

PARALLEL GUIDE 32

The Restoration

Summary: The extensive work of the so-called “Chronicler” preserves the history of the Restoration in the books of I and II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. After showing how the Exile influenced Jewish religion and discussing the centrality of the temple, this chapter presents an extensive reordering of Ezra and Nehemiah and then proceeds to a detailed discussion of the two books, pausing along the way for brief looks at the books of Haggai, Zechariah, Third Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah.

Learning Objectives

- Read [Ezra 1-10:39](#), [Nehemiah](#), and [Ruth](#) (see page 560)
- Read [Jonah](#)
- Name three ways these Jews maintained their identity during the Exile
- Contrast the views of history presented by the JE history, the historian of Deuteronomy, and “the Chronicler”
- Learn the meaning of the following terms: [targum](#), [Zion](#), universalism, diaspora, [Aramaic](#)

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. “Culture-shock” describes the feelings of alienation of people who move to a very different culture. It is a radical form of homesickness. Compare a time when you felt “culture-shock” or homesickness to the Jews’ experience in exile. How are the experiences the same? How do they differ?
2. Whenever the present circumstances of your life change significantly, your recollection of the past adjusts to the new situation. For example, an adult who becomes a parent for the first time recalls many personal childhood experiences with a new perspective. In a sense your personal history changes whenever your present circumstances change. Your past is redefined. Compare your personal experience with the various versions of history that have been presented.

Preparing for Your Seminar

Ours is a time of rapid change. [What might we learn about both changing and maintaining our traditions from the experience of the Jewish people as they endured exile and return to their homeland? Be prepared to discuss the effects of change, perhaps looking at the effects of death and new life as a guiding principle.](#) Consider also the need for [appropriate grieving](#) of those changes which mark the end of a way of life.

Additional Sources

Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, The Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1965).

John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd. ed. (Westminster Press, 1981).

John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, The Anchor Bible Series, vol. 20 (Doubleday, 1968).

Chapter 32 THE RESTORATION

Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but the return was hardly the glorious procession which Second Isaiah pictured. In many ways life in Babylon had been quite pleasant for the exiles. It offered material comfort not possible in the war-torn land of Palestine. In fact, many of the exiles may have preferred the prosperity of Babylon, for a number seem to have declined the permission to return home. Those who did return were the staunchly faithful Jews for whom Jerusalem and the temple were of supreme importance.

In this lesson we examine how these zealous worshipers of YHWH responded to the crisis presented to them by the Exile, and how they acted upon their return to Jerusalem. They developed there a style of life quite different from that which Second Isaiah predicted; its exclusive, nationalistic nature stemmed from the circumstances of the time.

The Chronicler

In this lesson we also introduce the third great historian of the Old Testament, “the Chronicler,” and follow that narrative to the rise of Ezra the scribe. We look briefly at Third Isaiah (Isa. 56-66), Haggai, and Zechariah. Finally, with a brief summary of the books of Ruth and Jonah, we demonstrate that a strand of universalism survived the strictures of the narrower and more nationalistic Judaism of the time after the Exile.

YHWH’s work of salvation was seen by the Old Testament writers of history as a series of responses—of Israel to God’s call and of God to Israel’s actions. Whether Israel was faithful or unfaithful, YHWH fulfilled God’s purposes. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (Gen. 50:20). Joseph’s words to his brothers reflect the idea that God takes human actions and turns them to God’s own purposes.

In historical accounts we see the interactions between humankind and YHWH in which YHWH’s saving work is done. Of all the literary forms in the Old Testament, history is the most important. Having said this, we need immediately to add that we are not talking about twentieth-century views of historiography. What is of supreme importance to the biblical writers is the theological interpretation of the historical events. The biblical authors **make no claim to being “objective” chroniclers of events; they make quite the opposite assertion: they are proclaiming the meaning of the events they relate.** The JE epic sets the history of Israel’s relationship with God in the context of the history of the world from its creation to the scattering of the peoples. It tells of the wanderings of the patriarchs and the sojourn in Egypt; it then tells of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the release of the captive people, their desert wanderings, and their taking possession of the land. The Deuteronomistic historian, using the JE epic, court records, other sources, and making editorial notations, picks up the story of the people of God from the time of Moses. D tells a different story of the taking of the land, then carries the story through the rule of

Samuel, of the kings of the kingdom united and divided, to the time of the Exile. A third historian, after covering much of the same material as the Deuteronomistic historian, carries the story further, bringing it up to **around 400 BCE**, when Ezra the scribe reads “the Law” to the people of Jerusalem as part of a covenant

renewal ceremony. This historian is usually referred to as the Chronicler.

The Chronicler's work is found not only in I and II Chronicles, but also in Ezra and Nehemiah. His history reflects the attitudes and concerns of the Judaism of the day, some time between the beginning of the fourth century BCE and the latter third of the same century. Judaism in the fourth century BCE was different in significant ways from the life of Israel and Judah before the Exile. There was no longer a king, and Judah was only a province of the Persian Empire. The central figures in the community were the governor, whose authority came from the Persian king, and the high priest.

The temple was the supremely important institution of religious life, to a degree not imagined even in the Deuteronomic reform. Above all, the Law ruled, most especially in its requirements on observing the Sabbath and prohibiting intermarriage with non-Jews. The Chronicler rewrote the history of the monarchy and of the events that followed the return from exile to show that these events were part of God's plan.

The Contribution of the Exile to Postexilic Judaism

Psalms 137 speaks of the major problem that the Jews faced in exile: "How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (v. 4) Israel had long viewed the land itself as central to the promises that YHWH had made to the patriarchs. It was "the land of promise"—not simply a desirable land, but the symbol of YHWH's promises to the people. In later years, Jerusalem in particular, the city in which YHWH had caused God's name to dwell, came to stand for the promise of the "everlasting covenant." In exile, the land was left behind, Jerusalem abandoned. So the Psalmist writes, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Zion [Jerusalem]. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" (Ps. 137:1-3). How could the Jews sing the songs of Zion when they had been sent from the land?

The crisis was more severe than we might imagine today. It was generally thought that gods were confined to the lands over which they ruled. The JE epic had demonstrated the power of YHWH to overcome the gods of Egypt and set the people free, and YHWH was victorious over the gods of the nations who stood in the way of the people's settlement in the land. The prophets, from Amos through Isaiah of Jerusalem, had shown YHWH determining the outcome of history, using foreign powers to accomplish God's purposes. But through all this, the idea persisted that the land of Israel, and especially the city of Jerusalem, home of the temple, was YHWH's own dwelling place. To "lose" the temple was to lose also the regular and assured means of contact between God and humankind. To be banished from the land was to be sent away from God's presence.

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In the crisis that the Exile presented, the Jews had two choices—they could abandon their ancient tradition and become members of Babylonian society, or they could find some way to maintain their identity over against the foreign society in which they lived. No doubt many followed the first course. Life in Babylon was relatively easy for the exiles. They were not free to leave, but beyond this there were few restrictions placed upon them. In contrast to the splendors of Babylon, one of the largest and most impressive cities of the ancient world, Jerusalem must have seemed almost rustic and crude, especially after siege and destruction. Even in the days of Solomon it could not have compared with the splendor of sixth-century Babylon. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon are still remembered as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temptation to forget Jerusalem and adopt Babylon must have been nearly overwhelming.

Some of the exiles chose the other course. They joined in the sentiment expressed in Ps. 137:5-6—"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!" These Jews had to find a way to keep the remembrance of Jerusalem forever alive.

One way to do this was by preserving and constantly reading the story of YHWH's dealings with Israel. The priests during their exile could no longer offer the sacrifices at the temple, but they could continue to offer direction to the people. Accordingly they started to write down the ancient beliefs and customs, JE and other written and oral traditions, in a single body of "teaching"—torah. It is unlikely that this was done as a single project all at one time. Some of it was almost certainly carried out after the people returned home. But the movement to bring the ancient traditions together to form a unified "teaching" or torah began among the exiles. The composition of the P version of the ancient history began in Babylon.

Two long-established practices also acquired new—or at least greater—meaning: circumcision and the Sabbath observances. The Israelites, along with many other ancient peoples, practiced circumcision. Whether they did so for **hygienic reasons** or as **a cultic act in connection with marriage** is not clear—possibly it was both. In Canaan, circumcision could have served no function in distinguishing the Israelites from their neighbors, since the Canaanites practiced it as well. The Babylonians, however, did not. In Babylon, then, for a man to be circumcised was to bear an indelible mark on his body that he was not a Babylonian. In the Priestly retelling of the patriarchal story, circumcision is made a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:9-14). **An action which had always been done by the people was thereby made a sign of membership in Israel: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:14). The birth of every Jewish male child in Babylon became, therefore, an occasion of the covenant.** The rite of circumcision would then reach into each Jewish home with the reminder that this family was Jewish, not Babylonian.

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For the Jewish community as a whole, the Sabbath served as a different kind of reminder. An occasional day of rest is almost a physical necessity, and the weekly cycle is an obvious rhythm by which to determine it. The phases of the moon mark off the weeks with a dependable regularity, and there were probably many peoples who associated a day of the week with cultic observances of the moon god. Whatever the Sabbath may have meant to Israelites before the Exile, however, the P writer's version of the creation story made the seventh day YHWH's day for all time. As noted earlier, the P writer's version of the creation story compresses the several stages of creation to make them fit into six days. But, as P tells the story, creation was not completed until on the seventh day God "created" rest. **The story, as P shaped it, leads up to the creation of the Sabbath. Like circumcision, the Sabbath is divinely instituted, and P puts the establishment of both institutions as early in the human story as possible.**

When the Jews ceased all work on the seventh day of each week, they placed themselves in visible contrast to the rest of Babylonian society. Each Jew was made sharply aware of his or her difference from the Babylonian neighbors, and at the same time the larger society was made aware of the existence of the Jewish community.

In these three ways—the editing of the torah, the practice of circumcision, and the observance of the Sabbath—Jews were able to maintain their identity as a separate people—the people of YHWH—and to resist the attractions of an alien and seductive culture.^{top}

The Temple

When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem, they realized that Second Isaiah was at least partially right—the "former things" were no more. They were no longer an independent nation with a king from the house of David. Jerusalem was no longer the capital city of YHWH's appointed monarch. Still, it was the city in which the temple, though partially destroyed, stood. The center of unity for the people of YHWH could no longer be the house of David, but it could be the house of YHWH. These were the circumstances under which the Chronicler wrote, and they necessitated a reinterpretation of the history of

Judah.

First and Second Chronicles retrace much of the history presented in the books of Samuel and Kings, but the emphasis is considerably different. David is portrayed less as a national hero than as the founder of the temple and the one who shaped its liturgical patterns. Drawing on the early chapters of Genesis, the first nine chapters of I Chronicles are an extended genealogy, which establishes Israel as the chosen people and traces the ancestry of the Jerusalem priesthood back to Aaron through **David's priest, Zadok**. The other priests, those who had maintained the rural shrines prior to Josiah's reform, are referred to simply as "the Levites" and are seen as assistants to the "Zadokite" priesthood of the temple. This was the existing state of affairs at the time the Chronicler wrote, and the genealogical tables were shaped to establish its antiquity and thus its legitimacy.

The remainder of I Chronicles, especially I Chron. 22ff., shows David establishing the temple cult, assigning the duties of the temple officials, and laying down the rules for

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its ritual. Second Chronicles begins with Solomon's construction of the temple. The Deuteronomistic history as given in Samuel and Kings is followed—with some variations—through the time of the Exile. Although Chronicles uses the Deuteronomistic history, it presents a different picture. Much more detail is given about the temple and its rites and much less interest is shown in the political events of the time. Compare the treatments of the reign of King Hezekiah (II Kings 18-20; II Chron. 29-32). The major concerns of the II Kings account are political, having to do with Hezekiah's constant involvement in foreign affairs, particularly as an attempt to avoid takeover by Assyria. Hezekiah's attempts at religious reform are mentioned only in passing (18:4), and most of the account (18:9-19:37) is given over to the war with Assyria, if it can be called that. The superpower runs over the Northern Kingdom, capturing the capital city of Samaria in 722 BCE; then under Sennacherib the Assyrian army moves southward, seizing many smaller Judean cities and laying siege to Jerusalem. The siege is lifted, however, either because Sennacherib is called to fight elsewhere (19:7) or because a plague strikes the Assyrian army (19:35-37). The Chronicler does not ignore the political aspects of Hezekiah's reign—see the summary of the Kings' narrative in chapter 32—but the Chronicler's major concerns are religious. Hezekiah is introduced as a reformer (29:3), intent on repairing the damage to the nation's spiritual life done by Ahaz, his father. Thus, Hezekiah is interested primarily in restoring access to the temple. He exhorts the priests and particularly the Levites to reform (29:5, 11). He organizes their sanctification and that of the temple (29:5-15) and he plans a great service for Passover (ch. 30). This last act is not without political significance, since it is intended to reunite Jews north and south, but its religious aspects are what interest the Chronicler, who sums up Hezekiah's reign as follows:

"Hezekiah did this throughout all Judah; and he did what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, to seek his God, he did with all his heart; and he prospered" (31:20-21).

The Chronicler thus presents the temple as the most prominent feature of pre-exilic history. David is a great figure, established as king by YHWH himself, but the most important thing that David did was to draw the plans for the temple, including its appointments, its priesthood, its music, and its liturgy. When defeat came to the nation, the monarchy was ended and the temple was destroyed. After the Exile, the monarchy could not be reestablished, but the temple could be rebuilt.

The Chronicler's story continues in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In these books the center of interest is in rebuilding the temple and reforming the life of the community along the lines of the deliberately emphasized Jewishness that developed during the Exile.

Ezra-Nehemiah

In the Hebrew text these two books were one scroll. They are part of the Chronicler's story, following directly after the two books of Chronicles, which were also a single scroll in the Hebrew. During the course of copying, the text of Ezra-Nehemiah has Nehemiah

become badly corrupted. For many reasons, scholars are certain that the events related could not have occurred in the order that the text now presents. One possible explanation of the textual corruption is that scribes writing much later became confused about the sequence of events. They were not aware of the dates of some of the Persian kings and rearranged the texts in the wrong order. Many reconstructions of the correct original order of the text have been attempted. For the sake of consistency with the footnotes in the OAB we adopt the reconstruction suggested in the introduction to Ezra there.

Please take your Bible and mark the text of Ezra and Nehemiah as follows. In the margins mark the beginning and end of each of the following ten sections. At the end of each section make a note to show what to read next. For example, at the end of the first section, at Ezra 2:70, write in the margin, "Go to Neh. 7:6." In this way, by turning from section to section, you will be able to read Ezra-Nehemiah's story in something approximating its original sequence. The ten sections to mark are:

- 1) Ezra 1, 2:1-70
- 2) Neh. 7:6-73a
- 3) Ezra 3:1-4:6
- 4) Ezra 4:24-6:22
- 5) Ezra 4:7-23
- 6) Neh. 1:1-7:5
- 7) Neh. 11-13
- 8) Neh. 9:38-10:39
- 9) Ezra 7-10
- 10) Neh. 8:1-9:37

Now read these biblical passages in the order given here to discern the outline of the Chronicler's account. At appropriate points the lesson commentary will be interrupted to introduce some of the prophetic voices which arose during the time of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Ezra 1, 2:1-70; Nehemiah 7:6-73a; Ezra 3:1-4:6 The Chronicler's Account

The story opens with the edict of Cyrus allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. Typical of the Chronicler, the edict is presented as the result of YHWH's rousing the spirit of Cyrus. This is done, apparently, that the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:38) might be fulfilled. The whole matter of captivity, exile, and release has been under the control of YHWH.

The number of Jews who went home at this time was almost certainly smaller than the list given in Ezra 2 and Neh. 7:6-69. The fact that many Jews were well established in their adopted countries (Babylon or elsewhere) is shown by the second option for supporting the temple project: "with silver and gold, with goods and with animals." The option of contributing the fruits of their sojourning may have cut down on the number of Jews who decided to return to Jerusalem. The Chronicler, writing about the events long after they occurred, has probably taken a later list, or lists, and inserted the compilation at this point.

Under the leadership of two men, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, an altar is built—presumably within the ruins of the temple—and the sacrificial cultus is reestablished. In addition, foundations are laid for the rebuilding of the temple.

The cult and the temple are at the center of the Chronicler's interpretation of history. "The main interest of the writer centered about the cult, but the center of the cult was the temple, for whose reconstruction the Cyrus edict had been issued. Hence the first thing to be done after due attention had been given to the functioning of the cult, as far as possible, was to initiate plans for carrying out the royal edict" (Myers, p. 27).

As far as the edict itself is concerned, the Chronicler includes Cyrus' declaration that YHWH has given him "all the Kingdoms of the earth" and appointed him to rebuild the temple. The Hebrew people are to support the project either by going to Jerusalem to help with the building or by pledging money.

The plans follow those of David and Solomon, but they are not immediately carried out. The foundation is laid, but that is all. What prevents the plans from being pursued? Various explanations are offered, and the Chronicler's differs significantly from that of Haggai and Zechariah. In the Chronicler's view, the people of YHWH cannot be blamed for the delay in rebuilding the temple. The forces must be from "outside." So the Chronicler introduces *invents?* at this point certain "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin"—probably Samaritans—who offer to help in the rebuilding operations. They are sharply rebuffed. The "adversaries" then "discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan, throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia" (Ezra 4:1-4).

The rebuilding of the temple is postponed. Meanwhile, things seem to go badly for the people in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. War has desolated the land and the Babylonians have left no strong leaders to foster its redevelopment. The small group of exiles who returned under Cyrus have been unable to knit the people together into an effective community. Meanwhile, the Persian throne suffers a series of blows. Cyrus dies in 530 BCE. Cambyses, an ineffectual ruler, succeeds to the throne and dies in 522, leaving no heir. Darius is next in line to the throne. The first two years of his reign are plagued with strife and intrigue as he seeks to secure his position. It is in the early days of the reign of Darius that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, seeing the turmoil in Persia as a sign of YHWH's activity, are to spur the Jewish leaders on to the task of rebuilding the temple.

Haggai and Zechariah

In this time, when poverty and listlessness are afflicting Jerusalem, two prophets announce the coming of YHWH's Messiah and the glorification of Jerusalem. The vision of Second Isaiah has remained unfulfilled. Far from being a powerful procession, the return from exile must have passed almost unnoticed. Haggai sees this not as a failure on YHWH's part, but on that of the people. They have struggled to satisfy minimal economic needs, saying "the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house" (Hag. 1:2). Haggai claims that the failure of the economy is due to YHWH's displeasure at the people's attitude. "You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you run off to your own

houses" (Hag. 1:9). Haggai speaks this message to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua, the high priest, the son of Jehozadak (Hag. 1:1). Zerubbabel belonged to the house of David, and Haggai calls him the "governor of Judah" (Hag. 1:1). It is doubtful that he held that office, strictly speaking. At the time Judah seems to have belonged to the province of Samaria, called "the Province Beyond the River" (Ezra 5:3)—west of the Jordan from Persia—and to have as its Persian-appointed governor a man named Tattenai (Ezra 5:3). Zerubbabel must have had an official position, however, for Haggai to call him "governor." Joshua (spelled "Jeshua" in Ezra 3:2 and through the Chronicler's account) is called the "high priest." In pre-exilic times no

such office existed, but the position was to assume greater and greater importance in the post-exilic period. The two leaders respond to Haggai's urging, and work begins again on the temple (Ezra 5:2). Haggai accompanies his insistence on rebuilding the temple with a prophecy of the coming of YHWH and the Messiah. Now it is necessary not only that the temple be rebuilt, but also that the people be pure. Haggai 2:10-19 speak of the unclean condition of the people. What is meant is not clear, but, in view of what is said later in the Chronicler's history, it may well refer to the presence of Samaritans, whom we have seen speculated as opposing the work of the post-exilic community.

Haggai promises Zerubbabel, in the name of YHWH, that YHWH is about to "shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms." (Perhaps the prophet has his eye on the turmoil within the court of Darius.) "On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the LORD, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the LORD of hosts" (Hag. 2:20-23). Zerubbabel, of the house of David, is to be the chosen one, the Messiah, who will act as YHWH's agent. His word will carry with it the full authority of YHWH, as a signet ring certifies the authority of its bearer. Haggai recalls the official theology of pre-exilic Judah: YHWH has chosen David and Zion and will by no means forsake the choice.

This messianic expectation is doomed to disappointment. Zerubbabel suddenly disappears and is heard of no more. Perhaps the Persians feared a nationalist uprising when words such as Haggai's reached their ears, though this is unlikely, for Darius "confirmed the decree of Cyrus, which was found in the archives at Ecbatana. Tattenai [the governor of Samaria] was ordered to provide the subventions therein specified for the costs of building and the maintenance of the cult, and on no account to interfere" (Bright, p. 372). Work on the temple was to go forward.

Haggai demonstrates some of the features of the "messianic expectation" which was growing during this time, and which would continue to grow in fervor until the time of Jesus. A great upheaval was to occur—the shaking of the heavens and the earth and the overthrow of nations by war—and YHWH would rule through the Messiah.

Zechariah

Only the first eight chapters of this book come from the hand of the prophet himself. The remaining chapters likely were written during the time of the Greek occupation

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of Judah. The mysterious night visions recorded in the first six chapters show some of the characteristics of apocalyptic writing (ah-pock-ah-LIP-tick). In apocalyptic literature strange symbols are used, both to convey a sense of mystery and to prevent oppressors from understanding their message. In this sense, these chapters of Zechariah could be called apocalyptic. In the apocalyptic literature that flourished at a somewhat later time, the coming of YHWH and the Messiah was expected to be a totally supernatural event. **The circumstances of the time in which true apocalyptic expression develops are generally so hopeless that the only remedy is direct help from YHWH. Second Isaiah could call Cyrus "the anointed" and Haggai could designate his contemporary, Zerubbabel, the Messiah, but in the apocalyptic literature the Messiah is an increasingly mysterious figure—a role no historical figure could possibly fill. In this sense, Zechariah 1-8 cannot be considered "apocalyptic." (In contrast, chapters 9-14 are apocalyptic.)**

Zechariah's visions indicate that YHWH's work is going on at the present time, though unseen by most people. The four horsemen patrol the earth, although nothing seems to be happening—"the whole earth remains at rest" (Zech. 1:11). YHWH promises that his passion for Jerusalem burns strong and that YHWH will come to bring prosperity to it again (Zech. 1:17). The next two visions also bring assurance that YHWH will perform this work for Jerusalem. In chapter 3, Joshua is seen standing in filthy garments. The garments

are taken from him and replaced with clean ones, and he is given the turban, the symbol of the office of the high priest (Zech. 3:35). (In this passage, “Satan” appears in Zechariah’s vision. He is the “accuser”—the member of YHWH’s heavenly court whose function it is to act as prosecuting attorney, accusing those who are brought before YHWH’s seat of judgment. While Satan here is beginning to develop a separate and distinct character, he has not yet become the figure familiar to us for representing the power of evil.)

The next vision is of a lampstand of two olive trees, symbolizing the all-seeing YHWH and the high status of Joshua and Zerubbabel—the high priest and the messianic king. The fifth vision, the flying scroll, symbolizes the word of YHWH going over the land with a curse to purge the land from evil. The sixth vision portrays a woman—symbolizing the sin of Judah (!)—put into a jar for shipment to Babylon (“the land of Shinar”).

The high point of the prophecy of Zechariah comes with the crowning of the Messiah. In the text as it now stands, it is Joshua who receives the crown (Zech. 6:9-14), but it is almost certain that originally Zerubbabel was named. Disappointment over Zerubbabel’s behavior probably caused a later scribe to replace his name with that of Joshua, but every indication earlier in the book points to Joshua’s being the high priest under the king Zerubbabel. The Messiah is called “the Branch” (Zech. 6:12), the title used by Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 4:2, 11:1; Jer. 23:5, 33:15) and by this time a traditional name for the Messiah.

Zechariah, often judged as inferior to the great pre-exilic prophets, was mistaken about the Messiah. His message of hope at a time of poverty and lack of zeal for YHWH does not stir readers/hearers today like the words of the earlier great prophets.

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But his book is not without echoes of the older prophecies—“Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another” (Zech. 6:1-10). These words compare with those of Micah 6:8 concerning YHWH’s requirements of the people. Although the emphasis during this period was on maintaining the identity of the Jewish people by marking them off from their neighbors, Zechariah looks for a time when YHWH’s name will be received by the nations—“In those days ten men from the nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zech. 8:23).

Ezra 4:24-6:22 The Chronicler’s Account Continued

“Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them” (Ezra 5:1-2). It is at the instigation of the prophets that work on the temple is begun again. These verses show the prophets not only as instigators but as participants, though the actual work is led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are to run into difficulties. When they begin the work on the temple again, the governor of Samaria, Tattenai, questions their right to do so. Perhaps the Samaritans, irked by the rejection of their offer of help (Ezra 4:1-3), are attempting to stop the Jews from erecting a building which would provide a rallying point for Jewish loyalties. This notion does not seem to concern Tattenai, if indeed he is aware of it. As we have noted, the Jews claim that Cyrus himself had ordered the temple rebuilt, and the governor sends a letter to Darius asking him to search the archives to see if this is true. Darius does as he is asked and discovers Cyrus’ letter. Darius thereupon orders Tattenai to let the work continue—although there seems to have been no attempt to halt it while the matter was being investigated. Darius even instructs the governor to pay all expenses for it from the royal treasury. The temple is finished “in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king” (Ezra 6:15). The building is dedicated, and the exiles keep the Passover.

Ezra 4:7-23

A gap occurs in the account at this point. Apparently attempts were made to rebuild the walls of the city, which had been broken down during the siege under the Babylonians. Then, during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-423 BCE), some people of varied nationalities living in Samaria wrote to the king that the Jews were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. If this were allowed to continue, they threatened, the Jews would rebel against their Persian rulers—"you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River" (Ezra 4:16). Artaxerxes—or possibly lower ranking officials writing in his name—issued a decree forbidding the work on the walls. Soon after this the school of prophets known as Third Isaiah (or Trito-Isaiah) probably wrote what is now contained in Chapters 56-66 of the Book of Isaiah.

The writer of these chapters seems to have been a member of the group of disciples of Isaiah and Second Isaiah. Indeed, the vocabulary of Chapters 56-66 often reminds one of Second Isaiah, but the message is quite different, suggesting that its context

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must be different in time and in place. Third Isaiah is not looking with hope and confidence at a Jerusalem which will be entered triumphantly from exile but at a Jerusalem which still lies in ruins, whose temple worship is debased and whose people have no hope.

Third Isaiah

In chapter 56 the prophet urges the proper observance of the Sabbath. Even foreigners and eunuchs who observe the Sabbath will be counted among YHWH's people—their offerings will be accepted, "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. 56:7). Isaiah, verses 58:13-14, makes keeping the Sabbath a mark of one who is worthy to receive the "heritage of Jacob."

The state of affairs in Jerusalem does not demonstrate such faithfulness. The leaders of the people are blind (56:9ff.), idolatry and immorality are rampant (57:1-13). YHWH will come to restore the people—but they must repent. "For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (57:15).

Worship as portrayed here has sunk to a low point and lost all ethical dimension. The people come to the temple, but they do not obey the teachings of YHWH. They fast, but the fast is selfish. After they fast, they wonder only why YHWH does not bring blessing to them. This is not the fast YHWH demands. "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. . . . Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (58:4-7)

This section of Isaiah can soar to heights of vision, speaking of the true balance between just actions and ritual observance. We find here also passionate expression of the hatred of a Jew for the Edomites who had overrun Judah during the Exile and still harassed her. YHWH comes from Edom in crimson garments, made red with the blood of the Edomites. "I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments and stained all my robes. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come" (63:3-4). It is YHWH who is speaking these words. "Redemption" here refers to the act of a family member obtaining blood revenge upon those who have injured one of the same family.

How in the same collection can we find the following description of the new Jerusalem that will appear when YHWH comes, words which have inspired pacifism in countless readers? “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD” (65:25).

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Claus Westermann suggests that the passages are from different sources. In fact he assigns to the basic source, which he calls Trito-Isaiah, only 57:14-21, chs. 60-62, and 65:16b-25 in which he finds “the nucleus of Trito-Isaiah’s proclamation,” which is always (and only) “salvation to the whole of the nation” (p. 411). While Westermann is undoubtedly right—we must remember that Third Isaiah is not the work of a single individual—we must remember that for Israel the day of YHWH could refer both to its triumph and the defeat of its enemies. In fact, the elevation of Zion (“my holy mountain”) most often brings with it judgment on other nations (cf. Ezek. 39:7-8, 11-16). The Jews to whom Third Isaiah was addressed might not have perceived an inconsistency between bloody triumphalism and a vision of utter peace. Finally, for Third Isaiah, fidelity to YHWH brings salvation. In chapter 56 we find that when YHWH’s salvation comes, it will come to those who “keep justice and do righteousness,” no matter who they are. Foreigners and eunuchs will be admitted to the community of Israel (vv. 3-7); they cannot be excluded. Indeed they will attain full (cultic) standing among the people, worshiping in the temple, offering sacrifice there, even becoming priests and Levites (66:18-23).

These lines . . . come from a period when purity of blood became a rigorous test for admission to the Israelite community, and was applied with particular rigor to admission to the priestly and Levitical classes. The writer does not move against this practice directly, but he certainly treats it as a temporary dispensation, which must yield in the day when YHWH is recognized by the nations. No Old Testament writer says more clearly that the difference between Israelites and Gentiles must disappear in the fullness of Israel. (McKenzie, p. lxviii)

Nehemiah 1:1-7:5

One other passage from Third Isaiah’s proclamation of salvation must at least be mentioned because of the importance it has had for Christians. Third Isaiah’s proclamation of salvation was not to be fulfilled in any direct way. Still, the authorization that is claimed for the proclamation in 61:1ff. was to be taken up again by Jesus of Nazareth as his own authorization (Luke 4:16ff.): Third Isaiah “did not usher the fulfillment in,” but this work was to act “as the voice of a messenger proclaiming salvation on the way which led to Christ” (Westermann, p. 308).

The Chronicler’s Account Completed

The letter the Samaritans had sent to King Artaxerxes I protesting the building of the wall was probably answered—in the king’s name—by a lesser official. Nehemiah, a Jew living at the Persian court and serving as “cup bearer” for the king, asks permission to go to Jerusalem and oversee the reconstruction of the city, including its walls. The king gives no indication that he is aware of an edict prohibiting the rebuilding of the walls and gives Nehemiah a letter of official authority (Neh. 2:8).

The Chronicler’s account uses Nehemiah’s own memoirs of the events, and the first-person story is vivid. When Nehemiah comes to the city, he does not immediately show his letter of authority, but instead makes a secret inspection of the city’s wall by night (Neh. 2:11-16). He urges the people of the city to begin rebuilding the walls, only then revealing his authority from the king.

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The governor of Samaria, Sanballat, attempts to intervene, but Nehemiah casts the Samaritan officials out of the city, declaring that they have “no share . . . claim . . . historic right in Jerusalem” (2:20). To have succeeded in this, Nehemiah must have shown his royal authority, though the memoirs do not say that he did. In 5:14, however, he calls himself “governor” by royal appointment. From that point and through the entire rebuilding operation, Sanballat tries by various plots to derail the project and destroy Nehemiah, but Nehemiah sees through each ruse. The wall is completed in fifty-two days, and, according to Nehemiah’s account, “all the nations round us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem” (Neh. 6:15-16).

Nehemiah 11-13, 9:38-10:39

As governor of Judah, Nehemiah is to carry out extensive civil reforms. Lots are cast to determine who will live within the city and who will live in the countryside, so that the land can be organized for more efficient management. The main thrust of the reforms centers in the preservation of Jewish identity over against the Samaritans and other neighboring peoples. The Sabbath observance is commanded (13:15-22) and intermarriage with non-Jews prohibited (13:23-30). Both measures are backed up by the authority of “the Book of Moses” (13:1), though what is included in this phrase is not certain. While there is no reason to doubt Nehemiah’s devotion to Yahwism, his insistence on these measures was probably motivated by concerns which were more political than religious. To keep Judah distinct from its old status as a part of the province of Samaria, it was essential to exclude “foreign” influences as much as possible.

Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 8:1-9:37

“Now after this. . .” The phrase, as Jacob L. Myers points out, “marks the connecting link between events taking place at the time of the building of the second temple and those related here, which center about Ezra and his work. Though references are doubtless hidden elsewhere, we are in the dark about what took place during the interval” (p. 59). We are even in the dark about the length of the interval. As the text of Ezra-Nehemiah now stands, the impression is given that Ezra and Nehemiah were both in Jerusalem at the same time. This can be best explained if Ezra came during the thirty-seventh year of Artaxerxes I (c. 428 BCE and during Nehemiah’s second term in Jerusalem). This is possible, but there are also good reasons to place it later in the seventh year of Artaxerxes II (c. 398 BCE). For one thing this allows Ezra’s work to be the “final and decisive thing which later tradition made it and which it seems, in fact, to have been” (Bright, p. 398). It deals with the difficulty raised by the fact that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah gives any indication that he knew of the other’s presence. Yet each seems to have acted as the dominant leader of the community. It does not seem possible two such persons could have lived and worked together without at least acknowledging each other. Perhaps confusion came about when a later scribe failed to distinguish between Artaxerxes I and Artaxerxes II. Since both Ezra and Nehemiah were sent by a king named Artaxerxes, a scribe may have rearranged the text in its present order.

The tradition that Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries should not be dismissed too lightly. According to John Bright, “The fact that the Chronicler scarcely mentions Nehemiah, whereas Nehemiah’s memoirs probably mention Ezra not at all, is readily explainable. The Chronicler’s interests were primarily ecclesiastical, and to these

Nehemiah was peripheral, whereas Nehemiah’s memoirs were a personal apologia, concerned exclusively with what he himself had done” (pp. 400-401). One other possibility exists, that Ezra preceded Nehemiah, arriving in 458 BCE, the seventh year of **Artaxerxes Longimanus**. Though some scholars have argued for this—and the biblical record does seem in its present order to place the work of Ezra before Nehemiah—it does not seem likely. Finally, no positive decision can be reached. (The interested reader can find a fairly complete discussion in Bright’s *I sent Nehemiah* in 445 BCE and that the Artaxerxes under whom Ezra came

to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1) was the second of that name, reigning from 404 to 358 BCE. Ezra arrived shortly after 400 BCE.

Why Artaxerxes sent Ezra to Jerusalem is not made clear in the biblical text. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century CE, gives information which may provide an explanation. Josephus says that during the reign of Artaxerxes II the high priest in Jerusalem, Johanan, murdered his brother. Ezra, described in Artaxerxes' letter of authorization as "the scribe of the law of the God of heaven" (Ezra 7:12), is sent "to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand" (Ezra 7:14). Furthermore, Ezra was given authority to "appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment" (Ezra 7:25-26). Ezra seems to have been sent to tighten the discipline in Jerusalem, perhaps as a result of the scandal created by the high priest's action, as Josephus suggests.

Ezra finds a "land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the land, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness" (Ezra 9:11). Nehemiah's reforms a generation earlier either had not succeeded or had been allowed to fall into neglect. Ezra calls an assembly of "all the men of Judah and Benjamin" (Ezra 10:9). He accuses them of marrying foreign women and challenges—perhaps even incites—them to "make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will" (Ezra 10:11). Because it is raining heavily at the time of the assembly, the men suggest that leaders be selected to form a group of a manageable size and come in out of the rain. This "committee" can consider the situation, ascertain who are guilty of the offense, and take action. This is done, and the text gives a list of the men who had married foreign women. These are required to put away their wives and their children (Ezra 10:12-44).

Ezra must wield great authority—no mere suggestion of sin would have been sufficient to produce such a result. But far-reaching reform could not be expected from a single act such as this. Accordingly, Ezra calls "all the people . . . into the square before the Water Gate" (Neh. 8:1a), and in their presence he reads "the book of the law of Moses" (Neh. 8:1b). The occasion is described in detail in Neh. 8:1-9:37.

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It has all the characteristics of a covenant renewal ceremony such as we have seen recurring periodically since the ceremony at Shechem under Joshua (Josh. 24). It is not clear exactly what it is that Ezra read to the people. What is clear is that it was a body of written material (Ezra 3:2, 4; Neh. 8:14, 15; 10:34, 36, 13:1)—Ezra opens it and reads from it. Some scholars have suggested that it was the Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 12-26); others that it was the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26). Still others suggest that it was the P code or even the whole Pentateuch. Ezra is said to have read to the people "from early morning until midday" (Neh. 8:3), which would not seem long enough to read the entire Pentateuch. Nevertheless, the overall picture presented in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah suggests that the document contained "substantially the content of our present Pentateuch. This may be seen both in the general orientation of the community of the restoration as well as in specific points" (Myers, p. lix).

As Ezra reads the Law, a group of men scattered throughout the throng **help the people understand what is being read (Neh. 8:7-8)**. This may mean simply that these men helped to interpret the meaning, much as a biblical commentary does. It is also possible that the people no longer understood this language (Hebrew) well. Aramaic, a Semitic language very similar to Hebrew, had become the language used throughout the ancient Near East for diplomatic and business transactions. The letters to and from the Persian kings which appear in Ezra-Nehemiah were all written in Aramaic. By the time of Jesus, Aramaic was the language spoken by the Jews, and Hebrew was, in a sense, a "dead" language, used only for reading the scriptures in the synagogue. A series of "targums," translations of the Hebrew scriptures into Aramaic, allowed the average Jew, not trained as a scribe, to understand the sacred text. Probably the men who "read from the

book, from the law of God, with interpretation and gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8) were fulfilling the role which the “targums” and the later “scribes and lawyers,” official interpreters of the torah, performed.

The pattern for post-exilic Judaism was now set. The temple had been rebuilt and Jerusalem restored as the center of Judaism. Circumcision and Sabbath observance, having served the purpose of identifying and uniting the people during the Exile, were now firmly established as commandments of the Law. Intermarriage with non-Jews was prohibited. For all practical purposes, this meant the prohibition of marriage with all foreigners, but we should remember that the point was irreducibly religious and not what we would call today racial or ethnic. Above all of these, the Law and a professional class of interpreters of the Law had taken a central position in the life of the people. The redemption that Ezekiel and Second and Third Isaiah had predicted had not come, at least not fully or in the form they had anticipated. Neither had the messianic king come. There would be claimants to that title in future centuries, but the primary leadership of the people was to come from the temple priesthood, especially the high priest, and, increasingly, from the rising group of “scribes.” Ezra was the first of a long line of these scribes, the custodians of the growing body of literature that was becoming sacred scripture. After Ezra, no “new” prophets were raised up to speak the word of YHWH. The writers of apocalyptic books took the

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names of famous personages in the past rather than asserting their own personalities as messengers of YHWH. And at the center of Jewish life was the torah. The torah was interpreted by the scribes, and the Jewish community resolved to live by its teachings. Gradually the books of the prophets and other books called simply “the Writings” would join the torah as “sacred scriptures,” and Judaism would become “a religion of the book.”

Post-exilic Judaism may have developed a narrowness of purpose and an exclusiveness that reversed Second Isaiah’s vision of Israel as a light to the nations. It succeeded in keeping Yahwism alive when other peoples and their religions disappeared into the melting pot of syncretism.

Ruth and Jonah: Broader Horizons

The age was not without voices lamenting the exclusiveness which prevailed. Two of these are found in the books of Ruth and Jonah.

The **Book of Ruth**, telling a story set in the time of the judges of the old tribal confederacy, speaks of the faithfulness of a Moabite woman, Ruth, who is married to an Israelite. When her husband dies without giving her children, she persists in the law of levirate marriage to provide her family with an heir. The concluding point of the story is that this Moabite woman, a foreigner, is an ancestor of the great King David!

The Book of Jonah from the fifth or fourth century BCE also has a note of universalism about it. It is unfortunate that the story is known mainly as a test of credulity—could Jonah really live for three days in the belly of a whale?

The story is an imagined one, told to make at least two important points. The first is that the word of YHWH is supreme. God’s word alone keeps the waters in their place and controls the raging monster of the deep. We may be able to see the P creation myth in the background of this. Jonah, a prophet, is commanded by the word of YHWH to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the hated Assyrian Empire, and to preach. Jonah, reflecting the narrow nationalism of post-exilic Judaism—though the story is set in the time of the Assyrian oppression—refuses to obey. He sets out upon the deep in a ship, attempting to escape YHWH’s word. Apart

from YHWH's word, the seas are the chaos that prevailed when YHWH created. Accordingly, a great storm arises. The non-Israelite crew believes that someone's god is angry. After casting lots that fall on Jonah and after his confession that he is fleeing from YHWH, the sailors throw Jonah overboard. The monster of the deep—a "great fish," not a whale—devours him. So it is with all who take themselves away from the creative power of the word of YHWH, or who, in spite of Ps. 139, think they can escape his hegemony (preponderant influence or authority over others).

The second half of the story reveals a note of universalism. Jonah repents and immediately finds himself thrust up on dry ground—the "dry ground" of the P creation myth. Obedient to his mission, he goes to Nineveh and preaches the word of YHWH, expecting the judgment of God on the Assyrians. The people of Nineveh repent, and YHWH forgives them. Jonah is incensed. His nationalistic pride and his hatred of

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the Assyrians cause him to sulk, sitting outside the city in the shade of a vine. God makes the vine wither, and Jonah is saddened by its death. YHWH then asks Jonah a question and the book ends without an answer given: Should not YHWH care also for the people and animals of Nineveh? The ending is similar to the conclusion of Jesus' parable we call the Prodigal Son: the father invites the older son into the welcoming celebration for his brother, but we do not know how he responds.

In spite of a desire for universalism, exclusivism prevailed, at least in Palestine. Jews scattered abroad—the Jews of the diaspora or "dispersion"—were influenced by non-Jewish thought and culture. Yet, even they preserved their essential Jewishness within a world that urged syncretism. Without the carefully constructed and administered discipline and organization that post-exilic Judaism provided, the light which was to lighten the nations would not have survived the surrounding darkness.

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End of chapter

Change back

We could spend some time discussing this in the context of our own life together.

Appropriate grieving. [back](#)

Not sure what this means. Many people would think of Queen Victoria after Albert's death.

Make no claim back

In other words they aren't writing history.

Ezra's date [back](#)

This is totally fascinating. So much of we consider super-ancient in the bible actually came into existence between 500 and 400 BC - around the time of the rise of Classical Greek culture, some might say the rise of culture in general. Also the era of Buddha and Confucius. Part of a world-wide something?

Crisis of the Exile [back](#)

This is the same problem that faces Jews today. And in a different way it also faces Christians who have a conscience.

Don't get me started!

An action ^{back}

Better they should just have worn buttons saying "YHWH is super!"

Jeremiah's letter [back](#)

The powers that be are ordained of God, right?

As early in the human story as possible [back](#)

This is outrageous. For me, it also justifies my spending a lot of time on the text. Perhaps, as Joe suggested, we should repeat Year 1.

So we're really not looking directly at such perspirationally-challenged wanderers as Abraham and Moses, but perhaps at literary creations of the first Age of Enlightenment. Compare King Arthur (who probably did exist in some fashion), Robin Hood, and Geo. Washington's cherry tree. (We hear less about his expense account, or his attempt to get back the slaves who had run away to New York).

And the EFM writers set it down as though it doesn't much matter!

Hopeless [back](#)

I suppose this is all better than looking for a man on a white horse. But think about what motivates suicide bombers.

I was taught that Artaxerxes was so called because he came after Xerxes. But see [Wikipedia](#), for a good discussion. But bringing in the word *Longimanus* without explanation is sloppy editing.

Help people understand [back](#)

I bet they did. From another timeline: *Fuchs-Nachrichten: Zustimmung oder Sterben!*

Ruth [back](#)

From the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#). From [Wikipedia](#). What a difference order of placement within the bible makes to our assumptions!

Jonah [back](#)

My second favorite book in the Old Testament, just behind Ecclesiastes, which we will discuss in Lesson 34.

A cultic act [back](#)

I don't for a moment believe this. If true, it would give added meaning to the old joke about the young bridegroom who pokes his head out of the hotel bedroom on a chilly February morning, only to be confronted by the gardener who amiably remarks, "Raw this morning, isn't it?"

