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The Historical Books of the Old Testament

Lesson 7

Lesson 7 Commentary

Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 8 Questions

The Maccabees and Recap

Introduction

We read in both the books of Kings and Chronicles that the Kingdom of Judah was exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

After two punitive strikes against Judah in 601 and 597 B.C., the Babylonian army stormed into Judah, besieged Jerusalem, and finally destroyed both the city and its Temple in 586 B.C. In the course of these events, Nebuchadnezzar hauled off great numbers of Jewish captives into exile and looted the Temple and treasuries of Jerusalem as spoils of war. Nebuchadnezzar directed the campaign from the town of Kiblah (Jer 39:5–6), and it was there that he exacted his cruel punishments. Around five years later, he ordered yet another deportation of Judeans to Babylon (Jer 52:30).¹

The citizens (at least the leading members) of Judah stayed in captivity until the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon around 538 B.C. The first Jews returned from Babylon soon thereafter, but they had no place to worship. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the Temple when he captured Jerusalem. Jeremiah describes the destruction:

On the tenth day of the fifth month, this was in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan, captain of the bodyguard, came to Jerusalem as the representative of the king of Babylon. He burned the house of the LORD, the palace of the king, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every large building he destroyed with fire. Then the Chaldean troops with the captain of the guard tore down all the walls that surrounded Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan, captain of

¹ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 643.

the guard, led into exile the remnant of people left in the city, those who had deserted to the king of Babylon, and the rest of the artisans. But Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, left behind some of the country's poor as vinedressers and farmers. The bronze pillars that belonged to the house of the LORD, and the wheeled carts and the bronze sea in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke into pieces; they carried away all the bronze to Babylon. They also took the pots, shovels, snuffers, bowls, pans, and all the bronze vessels used for service; the basins, fire holders, bowls, pots, lampstands, pans, the sacrificial bowls made of gold or silver. Along with these furnishings the captain of the guard carried off the two pillars, the one sea and its base of twelve oxen cast in bronze, and the wheeled carts King Solomon had commissioned for the house of the LORD. The bronze from all these furnishings was impossible to weigh.²

This brings us to Ezra and Nehemiah, who brought the people back to Judah and rebuilt the Temple and Jerusalem.

There is a natural bridge between 2 Chronicles and Ezra. Compare the last verses of 2 Chronicles to the opening verses of Ezra:

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to realize the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD roused the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, to spread this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. All among you, therefore, who belong to his people, may their God be with them; let them go up."³

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Those among you who belong to any part of his people, may their God be with them! Let them go up to Jerusalem in Judah to build the house of the Lord the God of Israel, that is, the God who is in Jerusalem. Let all those who have survived, in whatever place they may have

² Jer 52:12–20. All biblical citations are from the NABRE.

³ 2 Chr 36:22–23.

lived, be assisted by the people of that place with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, together with voluntary offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”⁴

As stated in the previous session, the similarities prompt some to suggest that the Chronicler and the author of Ezra are one in the same.

The high-level outline of Ezra and Nehemiah is as follows:

- I. From Cyrus’ Decree to the Completion of the Temple, ca. 537-516 B.C. (Ezra 1-6)
- II. Ezra’s Mission of Reform and Renewal, ca. 458 B.C. (Ezra 7-10)
- III. Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls of Jerusalem, ca. 444 B.C. (Neh 1-7)
- IV. The Great Covenant Renewal, ca. 444 B.C. (Neh 8:1-13:3)
- V. Epilogue: Nehemiah’s Disappointing Return After Several Years (Neh 13)⁵

Mention of the “first year of Cyrus, King of Persia in Ezra 1:1 suggests that the time period being written about starts around 538 B.C. The dateable reference mentioned in this narrative comes in the final chapter of Nehemiah:

During all this time I had not been in Jerusalem, for in the *thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon*, I had gone back to the king. *After a suitable period of time*, however, I asked leave of the king and returned to Jerusalem, where I discovered the evil thing that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in setting aside for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.⁶

The “thirty-second year of Artaxerxes” would be about 433 B.C. and Artaxerxes died in 423 B.C. “So, chronologically these two books stretch over a century, from 538 B.C. to 433–423 B.C. The lives and ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah fill a smaller window in that period, at most thirty-five years (from 458 B.C. to 423 B.C. [at the latest]).”⁷

Ezra

If you look at the first verses of Ezra, one important fact stands out. Previously the builder of God’s house was an Israelite, Solomon. Now the builder is a Gentile, Cyrus. “Although not a monotheist, Cyrus had great regard for the religious beliefs of his subjects, and claimed the patronage of each local divinity; *e.g.* his capture of Babylon is ascribed to the favour of Marduk.

⁴ Ezra 1:1–4.

⁵ Adapted from John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (Ignatius Press, 2018), Kindle Edition, Chapter 17, Location 9510 - 9531. As a point of interest, if you saw the movie “300” about the 300 Spartans who withstood the whole Persian army, the Persian king depicted was Xerxes I, who ruled Persia from 486 – 465 B.C.

⁶ Neh 13:6–7.

⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 504.

So here his success is attributed to Yahweh.”⁸ This might prefigure the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation history.

It appears that the initial return was led by a descendant of David and an ancestor of Jesus,⁹ Zerubbabel, along with Jeshua, the high priest. First, the altar is built and sacrifices are initiated. Second, the foundation of the new Temple is laid. Great celebrations are held as each of these projects are completed. Then, as a result of interference of “non-Jews,” the building stops. Enter the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who prod the people to get back to building the Temple.¹⁰ The Jews now appeal to Darius I, the king of Persia at the time, to follow his ancestor’s (Cyrus) decree and build the Temple. The “Second Temple” is completed somewhere between 520 and 515 B.C., thus beginning what is called the “Second Temple Period” of the Jews. In Ezra 6, we see the national celebration of Passover. “Thus the festival that had once functioned as a celebration of entry into the Promised Land under Joshua now functions as the celebration of the return to the land under Jeshua and Zerubbabel (see Josh 5).”¹¹

Notice in Ezra 1 that Cyrus returned the vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the “house of the LORD.”

King Cyrus, too, had the vessels of the house of the LORD brought forth that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his god. Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought forth by the treasurer Mithredath, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah. This was the inventory: baskets of goldware, thirty; baskets of silverware, one thousand and twenty-nine; golden bowls, thirty; silver bowls, four hundred and ten; other vessels, one thousand. Total of the gold and silver vessels: five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar took with him when the exiles were brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem.¹²

One big thing is missing: where is the Ark of the Covenant? In 2 Chronicles, Josiah put the Ark in the Temple before he died.¹³ Its location is never mentioned again. The book of Revelation suggests that the Ark is in Heaven.¹⁴ According to 2 Maccabees, Jeremiah took the Ark and other items and hid them:

⁸ R. A. Dyson, “Esdras-Nehemias,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard and Edmund F. Sutcliffe (Toronto; New York; Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 378.

⁹ See Matt 1 for a genealogy of Jesus.

¹⁰ See Ezra 5, Hag 1-2, Zech 1.

¹¹ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 17, Location 9571.

¹² Ezra 1:7–11.

¹³ See 2 Chr 35:1-6.

¹⁴ See Rev 11:19.

The same document also tells how the prophet, in virtue of an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should accompany him, and how he went to the very mountain that Moses climbed to behold God's inheritance [Mt. Nebo?]. When Jeremiah arrived there, he found a chamber in a cave in which he put the tent, the ark, and the altar of incense; then he sealed the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the path, but they could not find it. When Jeremiah heard of this, he reproved them: "The place is to remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows them mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will be seen, just as they appeared in the time of Moses and of Solomon when he prayed that the place might be greatly sanctified."¹⁵

The actual location of the Ark remains a mystery. I suspect it will never be found.¹⁶

Based on the dating of the Artaxerxes as king of Persia, it appears as if 50 years passed in silence. Then a descendant of Aaron, named Ezra, arrives on the scene with a mission. Apparently, the Jews have been intermarrying with the pagans in Israel:

When these matters had been concluded, the leaders approached me [Ezra] with this report: "Neither the Israelite laymen nor the priests nor the Levites have kept themselves separate from the peoples of the lands and their abominations—Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites—for they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, thus intermingling the holy seed with the peoples of the lands. Furthermore, the leaders and rulers have taken a prominent part in this apostasy!"¹⁷

This appears to be something different than "interracial" marriages as we think of it today. It is related to the corruption of the Jewish/Israelite cult with pagan worship. Ezra's objection is against "inter-cultic" marriage, not "interracial" marriage, *per se*. Ezra and the Jewish men take a very harsh approach to solving the issue. They expel the pagan wives and the children they had! As with *herem*, how do we reconcile our conception of God's goodness and this seemingly extreme reaction to innocent women and children? It is not easy, and no explanation completely resolves our modern unease. The most likely explanation is that in Ezra's cultural context, marriage between families was predominately a socio-political endeavor rather than a romantic one. Power and prestige were transferred and inherited primarily through the institution of

¹⁵ 2 Macc 2:4–8.

¹⁶ An interesting historical tidbit is that the triumphal arch of Tiberius in Rome has a panel with soldiers carrying a menorah and other Temple implements after the sack of Jerusalem and the second Temple in 70 A.D. There is not Ark among the spoils. Pompey, the Roman General, entered the Holy of Holies in the 60s B.C. and reportedly remarked on its emptiness.

¹⁷ Ezra 9:1–2.

marriage. Since the people who had established themselves in Jerusalem and the surrounding area during Judah's exile were pagans, the returning Jews used marriage as a means of re-acquiring influence and control over the land. By putting away their wives and the resulting children, they were giving up the social ingratiation and upward mobility that accompanied those relationships.

Nehemiah

Some two decades pass in silence before we see the appearance of Nehemiah. Nehemiah's heritage is not nearly as impressive as Ezra's. We only read about the name of his father, Hacaliah. While Ezra's leadership appears to be founded on his status as a Levitical priest, Nehemiah appears to be a layman with the power of King Artaxerxes behind him. Nehemiah has a building project to complete, just as the returning Jews had a building project to complete. The returning Jews rebuilt the Temple, while Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Just as the returning Jews celebrated the rebuilding of the Temple with a festival (Passover), Ezra and Nehemiah celebrated the rebuilding of the walls with a festival (Tabernacles).

The feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) is the primary feast held in the Fall to celebrate the fruits of the harvest given by God, primarily grains and grapes. In addition to being an agricultural festival, it also was a celebration in remembrance of being freed from Egypt. The reason it is called Tabernacles (or Booths) is due to the type of structure that the Israelites had to live in during the eight-day celebration. The "booth" was a structure made of tree boughs and palm leaves like the type of structure the Israelite supposedly lived in during the exodus from Egypt.

Another important statement is made in Nehemiah. We read:

Ezra opened the scroll so that all the people might see it, for he was standing higher than any of the people. When he opened it, all the people stood. Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, "Amen, amen!" Then they knelt down and bowed before the LORD, their faces to the ground. The Levites Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah explained the law to the people, who remained in their places. *Ezra read clearly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read.* Then Nehemiah, that is, the governor, and Ezra the priest-scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all the people: "Today is holy

to the LORD your God. Do not lament, do not weep!”—for all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.¹⁸

Why did Ezra have to “interpret it so that all could understand what was read?” While one might view this as similar to our modern day homily (interpreting the scripture), a likely explanation is that the people no longer understood (at least clearly) classical Hebrew, the language of the Torah. They had spent seventy years in Babylon. They probably at this point had adopted Aramaic, the language commonly spoken by the Jews of Jesus’s time. Aramaic was “a northwest Semitic language similar to Hebrew that served as the international tongue of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires successively.”¹⁹

Nehemiah ends on a rather ominous note. After governing Judah for a period, Nehemiah returns to Persia. After some time, he asks and receives permission to return. What he finds is not good. The issue of intermarriage has occurred again. Foreigners have taken up residence in the Temple. The Sabbath has been ignored. The Jews are not ready to govern themselves. But what is next?

¹⁸ Neh 8:5–9.

¹⁹ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 17, Location 9616.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 8

The Maccabees and Recap

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read “The First Book of the Maccabees,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 3 – Read “The Second Book of the Maccabees,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 4 – Read 1 Maccabees 1. Explain in a few sentences the situation that is happening. Who is the Alexander that is mentioned in verse 1?

Day 5 – Read 1 Maccabees 4:52-59. What Festival in today's terms are they describing? (Hint: Kislev roughly corresponds with the month of December).

Day 6 – Write in a few sentences the most important things you learned throughout this eight-week study, thus far.

THE FIRST BOOK OF MACCABEES

The name Maccabee, probably meaning “hammer,” is actually applied in the Books of Maccabees to only one man, Judas, third son of the priest Mattathias and first leader of the revolt against the Seleucid kings who persecuted the Jews (1 Mc 2:4, 66; 2 Mc 8:5, 16; 10:1, 16). Traditionally the name has come to be extended to the brothers of Judas, his supporters, and even to other Jewish heroes of the period, such as the seven brothers (2 Mc 7).

The two Books of Maccabees contain independent accounts of events (in part identical) that accompanied the attempted suppression of Judaism in Palestine in the second century B.C. The vigorous reaction to this attempt established for a time the religious and political independence of the Jews.

First Maccabees was written about 100 B.C., in Hebrew, but the original has not come down to us. Instead, we have an early, pre-Christian, Greek translation full of Hebrew idioms. The author, probably a Palestinian Jew, is unknown. He was familiar with the traditions and sacred books of his people and had access to much reliable information on their recent history (from 175 to 134 B.C.). He may well have played some part in it himself in his youth. His purpose in writing is to record the deliverance of Israel that God worked through the family of Mattathias (5:62)—especially through his three sons, Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, and his grandson, John Hyrcanus. The writer compares their virtues and their exploits with those of Israel’s ancient heroes, the Judges, Samuel, and David.

There are seven poetic sections in the book that imitate the style of classical Hebrew poetry: four laments (1:25–28, 36–40; 2:7–13; 3:45), and three hymns of praise of “our fathers” (2:51–64), of Judas (3:3–9), and of Simon (14:4–15). The doctrine expressed in the book is the customary belief of Israel, without the new developments which appear in 2 Maccabees and Daniel. The people of Israel have been specially chosen by the one true God as covenant-partner, and they alone are privileged to know and worship God, their eternal benefactor and unfailing source of help. The people, in turn, must worship the Lord alone and observe exactly the precepts of the law given to them. The rededication of the Jerusalem Temple described in 59 (see 2 Mc 10:1–8) is the origin of the Jewish feast of Hanukkah.

Unlike the Second Book of Maccabees, there is no doctrine of individual immortality except in the survival of one’s name and fame, nor does the book express any messianic expectation, though messianic images are applied historically to “the days of Simon” (1 Mc 14:4–17). In true Deuteronomic tradition, the author insists on fidelity to the law as the expression of Israel’s love for God. The contest which he describes is a struggle, not simply between Jew and Gentile, but between those who would uphold the law and those, Jews or

Gentiles, who would destroy it. His severest condemnation goes, not to the Seleucid politicians, but to the lawless apostates among his own people, adversaries of Judas and his brothers, who are models of faith and loyalty.

The first and second Books of Maccabees, though regarded by Jews and Protestants as apocryphal, i.e., not inspired Scripture, because not contained in the Jewish list of books drawn up at the end of the first century A.D., have always been accepted by the Catholic Church as inspired and are called “deuterocanonical” to indicate that they are canonical even though disputed by some.

First Maccabees can be divided as follows:

- I. Crisis and Response (1:1–2:70)
- II. Leadership of Judas Maccabeus (3:1–9:22)
- III. Leadership of Jonathan (9:23–12:53)
- IV. Leadership of Simon (13:1–16:24)²⁰

²⁰ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to 1 Maccabees.

THE SECOND BOOK OF MACCABEES

Although this book, like the preceding one, receives its title from its protagonist, Judas Maccabee (or Maccabeus), it is not a sequel to 1 Maccabees. The two differ in many respects. Whereas the first covers the period from the beginning of the reign of Antiochus IV (175 B.C.) to the accession of John Hyrcanus I (134 B.C.), this book treats of the events in Jewish history from the time of the high priest Onias III and King Seleucus IV (ca. 180 B.C.) to the defeat of Nicanor's army (161 B.C.).

The author of 2 Maccabees states (2:23) that this one-volume work is an abridgment of a five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene; but since this latter has not survived, it is difficult to determine its relationship to the present epitome. One does not know how freely the anonymous epitomizer may have rewritten the original composition or how closely the abridgment follows the wording of the original. Some parts of the text here clearly not derived from Jason's work are the preface (2:19–32), the epilogue (15:37–39), and probably also certain moralizing reflections (e.g., 5:17–20; 6:12–17). It is certain, however, that both works were written in Greek, which explains in part why 2 Maccabees was not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible.

The book is not without genuine historical value in supplementing 1 Maccabees, and it contains some apparently authentic official documents (11:16–38). Its purpose, whether intended by Jason himself or read into it by the compiler, is to give a theological interpretation to the history of the period. The major concern is the Jerusalem Temple, whose defender is the God of Israel. There is less interest, therefore, in the military exploits of Judas Maccabeus and more in God's marvelous interventions on behalf of the Jews and their Temple. These divine actions direct the course of events, both to punish the sacrilegious and blasphemous pagans and to purify and restore the Temple. The author sometimes effects this purpose by transferring events from their proper chronological order, by giving exaggerated figures for the size of armies and the numbers killed in battle, by placing long, edifying discourses and prayers in the mouths of heroes, and by describing elaborate celestial apparitions (3:24–34; 5:2–4; 10:29–30; 15:11–16). The book is the earliest known source of stories that glorify God's holy martyrs (6:18–7:42; 14:37–46).

Of theological importance are the author's teachings on Israel's sufferings (5:17–20; 6:12–17), the resurrection of the just on the last day (7:9, 11, 14, 23; 14:46), the intercession of the saints in heaven for people living on earth (15:11–16), and the power of the living to offer prayers and sacrifices for the dead (12:39–46).

The beginning of 2 Maccabees consists of two letters sent by the Jews of Jerusalem to their coreligionists in Egypt. They deal with the observance of the feast commemorating the

central event of the book, the purification of the Temple (Hanukkah). It is uncertain whether the author or a later scribe prefixed these letters to the narrative proper. If the author is responsible for their insertion, the book must have been written some time after 124 B.C., the date of the more recent of the two letters. A date of composition in the late second century B.C. is likely.

The main divisions of 2 Maccabees are:

- I. Letters to the Jews in Egypt (1:1–2:18)
- II. Compiler's Preface (2:19–32)
- III. Heliodorus' Attempt to Profane the Temple (3:1–40)
- IV. Profanation and Persecution (4:1–7:42)
- V. Victories of Judas and Purification of the Temple (8:1–10:9)
- VI. Renewed Persecution (10:10–15:36)
- VII. Epilogue (15:37–39)²¹

²¹ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to 2 Maccabees.