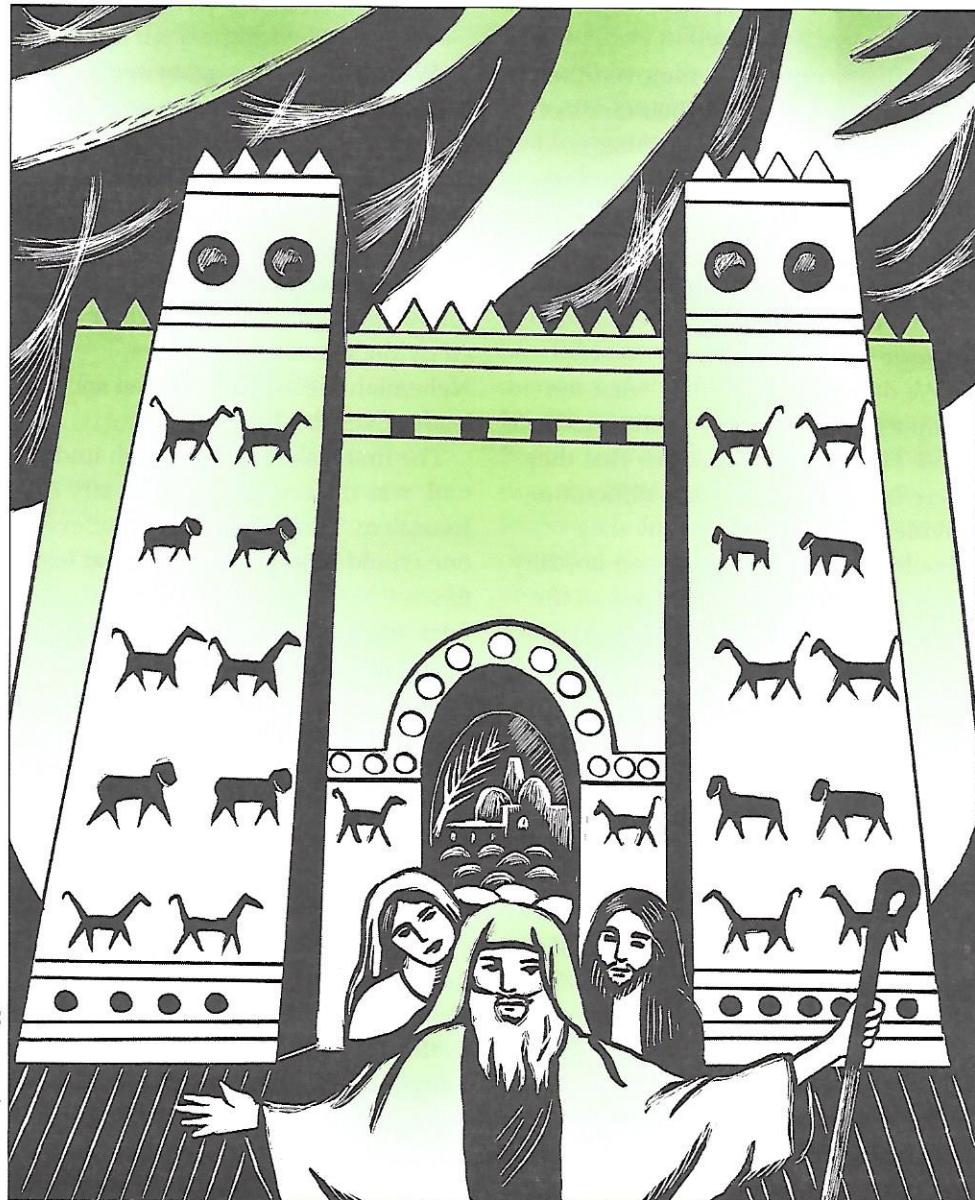


Scripture from Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible from St. Anthony Messenger Press



Illustrations by Paula Wiggins

Ezra & Nehemiah

By Dianne Bergant, C.S.A.

Rebuilding From the Bottom Up

Day after day, pictures of destruction flash across our TV screens. A home or a neighborhood or an entire city explodes in a flash or crumbles before our very eyes. Some people are killed in the process, and the lives of those who survive are shattered. This terrifying reality almost seems to characterize our day and age. It does not take long to destroy homes and cities, but it might take an entire lifetime to rebuild them—but rebuild we do.

The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of ancient Israel's rebuilding of itself as a nation and its rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. This rebuilding took place when the people returned from exile in Babylon. The story of their reorga-

nization as a people now settled in their own land, of their acceptance of the law of God as a guide for living, and of the need to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem does not always provide exciting reading. However, between the lines of this report we detect another story, one of radical reform of religious life and practice, of hostility between groups that had a common origin, and of the establishment of governing structures. This is a community that is undergoing immense and demanding changes, not unlike those that we ourselves face today.

Who's in Charge Here?

At times of great upheaval, it is important that someone be recognized as clearly in charge. However, leadership itself could be a contributing factor to this upheaval. Some people might assume the mantle of leadership for themselves; others might be chosen by members of the group, but then not followed by others. Leadership is always burdensome, but this is especially true at times of crisis.

The Babylonian exile lasted until around 538 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). The Persian ruler Cyrus inaugurated a new policy for conquered peo-

ples. Often conquerors removed their defeated enemies from their lands of origin and settled them in other regions, thereby preventing any threat of nationalism. Instead, Cyrus allowed these captives to return to their own homes. However, he kept them on a short leash, appointing governors to oversee their activities.

We do not know exactly what the people found upon their return to their land. However, we do know that they were faced with economic difficulties, divided opinions about how they should rebuild their lives, and hostility from the Samaritans, followers of the God of Israel who did not go into exile in Babylon but intermarried with people of other nations.

The Israelites certainly needed a leader, and they got two: Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was a priest and a scribe; Nehemiah acted as governor. Although these two men do not seem to have been contemporaries, they are considered the builders of the postexilic Jewish community in Palestine.

Regime Change

Today we hear a lot about regime change. It is one thing to move away from or overturn an existing political regime; it is quite another thing to replace it with a newly fashioned and more appropriate form of governance.



Praying With Scripture

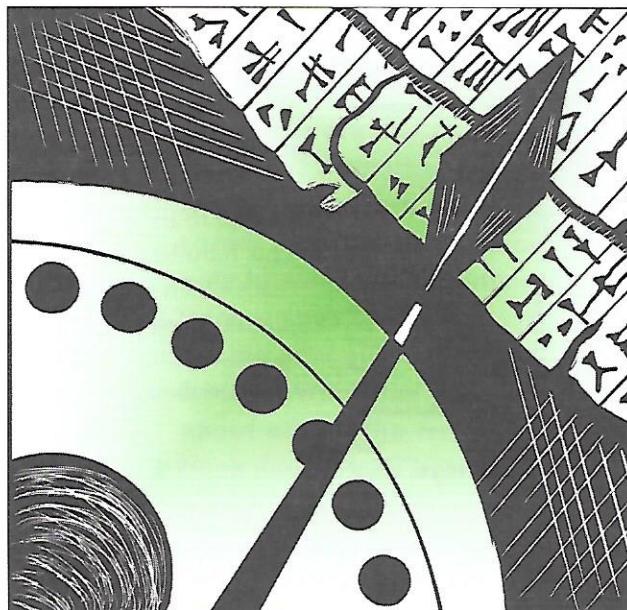
■ Psalm 66 is a communal prayer of thanksgiving. It recounts God's protection and care. Pray this psalm slowly and thoughtfully, allowing the sentiments expressed there to become your own.

We have seen this again and again in our own day. When governments are overthrown, civil war or terrorism frequently steps in and takes control. Once again we see the importance of strong leadership which can elicit confidence and encourage the people to follow its inspiration. Though appointed by the Persian conquerors, Nehemiah seems to have been such a leader (Neh 2:1-10).

The first task that Nehemiah undertook was the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. You would think that everyone would be eager to help, or at least to see that the city was finally rebuilt. Such was not the case. Nehemiah met opposition and the work suffered sabotage, particularly from the Samaritans, who had originally offered to help in the rebuilding. This was a case in which the rejection of people who had been considered "unworthy" came back and hit the religiously self-righteous sharply between the eyes.

Nehemiah seems harsh in his demands, but he wanted to make sure that the mistakes that Israel committed in the past were not repeated, mistakes that, in their eyes, had led to the punishment of exile in Babylon. These mistakes flowed from infidelity to the law. Nehemiah was intent on building a new and sacred temple out of the rubble of destruction and to raise a new and holy people to worship in that temple. In order to realize these goals, he would have to keep both the temple and the people away from what was not holy.

This was the reason the Samaritans were rejected. Having intermarried with non-Israelites who lived in the



land, they were ritually unclean. Intermarriage was a problem with some of the Israelites as well. While in Babylon, they had married women of that nation. Nehemiah insisted that the ritual integrity of the nation required that such wives be divorced. These radical regulations were meant to cleanse the nation of everything that might lead the people away from God.

Here is a lesson to be learned. When we wonder why people might hate us, it would do us well to reflect on how we have treated them in the past. If we have considered them inferior to us in any way, we should not be surprised at their hostility toward us.

Family-based Religious Education

The community that gathered to hear the teaching of Ezra was a mixed group. Unless we remember the social structure of that ancient community, we might not realize how extraordinary this was. This community was patriarchal in structure and androcentric in its focus. This means that the father (*patér*) was the head (*arché*) of the society and the man (*anér*) was its center of concern. Neither women nor children were valued as we have come to value them today. Therefore, for the biblical writer to make the point that women and those children old enough to understand were included in the vast assembly gathered to hear Ezra's teaching is quite significant (Neh 8:2-3). This probably does not mean that their status in society had changed in some notable way. Rather, it points to the importance

of a "family-based" understanding and appreciation of the new interpretation of the religious tradition being taught by Ezra.

The importance of the heads of the families is made clear in what follows in the narrative. They gather with Ezra and the priests and Levites to examine more closely certain aspects of the law, specifically the correct celebration of the Feast of Booths. This was a harvest feast that commemorated the time when earlier Israelites lived in the desert. Although Booths was a family-centered celebration, the heads of the families were responsible for making sure that it was observed correctly. During this first celebration, Ezra continued to read from the book of the law of God (8:13-18).

The Catholic church has a long tradition of catechetical instruction for children. Current adult religious education only really got off the ground with the Second Vatican Council, when members of the church had to be "retooled." So many things were changing, and these changes had to be explained. At this time, bible study became very important, as did workshops on the liturgy. Bishops began to write pastoral letters that explained the church's position on social and political matters as well as on points of doctrine. The value of family-based religious education programs was recognized by many local parishes.



Old-Time Religion

When things seem to fall apart, we often try to reclaim the past. This is because what we did in the past seems to have worked. It is not by accident that reforms are frequently fueled by an attempt to recapture the original inspiration of the group.

This is certainly what Ezra tried to do. He had the responsibility of reshaping a people who had been making accommodations to the thinking and practices of their conquerors. Having returned to their own land, they were now to return to the faith of their ancestors and the religious practices of that faith. And what did Ezra do to accomplish this? He gathered all the people together and, from day-break till midday, he read the book of the law of Moses to them. The people did not consider this a hardship. On the contrary, they listened attentively and they wept tears of devotion (Neh 8:1-12).

We have all seen pictures of throngs of people, moved by religious sentiment, with tears streaming down their cheeks. This appears to have been the experience of the returned Israelites. They knew that they were needy people, and they turned to God for help.



Living the Scriptures

Most parishes display reading material on a rack in the back of the church. Take a pamphlet or book home and learn something new about your faith.

There is a danger in trying to retrieve the past. Doing so might force "new wine into old wine skins." If the old skins are unable to hold the force of the new wine, they will burst and everything will be lost. The people could be thrown into confusion and might give up trying to rediscover their relationship with God.

New circumstances often call for new insights. However, Israel was a people with a rich and diverse religious tradition. Therefore, these new insights had to be somehow faithful to that tradition.

The present-day church is caught in a situation that holds some similarity to the challenges that faced these Israelites. The Second Vatican Council called us to interact with the broader world in a way that was unfamiliar to us. In doing so, we made many very significant changes. We made accommodations with that world.

Some within the church argue that we made too many accommodations, we went too far and moved away from our faith and the practices that flowed from it. They would have us reclaim the past, return to "old-time religion." However, an attempt to simply retrieve the past could be a rejection of the new reality that God is attempting to bring forth within us, among us, and

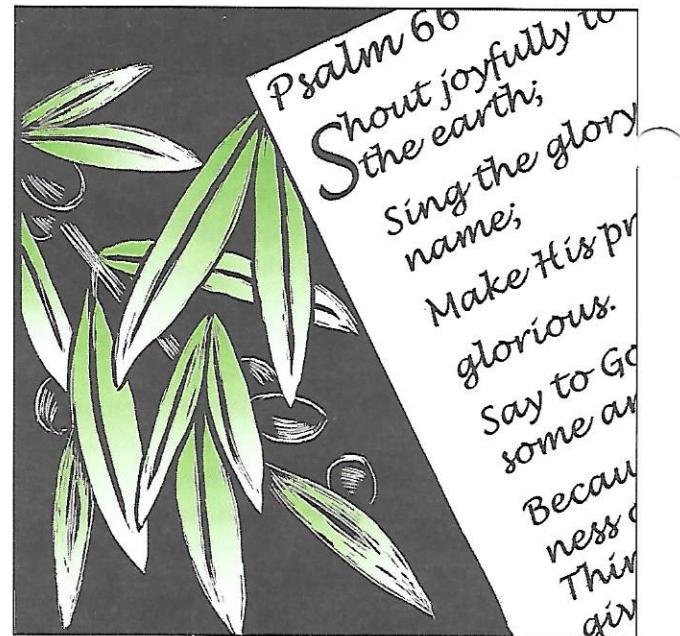
through us.

Even Ezra of old realized that the law had to be observed in a new way. The story tells us that he "read plainly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read" (Neh 8:8).

For us, too, the religious tradition must be interpreted in a way that embraces the reality of our times. This is one of the challenges before us today. ■

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., is Professor of Old Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She has a Ph.D. from St. Louis University.

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Talking About Scripture

- **How open are you to new insights into the faith? The other side of this coin is just as important. How faithful are you to the tradition itself, or might you be only looking for something different?**
- **Do you have a superior attitude toward people who cherish other religious beliefs? What can you do to learn more about other faith traditions?**
- **Does your family ever discuss aspects of the faith? What might you do to improve in this area?**



Reading About Scripture

- **Davies, Gordon F. *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Berit Olam). Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999.**
- **Nelson, Richard D. *The Historical Books (Interpreting Biblical Texts)*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, pp. 165-176.**
- **Throntveit, Mark A. *Ezra-Nehemiah (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992.**