordecai is her relative and that he has raised her in his home, so he is brought before the king. The king gives to Mordecai the authority that Haman had so that, like Joseph before him, he becomes second in command to a world leader and with a view to saving many lives. But now, Esther again makes an unsought petition to the king and again is heard. It is not her, or her relative Mordecai that she has sought to save. It is her entire people. Let the order to kill them be revoked!

Ahasuerus now trusts Mordecai—and with more reason than he had to trust Haman. Whatever Mordecai writes and seals with the king's seal will be done and may not be revoked.

The former edict cannot be changed, but Mordecai makes the decree to read that Jews may defend and avenge themselves on the day set earlier for their massacre—still 9 months away (v. 12 with 3:7). He trusts God that Jews will be successful in this, and must already see that the tide of favour to the Jews across the king's dominions is growing. He expects that there will be another conquering of enemies like the victory gained by Joshua, but now, on a battlefield across the nations.

Couriers speedily spread the edict in all the languages of the provinces—putting Jews in the spotlight for all nations to see (cf. Gen. 12:3). Mordecai leaves the king dressed royally. All Susa celebrates suggesting that the reign and designs of Haman had not been welcome. Jews everywhere are relieved and elated, and are honoured by their neighbours. In fact, many Gentiles join them because of the new light in which Jews are now seen. Look what happened to the man who tried to destroy them! Perhaps they also see that the religion of these Jews

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seeks the welfare of all (cf. Jer. 29:7), as distinct from the power games they had seen in Haman.

### **Chapter nine**

On 13 Adar (the last month), Jews assemble in towns across the kingdom and defend and avenge themselves. Opponents remain in spite of the edict but they are quickly destroyed, assisted by the king's officials and by public favour. 'None can stand against them' (v. 2; cf. Josh. 11:20). In fact, 'the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples', a similar situation to when Israel first approached the land promised to them (8:17; 9:2; Num. 22:3; Josh. 2:8-9). Mordecai has grown in power and the fear of him is now on them all!

Five hundred enemies of Jews are killed in the capital, including Haman's ten sons. The king reports this to Esther and asks what else she may want. A second day to complete the task is granted and a further 300 Jew haters die. Three times we are told that Jews did not plunder their victims, even though this is what Haman had plotted for the Jews (3:13), and even though the king gave them the right to do this (8:11). The Jews regard this as a holy war, in which the 'firstfruits' of the plunder belong to God (Deut. 13:16). Then again, the agenda of the Jews is preservation of their race, not enrichment. Out in the provinces, the total number of Jew haters killed is 75000.

Mordecai records all that has happened and sends letters to all the provinces requiring that the two days on which the victory was given to Jews be always celebrated with joy, naming it the Feast of Purim after the 'Pur' or casting of lots that began it all. Esther confirms the requirement. Seeming chance events have been the nature of this saga but through these events, God has ordained the preservation of his people. This feast of 'chance' must be kept for all future generations, just as the feast of Passover was required to be kept annually.

### **Chapter ten**

Our author says the truth of these things can be checked locally by looking at the records of the kings of Media and Persia. Though modern archeology cannot independently confirm this story, the facts were clear enough at the time for the writer to make this claim.

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# NEHEMIAH 1:1–2:18

## NEHEMIAH IN THE KING'S PALACE / NEHEMIAH COMES TO JERUSALEM

### Story Notes

File no. 98

*With Malachi 1:6-8; 3:8-10, 16-17*

*Nehemiah continues to tell the story, begun in Ezra, of Israel's restoration to Judea after several decades of captivity.*

*It is over 90 years since the first Jews have returned to Jerusalem. Local adversaries have petitioned Persia on several occasions to get their building projects stopped. They have succeeded in the reigns of Cyrus himself (Ezra 4:4-5), again in the reign of Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6—whom Esther had to petition for the life of her people) and again in the reign of Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-23).*

*Progress in the work has depended on the eagerness of Jews who remember the favour and promises of God, assisted by prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah. None of this work can proceed without express permission from the Persian king but God also stirs the hearts of pagan rulers (Ezra 1:1; 6:22; 7:27) to secure the welfare of his people and the continuing of his revelation to the world.*

*Ezra is one of the men, moved by God, who gets permission to return to 'the province beyond the River', along with royal gifts for the worship of the Lord, and documents to say that Persian treasurers in Judea must release funds to a specified value (Ezra 7:11-24). He is effectively appointed by Artaxerxes to be minister for religion (as we would now say) for Judea (Ezra 7:25-28), to teach and to secure all that was necessary for the worship of God in the province.*

*Now, during the long reign of this same Persian king and in spite of his appointing Ezra and writing his letter, work in Judea has stalled because of local adversaries (perhaps the occasion recorded in Ezra 4:7-23). The nation's kings have their own interests in mind rather than God's so the Lord's people must live, not by patronage but by faith in God, by things that are unseen (2 Cor. 4:18).*

### 1:1-11

Nehemiah tells us his own story. News of Jerusalem's 'trouble and shame', its inability to protect itself with walls and gates, grieves him deeply and drives him to prayer and fasting. But his prayer is to the God who 'keeps covenant and steadfast love' to those who love and obey him. But this raises a problem: Israel has not loved and obeyed, including Nehemiah and his ancestors and God has done what he promised Moses—scattered them (Deut. 4:25-31).

But Moses promised something else: that God would gather them to the place he chose to reveal his name when they returned to God. Nehemiah is praying as a member of a redeemed people! He expects God will hear his prayer and the prayer of all who 'delight to fear' his name. Clearly, over his days of praying, he has devised a plan and asks the Lord for success. Only now does he tell us who he is—a personal servant (probably a eunuch) to Artaxerxes I. He must approach the king about this matter, and like Esther with the previous king, Ahasuerus, must have regard to what will happen to him if his request is rejected.

### 2:1-18

A sad face on a healthy man may be dangerous in the presence of the king. What could cause this man to be sad under such a reign? Nehemiah must confess his dual loyalty—and the priority of the other over his present duties. The capital of his homeland (land of his father's graves) lies in ruins. The king understands men, and Nehemiah in particular, and recognises that he is after something!

At this point, Nehemiah breathes a prayer to God and asks the king for leave of absence to rebuild Jerusalem's city and walls. Remarkably, the king only asks how much time he will need to be away! Nehemiah asks for letters of authority and materials from the king's timber stores and gets all he asks for—'because the good hand of my God was upon me' (as Ezra 7:6, 9; 8:18; also Dan. 1:9; Prov. 21:1). He is given a king's escort as well.

Nehemiah is on a temporary assignment but stays for 12 years. He returns to Susa after that but then returns to Jerusalem again (13:6-7).

## **NEHEMIAH IN THE KING'S PALACE / NEHEMIAH COMES TO JERUSALEM con't**

Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem is official. He has been appointed governor of Judea (5:14 with 2:1) but must deal with governors of other nearby provinces in this 'region beyond the River'. The idea of someone seeking the welfare of the Jews is resented. Nehemiah must act covertly, inspecting the walls, and tells no one of his plan until it is well arranged.

After three days, Nehemiah summons the Jewish leaders. He tells them about God's favour and the king's authority to proceed and reminds them of the reproach that their present situation is, both to them and to God. The leaders are ready to begin. Opposition from a Horonite, an Ammonite and an Arab suggest the alliances that have formed in these regions. Their response quickly turns from displeasure (v. 10) to mocking (v. 19).

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## **NEHEMIAH 2:19–4:23; 6:1–16; 12:27–43**

Malachi 1:6–8; 3:8–10, 16, 17

# **NEHEMIAH BUILDS THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM / GIVING THANKS TO GOD**

## ***Story Notes***

**File no. 99**

### **2:19-20**

Now the battle is joined. Nehemiah gets the builders working and the Sanballat alliance scoffs. They also bring false accusations about Nehemiah starting a rebellion against the Persian king. Nehemiah confesses his trust in God for success and asserts that the mixed peoples of Samaria and surrounding nations have no say in the matter they are about. Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls is a matter between God and his people.

### **3:1-32**

The schedule of building teams is revealing. The list begins with priests (v. 1) who share in the work. Levites are also involved (v. 17). Some builders come in from surrounding towns like Jericho, or work on a section of the wall close to their homes in Jerusalem (v. 30). Leaders of two areas in Jerusalem are named (vv. 9,12) and one involves his daughters. Certain workers' guilds provide teams (vv. 8, 32) perhaps because their trades are not essential services like food or water supply. Only one sign of dissent is noted when some leaders don't want to submit to others (v. 5). Nehemiah is a competent project manager and has teams of people who know each other working on allocated areas of wall.

### **4: 1-6**

With such progress being made, Sanballat (governor of the Samaritan region) tries his mocking again (cf. 2:19) but now with vehement anger and vicious scorn about the feebleness of their effort, and Tobiah joins in the scoffing. Nehemiah asks God to deal with the shame being heaped on them. Disgrace has been his problem from the outset (1:3). God's name is being dragged in the dust and he asks God to turn the shame back on his enemies—and then proceeds building and half completes the wall! The Jews have been invigorated.

### **4: 7-15**

Such success stirs a mini 'cold war' (cf. Ezra 4:6-23). A coalition of enemies, now including some Arabs, Ammonites and others from Ashdod, confer and mount threats to destabilise the situation. Judeans (Nehemiah says 'we') pray, and Nehemiah sets up 24-hour sentries. Judeans begin to wonder if they can handle the triple task of clearing, building and guarding. Suggestions spread that spies will infiltrate the builders and kill them. Jews who live nearer to their enemies hear frequent threats that attackers may present from any quarter. With all this ferment, Nehemiah strengthens the guards at places where the wall is still low, and, noting the fear spreading from leaders to people asks them to remember the Lord and to remember the families for whom they are providing a future. They should not fear. These measures appear to contain the immediate threat and the work proceeds.

### **4: 16-23**

Safety now requires that only half the workers build while the others carry weapons. Even workers and couriers must have a weapon handy. A trumpet blast will summon the scattered workers to deal with any attack. Nehemiah reminds the Jews of their history of holy war: 'Our God will fight for us' (4:20; Exod. 14:14; Deut. 1:30). And they work from first light until dark, and then sleep in their clothes.

### **6:1-16**

The wall is completed—only the gates remain to be installed, and Sanballat and his allies try another ruse. 'Let's meet in Ono' (50km out of Jerusalem) they say. They talk of negotiation but intend harm. On their fifth presentation, they put their allegations into an open letter—planning for it to 'leak' and foment further trouble. They talk about Nehemiah being a rebel but have no substance to their claims. The threat is not minor however and Nehemiah again asks God for strength.

Then Nehemiah visits a prophet, only to find that he is a false prophet. He is one of several pseudo prophets who try to stop the work. Shemaiah wants Nehemiah to hide in the temple, an act Nehemiah says would be a sin (because he is not a priest—cf. 2 Chron. 26:16-23) and an act of cowardice that would make the Jews lose confidence in him. In fact, Nehemiah discovers that Shemaiah has been bribed by Tobiah and Sanballat to discredit Nehemiah.

All this happens in just over seven weeks, and the wall is finished! Now we find what this has all been about. The enemies have lost their battle but also lost their self-importance. They recognise that Israel's

## **NEHEMIAH BUILDS THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM / GIVING THANKS TO GOD      con't**

God has been at work. He has been made glorious, and they have been shamed—as Nehemiah requested (4:4-5).

### **12:27-43**

Nehemiah again picks up his own story (last at 7:5). Levites and people of other tribes gather to Jerusalem to dedicate the wall to God. After the necessary purification rites, Nehemiah arranges two choirs with instrumentalists, one to walk along the south and west walls and the other along the east and northern walls, singing as they head towards the temple area (cf. Psa. 48:12-14). The people have been taught that the law must not bring them sorrow (8:10). They need joy to be strong. And they will need to be strong now. They have good reason to praise the God who has brought about such a remarkable re-establishment of them in this contested land.

Arriving at the temple, they join to give thanks together and offer many sacrifices because of the great joy God had created for them. It was a noisy time—heard far away!

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