

# 2021 Bible Study [Member's Guide]

Ezra  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi  
Nehemiah

# TURN BUILD CONSECRATE



**ZRA**

**AGGAI**

**ECHARIAH**

**MALACHI**

**HEMIAH**



# Contents

<b>STUDY</b> ONE	Growing Deeper	01
<b>STUDY</b> TWO	Ezra 1.1-3.13	14
<b>STUDY</b> THREE	Ezra 4.1-6.22	41
<b>STUDY</b> FOUR	Haggai 1-2	57
<b>STUDY</b> FIVE	Zechariah 1-6	75
<b>STUDY</b> SIX	Zechariah 7-8	91
<b>STUDY</b> SEVEN	Free topic	105
<b>STUDY</b> EIGHT	Zechariah 9-11	107
<b>STUDY</b> NINE	Zechariah 12-14	121
<b>STUDY</b> TEN	Ezra 7.1-10.44	135
<b>STUDY</b> ELEVEN	Nehemiah 7.73b-10	149
<b>STUDY</b> TWELVE	Malachi 1.1-3.5	167
<b>STUDY</b> THIRTEEN	Malachi 3.6-4.6	177



# Preface

It is probably an understatement to say that 2020 has been a turbulent and challenging year for many. Nonetheless, I pray that you have experienced the faithfulness and mercies of God in marvellous ways. However, I am also mindful that there are some of us who, for various reasons, may have strayed quite far from the Lord. At the same time, there may be areas of the church that have been neglected over the months we have not gathered.

Therefore, as we step into 2021, it is time to return. It is never too late to return, not just to the physical church building, but most importantly, to the Lord. Similarly, it is time to rebuild the Lord's house and his work in our lives and in his church. Certain areas of ministry and service might have undergone a long hiatus, but it's time to pick up the pieces and rebuild.

Of course, unlike the Israelites who went into exile from Jerusalem because of their sin and rebellion, we have been in "exile" from the physical church gathering for many months, because of a medical emergency. Yet, this sense of being displaced, not being able to meet physically to fellowship with and encourage each other creates in us a certain longing of what we might have taken for granted in the past. As we focus on the post-exilic materials of Ezra-Nehemiah (in part), Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi (ENHaZeMa), you will find that returning and rebuilding always preceded the acts of reconsecration – the ultimate intent of God for his people.

Similarly, I pray that as we study these books of ENHaZeMa, you will be inspired to return to God and rebuild his house. More importantly, I pray that we will be led to reconsecrate ourselves to the Lord, to once again devote our entire being to him and for his purpose.

For this year, I am glad to enlist the help of Ps Lim Wei-en and our brother Immanuel Lim, a student from Singapore Bible College who is doing his field education with us. They have written the studies on Zechariah and Nehemiah respectively. As a team, it is our prayer that you will be drawn to walk closer to the Lord through these studies. May you be found returning, rebuilding and reconsecrating in the course of the year, for his glory!

Blessings,

*Senior Pastor Beh Soo Yeong*

**RES  
OUR  
CES**





# Recommended Readings

## Ezra-Nehemiah

Williamson, H. G. M. [Ezra, Nehemiah](#)

[WBC](#) 1985

Fensham, F. Charles [The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah](#)

[NICOT](#) 1983

**Kidner, Derek** [Ezra & Nehemiah](#)

[TOTC](#) 1981

## Haggai

**Baldwin, Joyce \*** [Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi](#)

[TOTC](#) 1981

Verhoef, Pieter A. [The Books of Haggai and Malachi](#)

[NICOT](#) 1987

Taylor, Richard A.; Clendenen, E. Ray [Haggai and Malachi](#)

[NAC](#) 2004

## Zechariah

**Baldwin, Joyce \*** [Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi](#)

[TOTC](#) 1981

Meyers, Carol; Meyers, Eric M. [Haggai and Zechariah](#)

[AYB](#) 1987

Klein, George L. [Zechariah](#)

[NAC](#) 2008

## Malachi

Verhoef, Pieter A. [The Books of Haggai and Malachi](#)

[NICOT](#) 1987

**Baldwin, Joyce \*** [Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi](#)

[TOTC](#) 1981

Taylor, Richard A.; Clendenen, E. Ray [Haggai and Malachi](#)

[NAC](#) 2004

*\* Highly recommended because it covers all three prophetic books and is the most accessible and affordable.*



# 1. Background to restoration<sup>1</sup>

The imminence of destruction and exile had filled the horizon of the pre-exilic prophets. Though they were not without their assurances of ultimate triumph for God's cause, the immediate crisis for the nation was such that they had to be watchmen, warning of threatening danger (Jer. 4.5; Ezek. 3.17; 33.4; Hos. 5.8; 8.1; Joel 2.1; Amos 3.6). From the time of Amos onwards both nations were presented with a message of doom. Fire was to devour Jerusalem (Amos 2.5) and for Samaria the end had come (Amos 3.15; 8.2). Like the prey in the teeth of a lion the population would be torn and carried away, and there would be no escape (Hos. 5.14; 13.7, 8). The light had gone out (Isa. 5.30), the land had been devastated (Isa. 6.11), the floods had risen up to the neck (Isa. 8.7, 8). Though a reprieve was granted to Judah in Hezekiah's time, the full sentence was imposed in 587 BC, when both temple and city were plundered and destroyed.

This disaster was the death of the nation. Far from recording an evolutionary spiral of steady progress from Moses to Christ, the Bible presents a high point of revelation at the time of the exodus, followed by a decline which the occasional reformation was powerless to reverse. The whole tragic story could be summed up in the sequence: chosen, privileged, presumptuous, rebellious. The defeat and captivity of the two kingdoms was a divine judgment, from which the nation would never recover. The carefully tended vine had grown wild (Isa. 5.2; Jer. 2.21), the tree had been felled (Isa. 6.13). Things could never be the same again. The only other event in Jewish history comparable to the exile was the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which foreshadowed final judgment at the end of time (Matt. 24). The exile was the prototype; it was 'the day of the Lord' for Israel and Judah.

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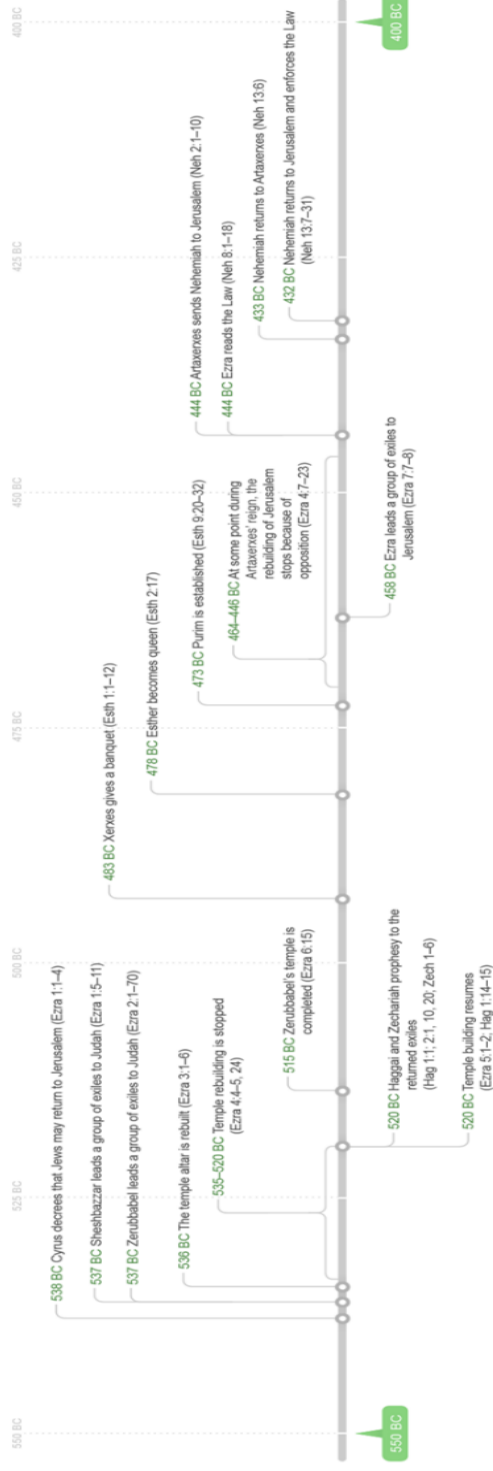
<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, J. G. (1972). *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 28, pp. 15–24). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

The best part of a lifetime separated the deportations of 597 and the first return in 538 BC. The common feeling among the exiles was that they might as well be dead. Their bones were dried up and their hope gone (Ezek. 37.11). From a human standpoint they were right. It would have been hard to find any reasonable ground for hope, but to Ezekiel came a vision of resurrection. God would recreate his people, reunite the two kingdoms under a Davidic head and set his sanctuary among them once and for all (Ezek. 37). The encouragements of Isaiah chapters 40–48 laid new stress on election and covenant. The great Creator still counted Israel his servant and Jacob his chosen (41.8) and therefore they need not fear. He had blotted out their transgressions 'for his own sake' (43.25) and planned their return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (44.28). Cyrus was designated as the anointed of the Lord to fulfil his purpose. Suddenly there was a glorious future ahead because they had an incomparable God who saw fit to forgive the past and plan redemption. The very heavens and earth would witness the declaration, 'The Lord loves him' (48.14).

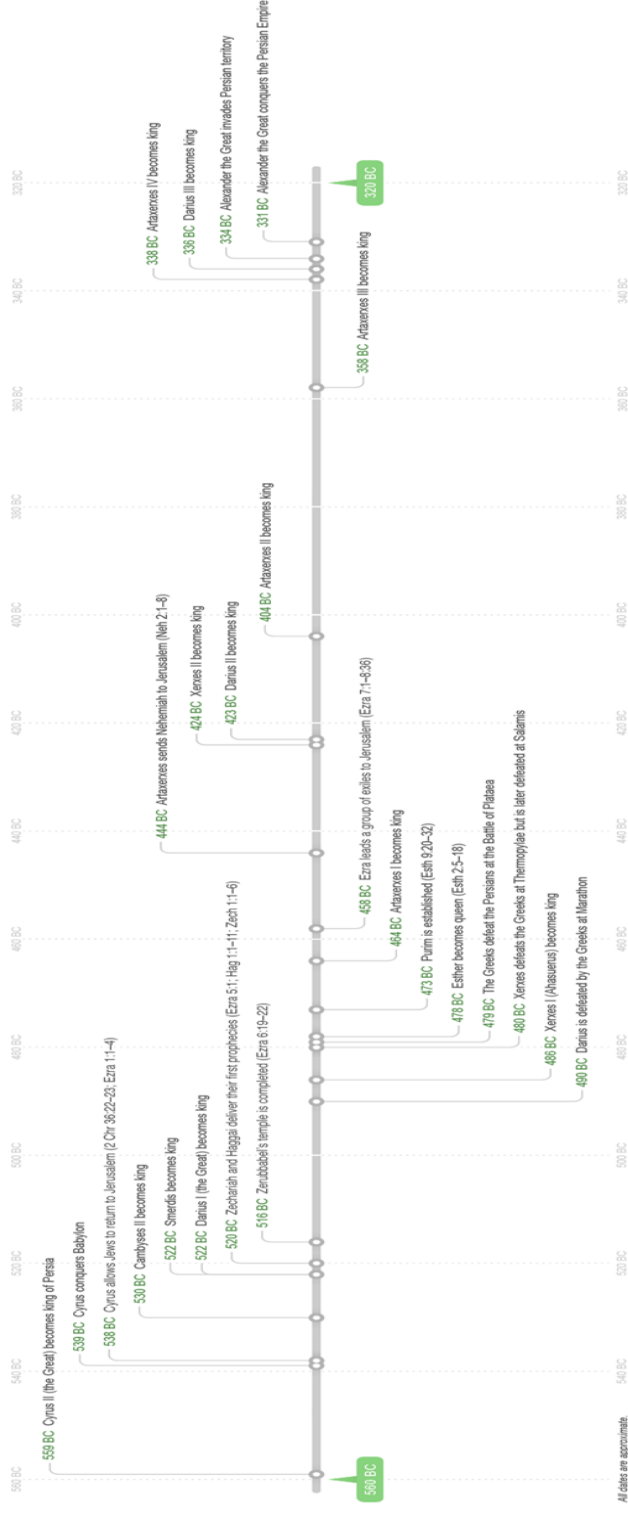
Such was the prophetic utterance. Jewish history began a new chapter in 539 BC when Cyrus, after twenty years of conquest, established himself as the king of a new world empire by entering Babylon as victor. Ever since the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 Babylonian power had been on the wane. A stable government eluded Nebuchadnezzar's successors until 556, when Nabonidus seized the throne, but even he aroused hostility and withdrew to Arabia in c. 552 BC, leaving his son Belshazzar to rule. Meanwhile Cyrus, prince of Anshan, had not only assumed power in Persia, but had taken advantage of internal strife in the Median empire to seize the Median throne. This added to his territory not only Media but the countries of Armenia and Cappadocia. From such a wide base he was able to launch military operations to both west and east. After taking the whole of Asia Minor and encountering Greece he moved eastwards through Parthia into Afghanistan. Though the full extent of his conquests in an easterly direction is not known, Cyrus had

# Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

Time chart 1. Source: LOGOS Bible Software



# The Persian (Achaemenid) Empire



established the largest empire the world had ever seen.<sup>2</sup> Once Elam and the area formerly known as Assyria had surrendered to him Babylon alone remained, helpless to defend herself. In October 539 BC this last bastion fell and Cyrus's empire was complete.

The next few years as they affected the Jews are recorded in Ezra 1.1–4.5. First of all Cyrus is quoted as saying that the Lord, the God of heaven, had charged him to build him a house at Jerusalem (Ezra 1.2). The 'Cyrus Cylinder' sheds light on this statement, for the king records how, after his victorious entry into Babylon, he rebuilt temples and restored gods to their places. His prayer 'May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries address a daily prayer in my favour ...', reveals his motive and his syncretistic outlook. By honouring all the gods he hoped to be able to count on the help of all. Thus the Jews were encouraged to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and received back the sacred vessels which Nebuchadrezzar had confiscated when the city fell. After a long register of those who returned (Ezra 2), the setting up of the altar is recorded (Ezra 3.1–6). Sacrificial ritual was resumed amid the ruins of the temple. Steps were also taken to obtain the official grant of timber allowed by Cyrus (Ezra 3.7), and in the second year a ceremony was held to give thanks for the inauguration of the rebuilding of the temple (3.8–13).

Progress was short-lived, however. The people of mixed descent who had appropriated the land during the exile wanted to identify themselves with the Jews by co-operating with them in their building projects. They probably hoped to keep a controlling interest in local political issues. Zerubbabel and Joshua appear to have had the support of the repatriates in refusing to compromise with people whose easy-going religion and morals might encourage apostasy. The resulting hostility brought the work to a halt, and the temple was still a ruin in 520 BC (Ezra 4.1–5).

Cyrus died in battle in 530 BC, fighting barbarian tribes to the north-east of Persia, but not before he had inaugurated an



efficient system of communication throughout the empire, and established effective control through Persian and Median officials, supported by the army. His unusual liberality as a ruler is well known. According to Herodotus, the Persians considered Cyrus to be a father to his people because he was 'in the kindness of his heart always occupied with plans for their well-being'. His son and successor, Cambyses, was by contrast a tyrant, who feared any apparent threat to his throne, and secretly assassinated his brother Bardiya, who was popular with the people. Cambyses' outstanding achievement was to add Egypt to the Persian Empire, but in July 522, on his way back from Ethiopia, he heard news that a usurper pretending to be his brother Bardiya had seized the throne in the eastern part of the empire. Though the details are obscure it seems that Cambyses took his own life. In the absence of a direct successor, Darius, son of the governor of Susa and an officer in Cambyses' entourage, claimed the throne. Incidentally the march of Cambyses' armies through Palestine, with the consequent looting and damage, may have contributed to the poverty referred to by Haggai (1.6, 9; 2.16f.).

The death of Cambyses sparked off rebellions in many parts of the empire. Darius' first task was to overthrow and execute pseudo-Bardiya. This he did by the end of September 522, but battles remained to be fought against rebel factions in such widely separated areas as Iran to the east, Asia Minor to the west and Egypt to the south. Darius refers to these campaigns in his famous inscriptions on the Behistun cliff in Iran. On the left-hand side stands the figure of Darius with his foot on the prostrate figure of Gautama (pseudo-Bardiya). There are differences of opinion as to how soon these rebellions were quelled (see the commentary on Zech. 1.11), but it is likely that Darius had established himself in the throne by 520 BC, the year in which Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy.

To what extent were these prophets influenced by world events? Like their predecessors they were given their message at a critical time, but if political revolt against Persia had been in their minds, as K. Elliger suggests, they were too late. Eighteen months

earlier would have been the favourable moment. Moreover, there was no evidence of a fighting spirit among those whom Haggai addressed. Though other nations were stirred by nationalistic fervour, that only served to throw into relief the hopelessness and lassitude of the little Jewish community in Judah. The fact that the Persian Empire was in a tumult may have awakened memories of Amos's earthquake prophecies (8.8; 9.5). Judgment on the nations was beginning and prophetic hopes of a Davidic ruler were about to be fulfilled. If he was about to come the temple must be ready to welcome him. In this way world events helped to give urgency to the prophetic message, but the message itself was not new. Ezekiel had seen that the temple must be rebuilt, but now the moment for action had come.

The right of the Jews to rebuild was challenged by the pro-Persian governors of Trans-Euphrates, who applied to Darius in writing for confirmation that Cyrus had authorized the project. An official memorandum was discovered at Ecbatana, whereupon Darius not only forbade interference with the work but also ordered material help to be given (Ezra 5.6–6.12). It is remarkable that Darius should have gone to so much trouble, especially if he was hard pressed by threats to his empire. Moreover there is not the slightest hint that he suspected the Jews of sedition or resented the leadership of Zerubbabel in Jerusalem at this time. The lack of information about Zerubbabel's fate, and the fact that he does not seem to have had a successor, has led to the conjecture that the Persians objected to the claims made for him (Hag. 2.21–23; Zech. 4.6f.), removed him and stripped the Davidic house of its prerogatives. Whatever may have happened later, the rebuilding of the temple appears to have proceeded peacefully until its completion in 516 BC, and there is no evidence of official Persian opposition. 'We detect no change of policy, nor of violent action against the Jews such as might have been anticipated if Zerubbabel's claims were looked at askance.'

The biblical records are silent about the Jews of Jerusalem once the temple was completed. No sequel was written to the

books of Kings and Chronicles, and only the two isolated incidents related in Ezra 4.6–23 give any information about the period 515–458 BC. Two aspects of the reign of Darius had a bearing on international relations. In the first place he organized the building of roads to enable royal envoys to cover in a week routes that took caravans ninety days (cf. Zechariah's horses that patrolled the earth). In the second place his confrontation with Greece turned the attention of world leaders westwards to the people destined to control the next world empire. It is true that there had been interchange of trade between Greece and the Near East from the second millennium BC, but the clash of Persian and Greek armies brought large numbers of Asians on to Greek soil. There was nothing surprising therefore about references to Greece in biblical literature from this time on (cf. Zech. 9.13).

As a subject people the Jews' political history was to be bound up with that of the great world empires. During the fifth century they were answerable to officials in Samaria who were out of sympathy with them, taxed them beyond their income (Neh. 5.4), and made exorbitant personal demands upon them (Neh. 5.15). Under continual threat of being accused to the central government, as happened during the reigns of Ahasuerus (Ezra 4.6) and Artaxerxes (Ezra 4.7–23), and having no means of self-defence, the Jews must have felt keenly their helplessness. Once hopes for the future faded, morale became low, and the religious and moral laxity presupposed by the prophecy of Malachi prevailed.

It was not that the prophets had been mistaken in presenting their glowing pictures of what God was going to do. It was rather that they had been given a very long view, ranging from the coming of Christ as man to his coming again in judgment and including the final ushering in of his kingdom. The baffling element was the time and manner of the fulfilment of their prophecies (1 Pet. 1.10–12).

## 2. Theological significance of the temple

The fact that Haggai and Zechariah had the primary task of ensuring the rebuilding of the temple raises the question of its place in the theological thinking of the period. No prophet initiated the building of Solomon's temple; Nathan gave permission rather than instruction to David's successor to build it (2 Sam. 7.12). In Nathan's eyes a tent was a more appropriate symbol of the Lord's presence than a temple because it was mobile, and therefore allowed freedom for the living, dynamic relationship which characterizes God's dealings with men (2 Sam. 7.6). So far as the ritual was concerned it could be performed equally well in the tabernacle as in a more permanent structure.

Moreover the efficacy of sacrifice had often been questioned. It was axiomatic for the eighth-century prophets that there could be no forgiveness of sin without confession and repentance, evidenced by a reformed daily life (e.g. Isa. 1.11–20). At best sacrifices dealt only with overt sins, not with the whole range of sins of the mind and heart. 'It is not surprising, therefore, that there were individuals in Israel who saw beyond the ritual of the sacrificial system and its concern with outward acts to the possibility of reconciliation with God.' Individuals found assurance of forgiveness apart from sacrifice (2 Sam. 12.13; Ps. 32.5) and certain Psalms go so far as to assert that sacrifices were not required by God (Ps. 40.6; 51.16, 17). Add to this the prophetic assurances that the Lord was to be found in exile (Jer. 29.12–14), and would be to them a sanctuary (Ezek. 11.16) even though no sacrifices could be offered, and it becomes obvious that there must have been a more fundamental reason for the rebuilding of the temple than resumption of the ritual.

A whole complex of ideas had grown up around the name Zion, which first occurs in the narrative recording David's conquest of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5.7). (a) Mount Zion became symbolic of the throne of the Davidic king, whose dynasty was for ever (2 Sam. 7.16). This theme is developed under the heading

'Messianic hopes'. (b) The Lord had chosen Zion as his own resting place for ever (Ps. 132.13, 14), and therefore the sanctuary was 'sanctified for ever' (2 Chr. 30.8). The Lord chose 'Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the heavens' (Ps. 78.68, 69). Though the heaven of heavens could not contain him, the Lord had deigned to call his own one particular hill on the face of the earth, and let it be known by his name (Jer. 7.11). No wonder Jeremiah's contemporaries could not believe that the temple would ever be destroyed (Jer. 7.3). (c) The nations were aware of the Lord's choice of Mount Zion, and yet they were allowed to profane it (Ezek. 7.21). By implication the name of the Lord was blasphemed among the heathen, for they were not to know that his glory had been withdrawn before it was destroyed (Ezek. 11.23).

It follows that the honour of the Lord was bound up with the rebuilding of the temple. The nations had to know beyond any doubt that the God of Israel had not gone out of existence when the Israelites were removed from their land. 'Then the nations will know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is in the midst of them for evermore' (Ezek. 37.28). Israel had to know that God did not go back on his election, hence Zechariah's assurance, 'Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion' (Zech. 1.14); 'The Lord ... will again choose Jerusalem' (Zech. 2.12).

In the thinking of Ezekiel there was a close link between the temple and the covenant. 'I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore' (Ezek. 37.26). While the temple lay in ruins there was no outward sign of the Lord's presence with the restored community. To judge by Haggai's assurance, given as soon as the rebuilding started, 'I am with you, says the Lord' (Hag. 1.13; 2.4), there had been considerable doubt whether God was among them at all. Ezekiel had seen that the glory of the Lord would return to Jerusalem, but he also envisaged

the temple there to receive him (Ezek. 43.1–5). In the event building was made possible by the work of God's Spirit, not by human initiative (Zech. 4.6). The Lord had overruled international events (Zech. 1.18–21) and stirred up enthusiasm through Haggai and Zechariah. The completion of the temple was to be proof that Zechariah had been his instrument (Zech. 4.9) and therefore a sign that the covenant had been renewed. The Lord was once more with them in the way that he had been with Moses and Joshua (Josh. 1.5) and therefore hope in the ancient promises revived.

Finally there was an eschatological reason why the temple was indispensable. When Micah first pronounced the destruction of Jerusalem (Mic. 3.12), he went on immediately to describe a new temple, higher than the hills, into which all the nations would flock to hear the transforming word which would bring peace to the world (Mic. 4.1–4; cf. Isa. 2.2–4). The sequence of events appeared to be destruction, desolation for a time, and then, with the Lord's house re-established, the 'latter days' would dawn with their messianic hopes. Similarly in Isaiah 40–55, once Jerusalem's punishment was complete (40.2), city and temple would be rebuilt (44.28) amid great joy. Nothing appeared to stand between the restoration of the city and ecstatic experiences of God's reign (Isa. 52.1, 2, 7). The rebuilding of the temple was the condition on which the dawning of the messianic age depended. Haggai implied as much (Hag. 2.6–9) and Malachi proclaimed that the Lord would suddenly come to his temple (Mal. 3.1).

The rebuilding of the temple was at once an act of dedication and of faith. It was a symbol of the continuity of the present with the past, and expressed the longing of the community that, despite the exile, the old covenant promises still stood. What the temple was to symbolize in God's purpose the prophets themselves could hardly be expected to appreciate, for Jesus spoke of his own body as the temple (Mark 14.58; John 2.19), which in its turn would be destroyed. Raised from the dead it was

to be the corner stone of a holy temple made up of living stones, believers who become 'a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (Eph. 2.19–22; 1 Pet. 2.4, 5), a church to be presented before him in splendour. For all this the rebuilding of the temple in the time of Haggai and Zechariah was a necessary preparation.

# STUDYONE

## Growing Deeper Invitation

### Introduction

In the midst of the pandemic, it has become clear that our personal and community spiritual and relational vitality is of utmost importance. What we have done in the past has been accentuated, for better or for worse. For instance, if we have been consistent in our own walk with the Lord, it would tend to put us in a better position to walk with him even more closely. Conversely, if, for instance, we have not been connected with other spiritual friends, say in the small group, we would find ourselves more isolated and cut-off from them during the circuit breaker.

As such, in planning for the next couple of years, we must place a special emphasis and urgency in deepening our spiritual and relational habits so as to continue to grow deeper in the Lord and in community. This has become the pastoral burden of the church leadership for 2021 – to encourage and cultivate a deeper walk with the Lord as a community.

### Growing Deeper Invitation

To this end, we are introducing a “Growing Deeper” invitation or challenge for 2021. We are inviting you to consider learning, practicing, or doing some basic but great spiritual exercises during the year. There are 10 practices that we have selected, and we encourage you to **pick at least 4** of them. The purpose is to develop a deeper walk with the Lord in the context of a nurturing and encouraging community of spiritual friends. You can pick some that are familiar to you, as well as some that are more challenging so that you can “stretch your spiritual muscles.” Most of these exercises are to be done with a few other friends. The intention is to encourage a closer fellowship and bond between you and a few other brothers and sisters in Christ as you grow



deeper in the Lord. No person is an island, and we need one another to last the spiritual journey.

In the course of the year, we hope to encourage one another in different ways to keep going, but **there will be no compulsion or pressure**. We only hope to inspire and spur one another positively. Let's see how many of us would be able to complete this invitation by the end of the year. Remember, there is no failure, except the failure to try! Conditions permitting, we look forward to a great celebration at the end of the year!

## CARE Group or small group Meeting

An electronic version of the Growing Deeper Invitation is provided [www.biblechurch.sg/growing-deeper](http://www.biblechurch.sg/growing-deeper)

As you meet in your CARE Group, share about the following questions. You may choose to share in smaller groups, and continue to encourage one another throughout the year.

1. What were some areas in your life that you are thankful for in 2020?

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2. What are some desires and wishes that you are trusting the Lord for in 2021?

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3. What are the 4 exercises in the Growing Deeper Invitation that you hope to complete in 2021?

a.

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b.

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c

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d.

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## NOTES

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# Ezra-Nehemiah

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## ORIENTING DATA FOR EZRA-NEHEMIAH <sup>1</sup>

- **Content:** rebuilding and reform in postexilic Judah through the latter half of the fifth century B.C.
- **Historical coverage:** from the first return (539/8 B.C.) to the end of the fifth century, but especially from 458 to 430, during the reign of Artaxerxes of Persia
- **Emphases:** successful completion of the second temple despite opposition; successful rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem despite opposition; the crisis of intermarriage and national identity; concern for covenant renewal and reform, based on the law, among the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem

## OVERVIEW OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Just as with Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which appear in our English Bibles as separate books, originally formed one book in the Hebrew Bible. They were not separated until well into

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

the Christian era. You will do well to read them together, since they do in fact tell one story, not two.

Using the memoirs (journals?) of Ezra and Nehemiah (noticeable for their use of “I”), plus archival letters and lists of various kinds, the author-compiler of this book (conceivably Nehemiah himself) records the story of Jewish reform between 458 and 430 B.C. The reform includes the building of the walls around Jerusalem (thus giving definition again to “the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name,” [Neh 1:9](#); cf. [Deut 12:5, 11](#)), repentance over intermarriage, and a covenant-renewal ceremony with the reading from the Book of the Law as its center point. In so doing, the author provides us with the most important source for the history of Judah in the postexilic period.

By watching for the shift between first-person and third-person narratives, you can easily track the flow of the narrative. It begins ([Ezra 1–6](#)) with a historical review of events some seventy years earlier—the building of the second temple (538/7 to 516 B.C.). Based on several archival records, this review emphasizes the Persian kings’ role in seeing that the temple was, in fact, completed. At the same time the author inserts by way of digression ([4:6–23](#)) a much later opposition to rebuilding the walls, which is the more immediate problem of Ezra-Nehemiah. With this literary stroke he ties the two events together as having the same sorts of difficulties from similar sources.

The Ezra memoirs ([Ezra 7–10](#)) first locate him in the lineage of Aaron, thus of priestly descent, and then report his return along with others (in 458 B.C.) under the auspices of Artaxerxes. Here the main focus is on rebuilding the religious community in and around Jerusalem in the midst of a conflict surrounding intermarriage, which is recognized as a main source of going astray after other gods.

The first of Nehemiah’s memoirs ([Neh 1–7](#)) tells the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem despite intense opposition by various groups, including even some Jews who had resettled or remained in the land (and were quite syncretistic); it concludes ([7:6–73](#)) by repeating the list of returnees found at the beginning of the book ([Ezra 2](#)).

This is followed by the high point of the narrative ([Neh 8–10](#))—a covenant-renewal ceremony, which begins with a reinstitution of the Feast of Tabernacles and continues for twenty-four days (ch. [8](#)), climaxing in a great national confession (ch. [9](#)) and a community document signed by the leaders, committing themselves to obedience to specific aspects of “the Law of God given through Moses” (ch. [10](#)).

After two more lists (of the repopulation of Jerusalem and its environs and of the priests and Levites, [11:1–12:26](#)) the book concludes with the second part of Nehemiah’s memoirs ([12:27–13:31](#)). These describe the consecration of the wall ([12:27–47](#)) and some final reforms (ch. [13](#)).

## **SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING EZRA-NEHEMIAH**

Before reading Ezra-Nehemiah, you may wish to review what was said about this historical period in “Specific Advice for Reading 1 and 2 Chronicles” (pp. [100–101](#)), since the same basic historical and religious background lies behind this book as well. You should be looking for several emphases in the narrative that offer keys to making sense of things as you read.

Most important, and in keeping with all that has preceded him thus far, our author (reflecting his main sources, Ezra and Nehemiah) is intensely concerned with the purity of faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel. This purity is to be found in keeping the commandments in the “Book of the Law of God.” All the reforms mentioned in the book are based on the Law, and the repentance in [Ezra 10](#) and [Nehemiah 9–10](#) is in both cases solely in light of what is said in the Law. This also accounts for the emphasis on the priests and Levites (as in Chronicles), because of their role both in teaching the Law and in maintaining purity of worship.

Crucial to this reform is the crisis over national identity: Who constitutes the true remnant of the people of God and thus is in genuine continuity with the past? It is in this context that you can best understand the urgent concern over intermarriage ([Ezra 9–10](#); [Neh 9:2](#); [10:28–30](#); [13:23–28](#)). Thus the suggestion that Ezra-Nehemiah is mostly about community building is not far



off the mark; it is indeed about rebuilding the community of God, based on the religious realities of the past.

This crisis over national identity is also the context in which to understand the passion for building the walls of Jerusalem. Walls do not simply keep unwanted people out; in ancient times they set boundaries and therefore gave *identity* to a city and its people. Nehemiah lived in a time when Jerusalem, the City of David and the place where God had chosen that his Name should dwell, had become the ultimate symbol of Israel's national and religious identity (a theme that pervades the book of Psalms and is crucial to the Revelation of John).

Finally, this concern over a pure people of God worshiping in a purified temple in a newly consecrated city (the word translated “dedicated” in [Neh 3:1](#) is used most often for “consecrating” holy things) is also the context in which to understand the (somewhat ambivalent) attitude toward the Persian kings. On the one hand, the people, even those who have returned, are regularly referred to as “the exiles” (see esp. [Ezra 10](#))—and they smart from their general lack of independent status as a people (“slaves,” [Ezra 9:9](#); [Neh 9:36](#)). On the other hand, they know full well that both their temple and the wall around Jerusalem are possible only because of the decree and protection of their Persian overlords—which gives them a margin of safety from local opposition. This is a primary reason for the recounting of the building of the temple in [Ezra 1–6](#), since its construction under the decree of Cyrus serves as an introduction to the main project of Ezra-Nehemiah, namely, the building of the walls—this time on the basis of official letters from Artaxerxes ([Neh 2:7–9](#)).

## A WALK THROUGH EZRA-NEHEMIAH

- [Ezra 1–6](#)      ***A Review of the Rebuilding of the Temple (538–516 B.C.)***

Watch for the narrative art of the author-compiler as you read this introduction to his book. Except for [4:6–23](#), he basically reviews the events surrounding the building of the temple, begun under Cyrus in 538/7 and

completed under Darius in 516. In turn he describes Cyrus's decree (cf. [2 Chr 36:22–23](#)) and his beneficence toward the project ([Ezra 1](#)); the list of the exiles who returned at that time (ch. [2](#)), focusing especially on the priests and Levites (the interest is in the temple, after all!); the successful beginnings of the project, starting with the altar and then the foundations of the temple itself (ch. [3](#); don't miss the repetition in v. [11](#) of the theme from Chronicles); the opposition to the project that brought the rebuilding to a halt ([4:1–5](#), [24](#)) down to the time of Haggai and Zechariah (you might want to read at least the book of Haggai in connection with this part of Ezra); the renewed opposition in 520 that brought about the exchange of official letters ([Ezra 5:1–6:12](#)) and cleared the way for its completion ([6:13–18](#)), followed by a Passover celebration ([6:19–22](#)). What doesn't fit into this review chronologically, of course, is the insertion of the later opposition to an apparently abortive attempt to rebuild the walls ([4:6–23](#) [ca. 448]), which is included here for literary purposes, anticipating the later opposition endured by Nehemiah.

□      **[Ezra 7–8](#)      *The Return of Ezra and Others to Jerusalem (458 B.C.)***

Note how the author begins this section with an introduction to Ezra and his return, emphasizing his being a priest and a teacher of the Law of Moses given by Yahweh ([7:1–10](#)). This is followed by Ezra's own memoirs ([7:11–8:36](#), note the shift to the first-person pronoun in [7:27–28](#)), which tell of the circumstances of his leaving Babylon ([7:11–28](#), note especially the role of the Persian king), those who accompanied him ([8:1–14](#)), and the circumstances of the return itself ([8:15–36](#)).

□      **[Ezra 9–10](#)      *The Crisis of Intermarriage***

With this section you come to the first major threat for our author, namely, that the returnees—even many priests and Levites ([10:18–24](#)) —“have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them” ([9:2](#)) by intermarrying with them. Note how Ezra's prayer ([9:6–15](#)) sets forth the main issues (and includes the tension between their present “slavery” and the

kindness of the kings of Persia). Chapter [10](#) then describes the reform itself. Note also that all of this is from Ezra's memoirs.

□     **[Nehemiah](#)**     ***Rebuilding the Walls under  
1–7                    Nehemiah's Governorship (444 B.C.)***

Using Nehemiah's memoirs, the narrator describes in some detail the circumstances surrounding the rebuilding of the wall. He begins with how Nehemiah, a prominent court figure, secured the king's permission and authority to return to Jerusalem (as governor, you learn in [5:14](#)) to rebuild the walls (chs. [1–2](#)). Chapter [3](#) describes in detail the who and the where of the participants in the project, while chapter [4](#) describes the opposition (thus recalling [Ezra 4:6–23](#)) and their rebuff. Note here also the surfacing of the holy-war theme ([Neh 4:20](#)). The interlude of chapter [5](#) relates Nehemiah's handling a conflict related to Jerusalem's poor—by reinstituting the “no usury” clause from the Mosaic Law ([Exod 22:25](#); [Deut 23:19–20](#)). Further opposition and the completion of the project are recounted in [Nehemiah 6:1–7:3](#). But note here the narrator's skill. Instead of going on to the dedication, which appears in [12:27–43](#), he brings this first long section of his narrative ([Ezra 1–Neh 7](#)) to completion by a nearly verbatim repeating of the list of returnees from [Ezra 2](#). This enclosure, which also holds the narrative in suspension, is his way of calling special attention to the two events that follow.

□     **[Nehemiah](#)**     ***The Renewal of the Covenant  
8–10***

With this account you come to the first of the two climactic moments in our author's narrative. Before the repopulation of Jerusalem and the dedication of its walls (chs. [11–12](#)) comes the ceremony of primary significance for him—a time of national renewal of the covenant. It begins with a long celebratory reading of the Law ([7:73b–8:12](#)) and includes the great celebratory Feast of Tabernacles ([8:13–18](#)). This is followed by a time of community confession (ch. [9](#)) in which the long history of disobedience is recounted (cf. [Ps 106](#)), and by the corporate signing of the renewal agreement ([Neh 10](#)).

□ **Nehemiah**     ***The Resettlement and Dedication***  
**11–12**                    ***of the Wall***

Note the narrative insight that puts this event *after* the covenant-renewal ceremony. Once covenant loyalty on the part of the renewed community is in place, then in turn are listed the new population (ch. [11](#)) and the priestly community ([12:1–26](#)). With that the walls that give them definition and protection are dedicated ([12:27–43](#))—in great ceremonial pageantry and with much music and praise (the reason for the Levites!).

□ **Nehemiah**     ***The Conclusion: Community Purity***  
**13**                    ***Reinforced***

Note that the final concern in the book is the one you have met throughout—that the renewed community of faith be pure with regard to the faith. Singled out are the exclusion of Ammonites from the sacred places (vv. [1–14](#)), the purity of the Sabbath (vv. [15–22](#)), and (not surprisingly) intermarriage (vv. [23–29](#)).

Ezra-Nehemiah advances the biblical story by describing how the necessary reforms in Jerusalem were set in motion, which were later to serve as the basis for the Judaism out of which Jesus and the early church emerge.



# STUDYTWO

## Ezra 1.1-3.13

### 1. Ezra 1.1-11

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

##### *Observation*

1. In verse 1, what did God do?
2. Who is Cyrus?
3. What did Cyrus say in verses 2-4?
4. What did the Israelites and their neighbours do in response to Cyrus' instructions (v.5-6, 11)?
5. What did Cyrus do in 1.7-11?

##### *Interpretation*

1. What was "the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah" (v. 1. cf. Jer 25.11-12; 29.10-14; Zec 1.12-16) and what are the implications of this phrase?
2. What is the impact of Cyrus' words in verses 2-4?
3. What is the significance of verses 5-11?
4. What is the significance of the list of gold and silver articles in verses 7-11?
5. What is the meaning of this passage?

*Application*

1. What does this passage tell you about the ways and purposes of God?
2. How has the response of the Israelites and their neighbours encouraged you?
3. How have you been instructed and inspired through this chapter?

**2. Ezra 2.1-70**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

*Observation*

1. Where did the Israelites come back from?
2. Where did they return to upon arrival (v.1, 70)?
3. Which are the various groups of exiles who returned?
4. What did the returning party comprise of?
5. What did the heads of households do when they arrived at Jerusalem (v.68-69)?

*Interpretation*

1. Why do you think the writer categorised the returnees into various groups as he did?
2. How long do you think they might have taken to return to Jerusalem?
3. In verse 63, why were some people excluded from partaking of the most sacred food?
4. What is the significance of this passage in Ezra 2?

*Application*

1. What are some aspects of this chapter that strike you as important or worth emulating?



### 3. Ezra 3.1-13

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

##### *Observation*

1. When and where did the Israelites gather in Ezra 3.1?
2. What did they do when they gathered (v.2-6)?
3. What else did the people do (v.7)?
4. When and how did they start building the house of God (v.7-9)?
5. What did the Israelites do when they laid the foundation of the temple of God (v.10-13)?

##### *Interpretation*

1. Why did the Israelites gather like they did in Ezra 3.1-6?
2. Why did some people shout with joy while others weep aloud (v.12)?
3. What is the significance of the temple that the Israelites had to rebuild it?
4. What do you think is the author's intention for chapter 3?

*Application*

1. How should we be informed and formed in our Christian faith based on the lessons gleaned from this chapter?
2. What is our New Testament understanding of the temple and how does it apply to us today?

## Ezra 1.1-3.13

### GROUPSTUDY

1. What did Cyrus say and do with regards to the Israelites, and how did the Israelites and their neighbours respond (Ezra 1.1-11)?

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2. How does this passage in Ezra 1 instruct and inspire you, insofar as God's purpose and plans for you are concerned?

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3. What is the significance of Ezra 2? What are some aspects of this chapter that strike you as important or something you seek to emulate?

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4. What did the Israelites seek to do in Ezra 3 and why?

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5. What can you surmise about their emotional state as the Israelites lay the foundations of the temple (Ezra 3.10-13) and why?

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6. What is the significance of the temple that the Israelites had to rebuild it? What is our New Testament understanding of the temple and how do we apply that today?

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7. How may we be informed and formed in our Christian faith based on the lessons gleaned from chapters 1-3?

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# OPTIONAL READINGS

The following are two articles for those who would like to delve deeper into the significance of the temple:

## TEMPLE <sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, given the temple's central role in Jewish society, the biblical imagery surrounding it is particularly rich and suggestive. The temple presents a fascinating range of symbols and, in light of the biblical prohibition against graven images, a surprising emphasis on the visible nature of revelation communicated by the dwelling of Israel's invisible God (e.g., Ps 48.4–8, 12–14). No doubt the songs, fragrances, prayers and rituals surrounding a visit to the temple, the biggest structure of its kind in the ancient Near East, left an indelible impression on the senses and served as a fountainhead of religious imagery. After all, the temple was not only the worship center of Hebrew culture but also the art gallery, concert plaza and poetry library.

**God's Dwelling Place.** The temple in its most basic sense symbolizes the dwelling place of God. This is underscored by numerous references to the temple as the “house of God” or the “house of the LORD.” Its other titles include “the sanctuary” or at times simply Zion—as the psalmist emphasizes, “For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation” (Ps 132.13 NRSV; cf. Ps 9.11; 74.2; 76.2; Joel 3.17). In lieu of the carved deity symbolizing the presence of the gods in pagan temples, the architecture and increasingly precious metals encountered as one neared the holy of holies emphasized God's presence. Indeed, at its dedication the manifestation of his presence proved overwhelming: “a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8.10–11

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<sup>1</sup> Extracted from Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000). In *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (electronic ed., pp. 849–851). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

NRSV; cf. 2 Chron 5.14; 7.1–2; Ezek 43.5; 44.4). The two massive pillars of the forecourt are also symbolic of God's entrance into his abode (1 Kings 7.15–22; cf. Ezek 43.4).

However, the image of God's dwelling in a habitation constructed by human hands may appear problematic, or at best paradoxical. On the one hand, the temple provided a place for worship and a tangible reminder of God's presence, blessing and protection; on the other hand, its presence might lead to the perspective that God may be circumscribed. Criticism of the latter perspective is evident in Isaiah 66.1: "Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?" (NRSV; cf. Deut 4.7; Ps 145.18; Acts 7.48; 17.24). Even at the temple's dedication, Solomon acknowledges that God is not "contained" in it. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8.27 NRSV). Other passages unite both dimensions without any apparent tension: "The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven" (Ps 11.4).

The answer to this paradox lies in the fact that the temple is an earthly archetype of the heavenly reality, just as Moses constructed the tabernacle after the heavenly pattern revealed to him on Sinai (Ex 25.9, 40). This contrast between the heavenly and the earthly is also underscored in several passages of Hebrews: "They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one" (Heb 8.5 NRSV; cf. Heb 9.1, 24). Specific aspects of God's heavenly abode are duplicated in the temple. For example, God's dwelling in a veil of smoke and darkness is replicated in the holy of holies (2 Sam 22.12; Ps 18.11; 97.2; Rev 15.8).

**Symbol of Divine Victory.** The temple was more than God's earthly dwelling place. It was also a potent symbol of God's victory over his enemies. We may see this in 2 Samuel 7, the story of David's abortive desire to build the temple. David felt guilty that he lived in a permanent home while God still lived in a tent (2 Sam 7.2). He expressed his desire to build a permanent structure to the prophet Nathan, who initially approved the idea.



Later, however, God appeared to Nathan, telling him that David was not to build the temple.

The message of 2 Samuel 7 centers on a play on the Hebrew word *bayit*, which is rendered in various ways in most English versions (though not the NRSV, which translates “house” consistently). David is securely settled in his *bayit* (house; cf. 2 Sam 7.1) but wants to build God a *bayit* (temple; cf. 2 Sam 7.5). God rejects David’s plan but tells him *he* will build *for David* a *bayit* (a dynasty; cf. 2 Sam 7.11). The one who follows David in his dynasty will be the one to build the “house of God.” This one of course is Solomon, whose name means “peace.” The point is that the temple symbolizes victory over the enemies of God and peaceful settlement in the land. David was the conquest completer, but he was also “a warrior” (1 Chron 28.3); so the time was not right for the temple. His son Solomon built it.

In this way the temple is a symbol of establishment and victory. As such, it falls into the pattern of ancient Near Eastern mythology (in particular the Baal Epic of ancient Ugarit), which presents a pattern of warfare followed by the proclamation of the god as king and the commemoration of victory through the building of a new divine residence.

**The Temple and Creation.** Yet God’s celestial and terrestrial abodes are not always contrasted; often they are depicted as complementary. That is, the temple also represents the entire cosmos; it is a microcosm of all creation. “He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever” (Ps 78.69 NRSV). Since the temple speaks of all creation, Habakkuk declares, “The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Hab 2.20 NRSV). Similarly, Isaiah’s vision of God’s glory filling the temple is accompanied by the angelic antiphony “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is 6.3 NRSV).

Both the temple and the tabernacle embody a theology of creation and God’s presence within it. Consequently there are parallels between the Genesis creation account and the accounts of the building of the tabernacle and the temple. The significance of the light of creation and the light in the tabernacle (Ex 25.31–

40; 37.17–24) is retained in the temple (2 Chron 13.11). Similar to the seven days of creation, the temple took seven years to complete, a fact that emphasizes God as its builder rather than Solomon or David. The objects in the temple bear creation symbolism as well. For example, the placid waters of the bronze reservoir in the court of the priests represent God's victory over the waters of chaos, as celebrated in Psalm 93, which connects the creation of the world, the raging chaotic waters and the holiness of God's house. Both God's creation and his acts of creation are often imaginatively portrayed in the temple.

As a symbol of pristine creation the temple evokes the Garden of Eden, or paradise. Ezekiel depicts the primordial rivers (Gen 2.10–14) emerging from below the threshold of the temple (Ezek 47.1). He also suggests that the perfection of Eden is cultivated in the temple by its proximity to the tree of life. "Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary" (Ezek 47.12 NRSV). The psalmist longs for the delights of such a paradise: "Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple" (Ps 65.4 NRSV; cf. Ps 36).

**Place of Communication.** The temple, moreover, represents a place of communication with and about God. Its priests had access to the mind of God (Deut 33.8) and instructed the people in the law. This instruction in Torah which emanates from the temple is projected onto the age to come when the nations shall stream to Zion (Mic 4.2), the place of prayer for all nations (Is 56.7; Jer 7.11; Mk 11.17). It was a place to pronounce vows and fulfill pledges. Even during the time of exile, when the temple was in ruins, the people of Israel would direct their prayers toward the temple, knowing that God would hear (1 Kings 8.28–29; Ps 138.2; Dan 6.11; Jon 2.7). In Luke's infancy narrative the temple is the place where the pious receive revelation concerning God's coming salvation and where Jesus, even as a child, expounds God's Word. In Acts the early church does not abandon the temple but preaches in its precincts.

**Cosmic Center.** Not only did daily economic, political and religious life orbit the Jerusalem temple, but it symbolized the center of the cosmos, the meeting place between heaven and earth, the center to which distant communities would send delegations to offer worship. Ezekiel describes it as located in the “center of the nations” and as “the navel of the earth” (Ezek 5.5; 38.12 NRSV mg.). Hence actions that take place in its precincts take on special significance, such as Jesus’ prophetic act of cleansing the temple (Mk 11.15; Lk 19.45; Jn 2.15) and the rending of the temple veil brought about by Jesus’ death (Mt 27.51; Mk 15.38; Lk 23.45; cf. Heb 6.19; 9.3; 10.20).

**The Temple and Holiness.** Because the temple represented the dwelling place of God on earth, it was a symbol of holiness. The deeper one penetrated the temple precincts, the greater the sanctity one encountered. Unlike a synagogue or church, the inside of the temple itself was not a place of public worship. The spread wings of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies suggest a picture of divine sanctity and protection (1 Kings 8.6–7; cf. Gen 3.24; Is 6.2–3).

Since the temple represents all creation, the purity rules surrounding it had implications for categorizing everything, including people, in terms of clean and unclean. For example, the first gradation of holiness prevented Gentiles from approaching the inner precincts. Ezekiel is exhorted to “mark well those who may be admitted to the temple and all those who are to be excluded from the sanctuary” (Ezek 44.5 NRSV). In Herod’s temple there was a wall or marker that warned Gentiles not to proceed further under penalty of death. Paul is falsely accused of defiling the temple by bringing Gentiles past this barrier (Acts 21.28). This image is taken up in Ephesians 2.14, which maintains that Christ’s death “has broken down the dividing wall” (NRSV) between Jew and Gentile.

**The Temple and Community.** Since sacred concepts of boundaries, holiness and God’s presence undergird the identity of the people of God, the temple often symbolizes God’s people. For

Isaiah the restoration of the temple mount and of the people are synonymous (Is 51.16); Ezekiel's vision of the restoration of the temple is a vision of hope for Israel (Ezek 40.1–43.12). Numerous biblical authors employ the temple as a symbol of the rise and fall of God's people according to their moral, ethical and spiritual condition (Ps 79.1; 114.2; Jer 24; Ezek 9.6; 43.10; Dan 8.13; 11.31; Rev 11.1). Similarly, the disciples' discussion of the temple in the Gospels sets the stage for Jesus' prophetic discourse concerning the nation of Israel (Mt 24.1; Mk 13.1; Lk 21.5). John in particular emphasizes the function of the community, Jesus' body, as the temple that bears God's presence (e.g., Jn 2.19–21; 4.21–24).

Paul as well understands the redeemed community, the church, as the dwelling place of God: "Do you not know that you are God's temple?" (1 Cor 3.16). Accordingly, it has implications for separation from the unholy and ungodly (cf. 1 Cor 3.17; 6.19; 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.21). 1 Peter speaks of Christ and believers as "living stones" that are "built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2.4–5 NRSV). Revelation addresses the faithful as pillars of the temple (Rev 3.12) but also emphasizes that there is no longer any need for a temple because of the unmediated presence of God in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21.22), which, because it is fashioned as a cube (Rev 21.16), suggests the shape of the holy of holies.

**The Temple and Justice and Peace.** The temple is pictured as the embodiment of God's people's longing for justice, peace and blessing. This was true while the temple was standing and was only intensified by its destruction. The temple is related to the dispensation of law and justice; in it the law was both taught and practiced. The prophets were quick to remind people of the offensiveness of temple worship if not accompanied by justice (Is 1.10–17; Hos 6.6; Amos 5.21). Accordingly, the psalmist makes a connection between the physical and ethical preparation necessary for those who would "ascend the hill of the LORD" or "stand in his holy place" (see Ps 24.3–6; cf. Ps 15): the physical ascent of the temple mount into God's presence must be matched by an ethical ascent.

This fits well with the emphasis on the temple's physical beauty. The religion of the Bible tolerates no graven images of the deity, but it was not bereft of artistic achievement. Psalm 84 celebrates the beauty of Zion, which certainly would have included the temple building itself. It expresses the psalmist's longing to be in the vicinity of this marvelous building.

Moreover, the temple symbolizes peace and rest. Because the glassy sea of the temple is associated with God's victory over chaos in creation, the temple is associated with the sabbath rest that accompanied the completion of the world. The temple is spoken of as his "resting place" (Ps 132.14; cf. Is 66.1), and Solomon is chosen to be its builder because he is a "man of peace" (1 Chron 22.9). The completion of the temple is symbolic of the sabbath God grants Israel from its warring past. Hence it is from its origin a place of rest (cf. Ex 20.25). In Revelation the altar of the temple is pictured as the place where the martyrs rest until the time of the end (Rev 6.9–11).

**Image of Christ.** Like the tabernacle before it, temple imagery is associated with Jesus Christ in the NT. After all, the temple represented God's presence on earth, and Jesus is the fullness of that presence in bodily form. A rumor had reached the high priest that Jesus had foreseen the destruction of the temple (Mk 13.1–2) and attributed to him the claim that in three days he would build another, but "not made with hands" (Mk 14.58; cf. Jn 2.13–22). His opponents knew what he was saying: that he would stand in place of the temple as the presence of God.

**Conclusion.** Given such a richness of imagery surrounding the house of God, it is little wonder that God's people have always passionately yearned for life inside its courts: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long" (Ps 23.6 NRSV).

## TEMPLE <sup>2</sup>

### Jesus and the temple

The Synoptic evangelists regard Jesus' relations with the temple of Jerusalem as of crucial significance. They concentrate most of the relevant material into their accounts of his brief ministry in Jerusalem at the end of his life, to which they attach great importance, and ignore his earlier visits to the city. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is interpreted as the fulfilment of the eschatological hope of the coming of the Messiah to Zion (Matt. 21.9; Mark 11.9–10; Luke 19.38; John 12.14–15). Jesus' high-handed action in cleansing the temple is very likely understood by Mark as a Messianic action (Mal. 3.1–4; *Psalms of Solomon* 17.23–24). Mark's use of Isaiah 56.7 ('My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations') shows what he thought of those who had sacrificed Israel's calling to be a light to the Gentiles by commercializing their part of the temple, while the use of Jeremiah 7.11 points ahead to his teaching on the destruction of the temple (13.1–2; cf. 14.57–58; 15.37–38).

This radical view of the cleansing of the temple in Mark is supported by the account of the cursing and the withering of the barren fig tree, in which the story of the cleansing is embedded (11.11–25). A similar judgment on the order represented by the temple is probably intended by the prediction in Mark 11.23: the mountain of the Lord's house will not be elevated as expected (Is. 2.2 = Mic. 4.1), but cast down.

At Jesus' trial he was accused of saying, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands' (Mark 14.58). According to John 2.19 Jesus uttered a saying like this (\*cf. Acts 6.14). Why Mark attributed it to false witness is therefore debated by scholars. Possibly the witness was false because it misrepresented what Jesus said. He had predicted that the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13.2) and he had said that he would be put to death (8.31;

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<sup>2</sup> Extracted from McKelvey, R. J. (2000). Temple. In T. D. Alexander & B. S. Rosner (Eds.), *New dictionary of biblical theology* (electronic ed., pp. 806–811). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

9.31; 10.34), and these two things may have been unscrupulously combined. Support for this view can be found in John 2.19–20. There seems little doubt that Mark intended the reference to the temple ‘not made with hands’ to refer to the new temple. This is clearly the meaning intended by John who, significantly, places his saying about the new temple in the context of the cleansing of the temple (2.19–22).

The consequences of Jesus’ rejection and death for the temple of Jerusalem are nowhere more in evidence than in Mark’s statement that at the moment Jesus died the veil of the temple was torn apart (15.38). Coupled with this and immediately following it is the confession of faith by the Roman centurion (15.39). Whether the ruined veil was the one which hung in front of the holy place or the veil covering the entrance to the holy of holies, the meaning is not in doubt; the death of Jesus stands for the removal of the temple of Jerusalem and its replacement by a new means of forgiveness, and the first person to avail himself of this is a representative of those who were denied a place in the part of the temple assigned for their use (1 Kgs. 8.41–43). Thus Mark ends his Gospel with Jesus leading the disciples away from Jerusalem and back to Galilee (14.28; 16.7).

### **The new temple in Luke-Acts**

The temple of Jerusalem features prominently in Luke-Acts. In both writings the beginning of the new age is located in the temple of Jerusalem (Luke 2.25–32; Acts 1–7), but it is made clear that the gospel is for the nations (Luke 24.47), and that this will mean leaving Jerusalem and going to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8; 28.23–31). But cutting the umbilical cord which joined the infant church to Jerusalem was not easy, or so it would appear from the story of Stephen (Acts 6–7). Stephen directs a frontal attack on the temple, or more precisely on the attitude of mind engendered by the temple. The charge brought against Stephen is attributed to false witnesses (6.13), but, since what Stephen says substantiates the charge to a great extent, it seems clear that, as in the case of the charge brought against Jesus at his trial, the falsity was very likely due more to misrepresentation than to perjury. The logical sequel is unsurprising; the martyrdom of Stephen is

followed by the persecution of the church and the scattering of its members, first to Samaria (8.4–5) and then to Antioch (11.19–21). The way was thus prepared for Paul to take the gospel to the Gentile world (13.1–3) and for the book of Acts to end with the apostle not in Jerusalem but in Rome (28.30–31). Loyalty to the temple of Jerusalem was replaced by loyalty to the person of Jesus

### **The church as God's temple**

There is one text in Paul's writings which depicts the individual as God's temple (1 Cor. 6.19–20). Parallels for this idea have frequently been sought in Philo and the Stoics. But it should be noted that Paul did not think of the divine indwelling as part of the natural order as the Stoics did. He saw it as a gift of the new age; it was part of his ecclesiology and eschatology.

In other texts the Christian community is identified as God's temple. The eschatological nuance of this imagery is prominent in 1 Corinthians 3.16–17, where Paul says that it is the Spirit who makes believers in Christ God's new temple. 'You are God's temple, since God's Spirit dwells in you' (author's translation). The Holy Spirit is the divine gift of the new age (Ezek. 37.14; Joel 2.28–29; Acts 2.1–4).

The corporate character of the temple imagery is particularly clear in 1 Corinthians 3.16–17. 'You Corinthians—all of you—are God's dwelling-place' (author's translation). Over against the divisive tendencies at Corinth Paul sets the idea of the church as God's temple. His Jewish Christian readers could not fail to see the point. God does not dwell in a multiplicity of temples. He is one and can inhabit only one shrine (\*cf. 1.13, 'is Christ divided?'). To cause disunity in the church is to desecrate the temple of God, and desecration of a holy place leads to its destruction.

Equal emphasis is laid on the sanctity of the new temple, a thought which would have strong resonance for both Jewish and Greek Christians. Paul thinks of the church in almost spatial terms. It is God's holy preserve. Schism amounts to profanation of a holy place and will bring its own fearful penalty.

Another text in which the temple image is used to address the practical needs of the church is 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1. The key



texts, Leviticus 26.12 and Ezekiel 37.27, used here in the string of testimonia, are already combined in a prediction of the new temple in *Jubilees* 1.17, and it is possible that Paul is using proof texts which were already in use in the early church or in Judaism (Qumran). Whatever the origin of the couplet, Paul gives it his own meaning. It is the Christian community that inherits the promises of God. The holiness which God's presence gives it must be preserved from defilement by unbelievers (6.17; 7.1). In this text, as in 1 Corinthians 3.16, it is the local congregation which is God's temple.

Ephesians 2.20–22, by contrast, uses the temple image for the church universal. Doctrinal instruction is the intention. The text forms a summarizing conclusion to a passage which describes the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church (2.11–19). The terms 'far' and 'near' (v. 13, 17) were used by the rabbis to describe Gentiles and Jews respectively (*\*Numbers Rabbah* 8.4), while the references to 'peace' (v. 14, 17) denote the peace which was to prevail when Jews and Gentiles were united in the temple at Zion (Is. 2.2–4; Mic. 4.1–4; *1 Enoch* 90.29–33; *Sibylline Oracles* 3.755–776). This unity is further reflected in the idea of the removal of the wall dividing the races (v. 14), particularly if this is the wall in the temple of Jerusalem which separated Jews and Gentiles (Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.417; *Wars* 5.194–195). Thus Gentiles and Jews both have unhindered 'access' to the sanctuary of God's presence (v. 18).

The way is thus prepared for the architectural image of Jews and Gentiles forming the new temple (v. 19–20). The passage is significant for its fusion of the temple (*naos*) and the building (*oikodomē*) and its specification of different parts of the building. The foundation is the apostles and prophets (NT prophets; cf. Rom. 12.6; 1 Thess. 5.20; Acts 11.27, etc.; Rev. 1.3, etc.). In other words, Gentiles are assured that their membership of the church rests upon the bedrock of historic Christianity. Christ himself is the cornerstone or keystone, depending upon how one interprets *akrogōniaios*. Understood as a cornerstone, this particular stone was the first stone to be laid in the foundation, and all the others were lined up to it. This imagery gives Christ a determinative role

in the church, and also explains how the building can be said to 'grow into a holy temple' (Eph. 2.21).

The rabbis viewed the cornerstone of Isaiah 28.16 physiologically, as the embryo from which the world grew (\**Babylonian Talmud Yoma* 54a). The cornerstone unites the building because it is organically as well as structurally bound to it, and the building itself grows as further stones (Gentile converts) are added to it. The superstructure which arises from the foundation is described in parallel ways (Eph. 2.21–22), which are fused to create a double image. Viewed as a building, the church is still under construction; viewed as a temple, it is an inhabited dwelling. God deigns to dwell in his unfinished (and imperfect) church.

The crucial role which Christ has in the church is further explicated in 1 Peter 2.4–8. The reference to Christ as the cornerstone (v. 6) shows that the meaning of the verse is close to that of Ephesians 2.20; Christ is the source of the church's life and growth. It is for this reason that believers are exhorted to keep coming to him (v. 4). They are themselves 'living stones' and together with Christ they form a 'spiritual house' (v. 5). The strong Christological thrust of the text is indicated by the exhortation to 'offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (v. 5). That the edifice is understood to be a temple is shown by the mention of sacrifices and priesthood (v. 5). By reinterpreting priesthood as well as temple and sacrifice, the author has completed the circle of ideas represented by the temple image.

### **The heavenly temple**

The sanctuary or temple in heaven is an important idea in the epistle to the Hebrews. Contrasting the old covenant and the new and better covenant, the writer says that Christ the high priest has entered into the heavenly shrine (9.11–12; cf. 6.19–20; 8.2). By referring to the heavenly sanctuary as 'true' (8.2; 9.24) and to its earthly counterpart as 'shadow' or 'copy' (8.5; 9.24) the author demonstrates the transcendence and superiority of Christianity over Judaism.

The heavenly temple is the setting for the drama which is played out in chapters 4–20 of the book of Revelation. John sees the throne of God (4.1–11). Nearby is the sea (possibly a reference to the laver which is next to the altar in 1 Kgs. 7.23–26) and the altar (6.9–11). Presently John sees the temple opened and the ark of the covenant revealed (11.19). Angels emerge from the temple (15.6) and God sends out his judgments from it (16.1, 17). Beyond this, John is not interested in the heavenly temple as such; it is simply the stage for his *dramatis personae*. But the reader is alerted to expect the temple to play an important part in John's vision by his statement that the faithful will be made pillars in the temple of God (3.12).

It comes as a surprise, however, to be told that the new Jerusalem will not have a temple (21.22). The idea of Jerusalem without a temple runs counter to all the hopes of Judaism. It is taken by some commentators to mean that the whole city is a temple. It is noted that the city is cubiform (21.16; cf. 1 Kgs. 6.20). But John says that God and the Lamb are the temple. This probably means that in the place where one would expect the temple one finds God and his Son. Such a conclusion seems to be what John intends when he says that the martyrs stand in the presence of God (7.15) and that the dwelling of God is God himself (21.3; note the play on the words *skēnē* and *skēnōsei*). Thus John finally says that the temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. One after another the barriers separating worshippers from God are removed until they enjoy uninterrupted communion with God. 'His servants will ... see his face' (22.3–4). This is the *summum bonum* John presents to his hard-pressed readers.

## Conclusion

The temple is a central feature of the Bible. It is God's dwelling with his people that makes them the people of God, and when the temple of Jerusalem is destroyed the hope of a new temple became a central article of Jewish faith. The NT presents the church as the fulfilment of God's promise of a new temple. This spiritualizing of the temple, which had already begun in Judaism, resulted from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

and the gift of the Spirit. For this reason full weight should be given to the adjective when speaking of the *new* temple.

As a metaphor of the church the temple is significant for its theocentric emphasis. The church is the temple of God, or of God's Spirit, and never the temple of Christ. The image thus serves ecclesiology by drawing attention to the fundamental concept of the church as the people of God. On the other hand, when the temple is viewed in architectural terms and seen as a building, Christ's place in the church and his relation to Christians and theirs to him is made clear. The fusion of sacral and architectural images may indicate a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of the NT writers to emphasize the position of Christ in the church. No greater significance could have been attached to Christ than by giving him pride of place as the chief stone in the new temple.

At the same time the close connection of Christians with their Lord is denoted by their being called 'stones' in the temple. Together Christ and Christians form God's dwelling. Christians are 'living stones' because they are united to Christ the living stone, *i.e.* the resurrected one. The merging of temple and building images introduces a dynamic element into NT ecclesiology; the church 'grows into a holy temple in the Lord' (Eph. 2.21).

The use of the temple image also serves to depict Christ's work in the eternal world. He secures forgiveness for his people and mediates their prayers to God. Additionally, the heavenly temple image denotes the unhindered access to God which believers enjoy. Although still on earth, they join in the worship offered in heaven. This foretaste of the worship of the age to come is graphically portrayed in the book of Revelation which depicts God himself as the temple. God is directly and fully accessible to his people through his Son the Lamb.

## NOTES

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# STUDYTHREE

## Ezra 4.1-6.22

### 1. Ezra 4.1-24

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

##### *Observation*

1. Who were the people who came to Zarubbabel and the heads of the families and what did they want (v.1-2)?
2. What was Zarubbabel's and the leaders' response and why (v.3)?
3. What did these people do instead (v.4-5)?
4. During the reigns of Xerxes and later, Artaxerxes, what did the people do (v.6-7)?
5. What were the contents of the letter they wrote to Artaxerxes (v.8-16)?
6. What was the king's response and outcome for the Israelites (v.17-22; 23-24)?



*Interpretation*

1. What were the tactics employed by Israel's enemies?
2. When was the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes?
3. Why do you think they wanted to hinder the rebuilding of the temple and later, the wall?
4. How do you think the Israelites felt during this entire saga?

*Application*

1. In what ways are your past experiences and encounters similar to what is described here?
2. What are the lessons that you may glean from this chapter?

## 2. Ezra 5.1-17

### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

#### *Observation*

1. In Ezra 5.1-2, who were the leaders mentioned and what did they do?
2. What was the consequence of their work (v.3-4)?
3. How did God intervene (v.5)?
4. What were the contents of the letter sent to King Darius (v. 6-17)?

#### *Interpretation*

1. How is the purpose of God being fulfilled in the midst of the opposition?
2. How is this episode a reminder of what God is doing through Israel's history?

*Application*

1. What does this passage teach us about doing the work of God in the face of opposition?
2. In what way is God speaking to you in your situation through this text?

**3. Ezra 6.1-22**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

*Observation*

1. As a result of Tattenai's letter to King Darius, what transpired (v.1-5)?
2. What were King Darius' instructions to Tattenai and company (v.6-12)?
3. What was the outcome in the light of King Darius' instructions (v.13-15)?
4. What did the Israelites do after the temple was completed (v.16-22)?

*Interpretation*

1. What would you consider as divine providence in this entire episode in Ezra 6.1-22?
2. How was the purpose of God fulfilled in this chapter?

*Application*

1. What is God teaching you through this passage with respect to the work he instructs us to do?
2. What specific word is God saying to you through this lesson?

## GROUPSTUDY

1. What were the tactics employed by Israel's enemies in Ezra 4.1-5, 24 to hinder the rebuilding of the temple? During the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes, how did their enemies oppose Israel (Ezra 4.4-23)? How do you think the Israelites would feel during these times? What are the lessons that you may glean from Ezra 4?

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### Note:

Briefly, the Persian kings ruled as follows: Cyrus (536-530 BC), Cambyses (530-522 BC), Pseudo-Smerdes (523 BC) and Darius I (from 522 BC onward). One should note that verses 6-23 serves as a parenthesis of sorts, since Ezra 4.1-5, 24 relates to the rebuilding of the temple. In Ezra 4.6-23, the writer mentioned Xerxes I (486-465 BC) and Artaxerxes I (465-425 BC) and how even after the temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, the enemies of Israel continued to oppose the Jews in the later years when they were

rebuilding the wall. By the reign of Artaxerxes, the new Temple had been standing for half a century.<sup>3</sup>

As such, according to Kidner, “*The Jews who came up from you [Ezra 4.12] would be Ezra’s party of 458 BC (see chapters 7ff.), or else a later group. In either case some years would have elapsed before they could have been ready for the concerted building operation which provoked this letter, after the upheavals and heartbreaks of Ezra’s reforms. Everything points to a date approaching the year 445 in which Nehemiah heard the news which corresponds to our verse 23 (Neh. 1.3).*”<sup>4</sup>

Why does the author insert Ezra 4.6-23 here? Fensham argues that the author “is referring in this chapter in chronological order to the hindrances placed in the way of the Jews to rebuild the temple and the wall of Jerusalem. When he discussed the problems of the building of the temple in 4.1-5, it reminded him of later similar troubles with the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, and so 4.6-23 has been inserted, almost parenthetically, before the argument of the building of the temple has again been taken up in 4.24ff.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kidner, D. (1979). *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 12, p. 58). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, D. (1979). *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 12, p. 58). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Fensham, F. C. (1982). *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (pp. 69–70). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

2. Summarise the events in Ezra 5-6. Through this passage, how is the purpose and work of God being fulfilled, even in the face of opposition?

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3. What did the Israelites do after the temple was completed (Ezra 6.16-22)? What is the significance of what they did?

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4. What lessons can we glean from this passage in Ezra 4-6? In what way is God speaking to you in your situation through this text? Share any past or present experiences where God has intervened in your life in ways that are similar to this passage.

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5. What has God specifically called you to build/ rebuild in your life? What obstacles are you facing and how are you responding to him and these obstacles?

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# Haggai

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## ORIENTING DATA FOR HAGGAI <sup>1</sup>

- **Content:** four oracles encouraging God's people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem
- **Prophet:** Haggai, a postexilic prophet in Jerusalem and contemporary of Zechariah (see [Ezra 5:1](#); [6:14](#))
- **Date of prophetic activity:** a four-month period during the second year of the reign of Darius of Persia (520 B.C.)
- **Emphases:** God's people need to rebuild the temple as the place of God's presence and of their worship; current hardships stem from failure in this matter; a glorious future awaits the people of God and Zerubbabel (thus David's kingly line)

## OVERVIEW OF HAGGAI

Haggai, the tenth of the Book of the Twelve, consists of reports of four "words" addressed to Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the priest, and the people in Jerusalem. His main concern is to encourage the people to get on with rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

Haggai's first "word" ([1:1–11](#)) announces that recent droughts and poor harvests (part of the curses for covenant disobedience; see [Deut 28:20–48](#)) are connected to the returned exiles' failure to build God's house (though they had already built their own houses), to which the people respond favorably ([Hag 1:12–15](#)). A month and a half later, the second "word" encourages them to continue the work, promising that the glory of the new temple would surpass that of the first ([2:1–9](#)). Priestly rulings on defilement serve as the basis for the third "word" (vv. [10–19](#)), where God promises to bless them "from this day on." The final "word" (vv. [20–23](#)) is addressed to Zerubbabel, assuring him that God will be with him.

## **SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING HAGGAI**

It will help you in reading Haggai to also read [Ezra 1–6](#), which serves as background for the words of Haggai recorded here. After a large group of exiles returned in 539 B.C. under the edict of Cyrus, they immediately rebuilt the altar and laid the foundations of the temple ([Ezra 3](#)). Then the work stopped as the people built their homes and worked their farms. Now, some nineteen years later, the work on the temple has gone no further; meanwhile they have regularly experienced drought and poor harvests. Through Haggai, Yahweh calls attention to the connection between these two realities and encourages them to return to the task of rebuilding the temple.

As you read, watch for several features that distinguish Haggai: (1) His oracles are not given in poetic form, but a kind of rhythmic prose; (2) they are most often carried on by way of questions (cf. Malachi), which lead to God's word to the people ([Hag 1:4, 9; 2:3, 12–13, 19](#)); (3) he also makes effective use of repetitions—"Give careful thought" occurs twice in the first and third oracles ([1:5, 7; 2:15, 18](#)); "I am with you" occurs in the first and second ([1:13; 2:4](#)); that God will "shake the heavens and the earth" occurs in the second and fourth ([2:6, 21](#)); and in language echoing [Joshua 1:6–7, 9, 18](#), leaders and people are three times exhorted to "be strong" ([2:4](#)). Note also that while there is obvious progression in the four "words," there is also a clear correspondence between the first and third (the covenant curse is now to be overturned by covenant blessing) and between the second and fourth (encouraging Zerubbabel as leader).

Since the central issue of Haggai is the rebuilding of the temple, you will do well to recall the significant role the temple played in the life of Israel, which served as both the place of God's special presence (marking off Israel from all other peoples) and the place of proper worship. See "Specific Advice for Reading Exodus" (pp. [35–37](#)) and the notes on [Exod 25–40](#) (pp. [40–42](#)), and recall that God's Spirit is the way God is present among them (hence [Hag 2:5](#)).

The specific days and dates given for these oracles are worth noting. The first (29 August 520) is given on the first day of the (lunar) month, thus in the setting of a New Moon festival ([Num 10:10](#); [28:11](#)) and at the time of the full maturing of the grain; the second (17 October 520) comes at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles (Israel's harvest festival); and the third and fourth (18 December 520) during the growing season for spring harvest. All these were periods when people had no excuse that they were too busy to pay attention to the temple.

Here you also feel the frequent tension found in the prophetic tradition between present realities and the glorious future of God. As usual, the one (present hope) is spoken in light of the other (future glory). Note how this occurs regarding both the temple ([2:1–5](#), [6–9](#)) and Zerubbabel ([2:20–22](#), [23](#)), both being marked by God's eschatological shaking of the heavens and the earth.

## A WALK THROUGH HAGGAI

### □ [1:1–15](#)      *The Call to Rebuild the Temple*

Trace the unfolding of this "word." It begins with the setting (v. [1](#)), God's complaint with his people (v. [2](#)), and the primary question (v. [3](#))—failure to build God's house, even though the returned exiles have built their own. At the peak of the growing season, God calls them to start building his house! This is followed by two "Give careful thought to your ways" oracles about the present drought and the reasons for it (vv. [5–6](#), [7–11](#); drought is one of the curses for breaking covenant, [Deut 28:38–40](#)). Note how unlike the earlier

prophets the third part is ([Hag 1:12–15](#)); the people’s response is actually recorded—and it is positive!

□      **[2:1–9](#)**                      ***The Glory of the Second Temple***

You might try to imagine how someone seventy years old or older might have felt when they saw that the partly built temple was obviously not going to be like Solomon’s—and far short of Ezekiel’s grand vision ([Ezek 40–43](#)). Thus the people are encouraged to “be strong,” because in time the second temple will exceed the glory of the first (fulfilled finally when Jesus assumes the role of the temple while standing in the courts of this temple; [John 2:13–22](#)).

□      **[2:10–19](#)**                      ***A Defiled People Purified and Blessed***

Note that two questions about defilement/undefilement (vv. [10–13](#)) are used by way of analogy (vv. [14–19b](#)) to repeat the essence of [1:8–11](#) (their land is “defiled” because the people are “defiled”), while verse [2:19c](#) reverses the curse—from this day on God will bless them.

□      **[2:20–23](#)**                      ***A Message to Zerubbabel***

Zerubbabel, heir of David’s throne but a vassal governor of Judea under Persian rule, is promised a future overthrow of the worldly powers and that he will become God’s “signet ring” (“official seal”; cf. [Jer 22:24–25](#), where the last king of Judah was a “signet ring” to be discarded!)—a word also pointing forward to the time of David’s greater Son.

Haggai reminds us that God’s people are to be identified as a people of God’s presence (the role of the temple), finally fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

# STUDYFOUR

## Haggai 1-2

### 1. Haggai 1.1-15a

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. When and how did the word of the LORD come in Haggai 1.1?
2. What did the LORD say (Hag 1.1-11)?
3. Who responded to God's word and how did they respond (v.12-15a)?

##### *Interpretation*

1. Where were Haggai and the leaders residing when the word of the LORD came to them?
2. Why do you think the people said, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house?" (cf. Ezra 4.17-5.2)?
3. Based on what the LORD said, what do you think was the real-life situation of the Israelites at that time?
4. Why was this word of the LORD so important at that time?



*Application*

1. What lessons can we learn from this passage?
2. What do you think is the role of prophets and leaders then and now?

**2. Haggai 1.15b-2.9**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. When and to whom did the word of the Lord come the second time (Hag 2.1)?
2. What was the message from the Lord (Hag 2.2-5)?
3. What did the LORD say he would do in Haggai 2.6-9?

*Interpretation*

1. What was the context behind the hiatus of the temple rebuilding (Ezra 4.1-5 & 4.24-5.2)?
2. What was the Lord challenging the people to do (Hag 2.3-5)?
3. What does the LORD mean in Haggai 2.6-9?

*Application*

1. What are the implications of this passage in our own understanding of God's salvation history?
2. What lessons can we glean from this passage regarding our own obedience and worship of the LORD?

### 3. Haggai 2.10-23

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. When and how did the word of the LORD come to Haggai the prophet the third time (Hag 2.10)?
2. What did the LORD say this time (Hag 2.11-12)?
3. What else did the LORD say through Haggai the prophet (v.13-19)?
4. What and to whom did the LORD say the fourth time (Hag 2.20-23)?

##### *Interpretation*

1. What did the LORD mean in his third message (Hag 2.10-19)?
2. What did the message in Haggai 2.20-23 mean?
3. What is the significance of the Zerubbabel being made like the signet ring (v.23)?

*Application*

1. What can we learn from God's word to Israel (Hag 2.10-19)?
2. What does Haggai 2.20-23 mean for us today?

## GROUPSTUDY

1. Based on Haggai 1.1-15a and Ezra 4.1-5 & 4.24-5.2, what do you think was the life situation and problems of the Israelites at that time? What lessons can we learn from this passage?

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2. What do you think is the role of prophets and leaders then and now? What then is the role of followers?

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3. In his second message to Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people (Hag 2.1-9), what did the LORD want the people to do (Hag 2.3-5; cf Ezra 3.12) vis-à-vis what he promised he would do (Hag 2.6-9)? What was the purpose and significance of this second message? What lessons can we glean from this passage regarding God's salvation history and our own obedience and worship of the LORD?

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4. What were the words of the LORD on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month (Hag 2.10-19)? What did the LORD mean in this, his third message (Hag 2.10-19)?

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5. What is the significance of Zerubbabel being made like the signet ring (v.23)? What does Haggai 2.20-23 mean for us today?

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6. What lessons do you glean from the study of the book of Haggai?

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## NOTES

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# Zechariah

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## ORIENTING DATA FOR ZECHARIAH <sup>1</sup>

- **Content:** visions aimed at encouraging the postexilic community, especially the leadership, to rebuild the temple, plus oracles about the future coming King who would be slain and eventually triumph
- **Prophet:** Zechariah of Jerusalem, a contemporary of Haggai, but with a longer known ministry (cf. [Zech 1:1](#) and [7:1](#) with [Hag 1:1](#); see also [Ezra 5:1](#); [6:14](#))
- **Date of prophetic activity:** 520 B.C. until sometime in the early 400s
- **Emphases:** God is with the remnant community of people who have returned from exile; God will prosper her leaders; the future of Jerusalem and Judah is bright and full of peace and glory; Israel's King will come back to Jerusalem in triumph, yet he will be slain for the sins of the people; God will punish his people's enemies, yet many of the nations will come to know the Lord

## OVERVIEW OF ZECHARIAH

This eleventh of the Book of the Twelve has two such distinct parts (chs. [1–8](#); [9–14](#)) that many scholars believe chapters [9–14](#) to be from someone

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

else. But the Bible presents both parts together, with the second to be understood in light of the first. Here is a case where the near future and the great future of God exist in tension by the very structure of the book.

Both sections have recognizable parts. After an introductory call to repentance ([1:2–6](#)), you encounter a series of eight night visions ([1:7–6:15](#)), which are interpreted by an “angel who was talking with [Zechariah]” ([1:9](#)). These center in visions [4–5](#), which focus on the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel and the building of the temple. The rest of this section (chs. [7–8](#)) uses a question posed about certain fasts to preach about the true nature of fasting and to announce God’s future blessing of Jerusalem.

Chapters [9–14](#) contain two “oracles” (chs. [9–11](#) and [12–14](#)) having to do with God’s glorious future for his people and judgment on his/their enemies. The first contains a judgment against the nations ([9:1–8](#)) set in the context of the coming and subsequent rejection of God’s kingly Messiah ([9:9–17](#); [11:4–17](#)) and the great regathering of his scattered people ([10:1–11:3](#)). The second oracle picks up all of these themes but sets them into an even more obviously eschatological context, as they focus on “that day,” climaxing in chapter [14](#) with the final defeat of God’s enemies and the establishment of his universal kingdom, when all the nations come to worship him.

## **SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ZECHARIAH**

Most people find Zechariah an especially difficult read, even for a prophetic book. This is undoubtedly due to the highly symbolic nature of the night visions plus the normally complex character of prophetic eschatological oracles—and these are what make up most of Zechariah. But with a bit of help you should be able to negotiate your way through the book and appreciate some of its grandeur.

For the history of the period and the basic concerns of the prophet, see “Specific Advice for Reading Haggai,” p. [253](#). What is important to note here is that all of the primary concerns of Israel’s prophetic tradition occur in Zechariah—judgments of God’s people for their own sins; judgments against surrounding nations because of their sins against God’s people and because

Yahweh is sovereign over all the nations; a glorious future for the redeemed and purified people of God—and all of this set in tension between soon-to-be temporal realities and the final glorious future of God. What is also a pronounced feature of Zechariah is his expectation of God’s future messianic king, which is why he is quoted so often by the New Testament writers (especially with regard to Christ and the final expression of the kingdom of God).

A couple of observations may help your reading of the night visions. First, they are arranged in a concentric (chiastic) pattern. Note that visions 1 and 8 ([1:7–17](#); [6:1–8](#)) both envision four groups of colored horses, whose purpose is to go throughout the whole earth, as the backdrop for the building of the temple. Visions 2 and 3 ([1:18–21](#); [2:1–13](#)) and [6](#) and [7](#) ([5:1–4](#); [5:5–11](#)) have to do with obstacles facing the restoration community and its building of the temple (in 2 and 3 the obstacles come from without and in 6 and 7 from within). Visions 4 and 5 ([3:1–10](#); [4:1–14](#)) are the centerpiece, dealing especially with Joshua’s and Zerubbabel’s leadership, both for the building of the temple and for leading the community.

Second, you will note a similar pattern to most of these visions: Zechariah describes what he sees, he asks about its meaning, and an interpreting angel gives the explanation. Four of the visions ([1] [1:14–17](#); [3] [2:6–13](#); [5] [4:6–10a](#); [8] [6:9–15](#)) also contain one or more oracles, which make specific the message of the visions. The heart of all of this is a word of encouragement, declaring to the people that the time is ripe—the conditions are now in place for them to rebuild—while at the same time it is, as with Haggai, a word of encouragement to those in leadership.

The two oracles in chapters [9–14](#) are especially difficult to follow, but in the main they follow a pattern as well. Both have to do with the triumphal intervention of the Lord in the affairs of Judah and the nations. The first looks toward the more immediate future, the second toward the final coming of God’s universal rule. Common to both is the central place of God’s kingly Messiah, and the fact that he is rejected by the people.

One final note. Later prophets sometimes make use of the language and images of earlier ones. This is especially true of Zechariah, who not only mentions the “earlier prophets” ([1:4](#), [6](#); [7:7](#), [12](#)), but deliberately echoes their

language in a number of places (e.g., cf. [1:4](#) with [Jer 35:15](#)). This may be the best explanation for the intriguing piercing and suffering of God’s kingly Messiah in [Zechariah 11–13](#), which sounds like further reflection on Isaiah’s suffering servant ([Isa 52:13–53:12](#)). This also helps to explain why the New Testament writers refer to these two passages so often as the way to explain the Messiah’s crucifixion.

## A WALK THROUGH ZECHARIAH

### □ [1:1–6](#) *Introduction*

Both the heading, which dates about two months after Haggai’s initial word, and the words that follow serve as a validation of the prophet: This is what God has told Zechariah to tell the people, which affirms that the covenant is still in effect and calls for their obedience (in contrast to the way their ancestors behaved).

### □ [1:7–17](#) *Vision 1: The Horsemen: God’s Return to Jerusalem*

Note the parts as you read: (1) the vision itself (v. [8](#)); ([2](#)) Zechariah’s question about meaning (vv. [9–10](#)); ([3](#)) the interpreting angel’s response: They are the patrol who has gone throughout the whole earth and find it at rest; (4) the oracle(s)—Yahweh is returning to Jerusalem, so the people must not rest but must rebuild the temple.

### □ [1:18–21](#) *Vision 2: Four Horns Destroyed*

Note how this vision is in two parts with explanations. The days of the nations responsible for the exile (of both Judah and Israel) are over.

### □ [2:1–13](#) *Vision 3: Jerusalem Cannot Be Measured—The Return of Prosperity*

Note how the explanation (vv. [4–13](#)) takes the form of a series of oracles—the coming greatness of Jerusalem with Yahweh as her protector (vv. [4–5](#)); a call to the exiles in Babylon to return (vv. [6–9](#); thus picking up from vision 2); Yahweh’s dwelling in Zion as universal sovereign (vv. [10–13](#); thus filling out the present vision). Note also how verse [13](#) echoes [Habakkuk 2:20](#).

□     **[3:1–10](#)**             ***Vision 4: The Reinstatement of the High Priest***

Remember that this is the first of the two central visions. Since at stake is the rebuilding of the temple, the place of God’s presence, this vision has to do with cleansing the high priest, who is to function in the temple once it is rebuilt. Note the progression from clean garments and turban (vv. [3–5](#)) to recommissioning (vv. [6–7](#)) to the promised Branch (v. [8](#), referring ultimately to the coming Davidic king; cf. [Isa 11:1](#); [53:2](#); [Jer 23:5](#)); the vision concludes by anticipating the oracle in [Zechariah 8:1–8](#).

□     **[4:1–14](#)**             ***Vision 5: The Lampstand and the Olive Trees—God’s Renewing Spirit/ Presence***

Note the slightly different structure: the vision (vv. [1–3](#)), now with two sets of questions (vv. [4–5](#), [11–13](#)) and explanations (vv. [6–10](#), [14](#))—to encourage Zerubbabel that God’s Spirit will bring about what human power cannot—plus an affirmation of his and Joshua’s leadership.

□     **[5:1–4](#)**             ***Vision 6: The Flying Scroll—Banishment of Evil from Judah***

Now you are back to a brief vision and explanation: The evil that persists in Judah will be banished from the land.

□     **[5:5–11](#)**             ***Vision 7: The Woman in a Basket—Wickedness Exiled to Babylon***

Watch for the irony in this vision, as well as its relationship to previous visions: The people will return from exile (vision 3), Babylon has been overthrown (vision 2), the temple will be rebuilt (visions 4–5); so what happens to wickedness? It will be exiled to Babylon!

□      **6:1–15**      ***Vision 8: The Four Chariots—God at Rest and a Crown for Joshua***

Note how this vision wraps up the series. This new patrol of four horsemen again goes throughout the earth and finds it at rest (especially Babylon, the “north country,” v. [6](#))—all of this to say that the time for rebuilding is now.

The “word” that came to Zechariah that concludes the visions (vv. [9–15](#)) both supplements and reinforces the concerns that have preceded (Joshua, the Branch, the rebuilding of the temple).

□      **7:1–8:23**      ***In Response to a Question about Fasting***

A question related to special fasts in connection with the fall of Jerusalem becomes the catalyst for a series of oracles that take a concentric (chiastic) pattern similar to the visions.

[7:1–3](#)      The question: Do we continue to mourn and fast over Jerusalem’s fall?

[7:4–14](#)      A judgment against fasting without obedience to the covenant

[8:1–8](#)      A picture of restored Jerusalem, which serves to inspire

[8:9–13](#)      An encouragement to rebuild the temple

[8:14–17](#)      True fasting expresses itself in showing mercy and justice (cf. [Isa 58](#))

[8:18–19](#) The question answered: Let the fasts be turned into joyful celebrations

Note how the two appended oracles ([8:20–23](#)) anticipate the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant that includes the Gentiles ([Gen 12:3](#)). And finally note how the two sections of the book end on this same note ([Zech 8:20–23; 14:16–19](#)).

□ **[9:1–11:17](#) *Zion’s King and the Glorious Future for God’s People***

This first oracle resorts to the poetic pattern of the earlier prophets. Look for the following progression: What begins with a judgment on the surrounding nations ([9:1–8](#)) turns into the promised restoration of the Davidic king (vv. [9–17](#)) and of a united Israel ([10:1](#), [3b–12](#)). Note that the latter is enclosed by a denunciation of false shepherds ([10:2–3a](#); [11:1–6](#), [14–17](#)) and that the last of these encloses a picture of God’s true shepherd who will be rejected by the people ([11:7–13](#)), which in turn anticipates the central section of the next oracle ([12:10–13:9](#)).

□ **[12:1–14:21](#) *The Smiting and Final Triumph of God’s King***

Note how this second oracle picks up themes from the first one, especially the rejection of the true shepherd, while setting the whole in a more totally eschatological setting regarding the day of Yahweh (“that day”). This in turn is placed in the setting of the final eschatological expression of the holy war, where the enemy surrounds and ransacks Jerusalem ([12:1–3a](#); [14:1–2](#)) and the King is killed ([12:10–13:7](#))—but in the end God’s glorious final kingdom emerges ([12:3b–9](#); [14:3–21](#)).



The book of Zechariah advances the biblical story by reminding us that God's presence by his Spirit is at the heart of a restored Israel, while at the same time anticipating the sacrificial death of the Messiah who is to come.

# STUDY FIVE

## Zechariah 1-6

Zechariah was a prophet who ministered in the same era as Haggai. Both shared the same zeal for the returned Jewish exiles to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but Zechariah's emphasis lay more on the spiritual renewal of the people – he urged Israel to weed out sin from their lives and to take their covenant with God seriously. Zechariah also encouraged them to look beyond their present situation to God's eventual plan to establish his worldwide rule through his appointed Messiah.

Zechariah is the longest book of the Minor Prophets, and scholars generally divide the book into two halves, chapters 1-8 and chapters 9-14. Because of the length of the book, the four group studies will not cover the whole of Zechariah, although the personal studies will. You are therefore encouraged to do the personal study of the entire book on your own while meeting in small groups to discuss selected passages, with a focus on applying them to your lives.

### 1. Zechariah 1.1-17

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What was God's primary call to Israel through Zechariah? (v.3)
2. How did Zechariah encourage Israel not to be like their forefathers? (v.4-6)
3. What was Zechariah's first vision and what was the report brought by those whom he saw (v.8-11)
4. What is God's posture towards Jerusalem and promise to it? (v.14-17)



*Interpretation*

1. What does God's primary call in v.3 reveal about his character and desire?
2. What is God trying to impress on Israel when he contrasts the state of Israel's fathers with his words and statutes? (v. 5-6)
3. What do "horses" symbolize (see 9.10, 10.3, c.f. 1 Kings 10.26)? From what follows in v.14-16, is the report that "the earth remains at rest" a positive or negative one?
4. How would the people in Zechariah's day have responded to God's promise in v.17?



*Application*

1. How does the call of God in v.3 encourage you?
2. What are some ways we can better “hear or pay attention to (God)” (v.4) instead of going about our own way (like Israel’s forefathers)?
3. How does knowing that God is jealous for his people change your devotion towards him?

**2. Zechariah 1.18-2.13**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What did Zechariah see in the second vision and what was the function of the things he saw? (1.18-21)
2. What was the man in the third vision going to do (v.2), and what was the vision of Jerusalem he would be given? (v.4-5)
3. What does the Lord further explain that he will do to the nations and for Israel? (v.9-12)

### *Interpretation*

1. What do “horns” typically signify? (c.f. Deut. 33.17, Psalm 18.2, 75.10) What does the craftsmen casting down the horns of the nations reveal about God’s purposes for Judah?
2. What does God being “a wall of fire all around” Jerusalem and “the glory in her midst” tell us about his relationship with this city and its people?
3. How would the Lord’s declaration in v.4-5 and v.9-12 encourage Zechariah’s original audience?

### *Application*

1. How have you experienced God’s divine protection and indwelling presence in your life?
2. How does God’s faithfulness to faithless Israel encourage you in your own walk with him?

### 3. Zechariah 3.1-4.14

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What does Zechariah see in the fourth vision and how does he participate in it? (3.1-5)
2. What is the Lord's assurance to Joshua and what are the conditions that must be met before Joshua can enjoy the promised privileges? (3.6-10)
3. What does Zechariah see in the fifth vision and what is the interpretation of the vision given to him? (4.1-5, 10b-14)
4. What is the angel's prophecy concerning Zerubbabel? (4.6-10)

##### *Interpretation*

1. What is the significance of the role and responsibility of Joshua and Zerubbabel in Israel following the exile? (c.f. Haggai 1.1, 2.2, Ezra 3.2-9)
2. What does the removal of Joshua's filthy garments and the putting on of pure vestments signify, and why is this important?
3. How would the prophecy concerning Zerubbabel be received by the people as they sought to rebuild the temple?
4. Who do the figures of Joshua and Zerubbabel point forward to? How so?

*Application*

1. One of the primary theological emphases of Zechariah 4 is found in v.6, “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit”. How might this be applied to the work God is doing to build your life and to build his church?

**4. Zechariah 5.1-6.8**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

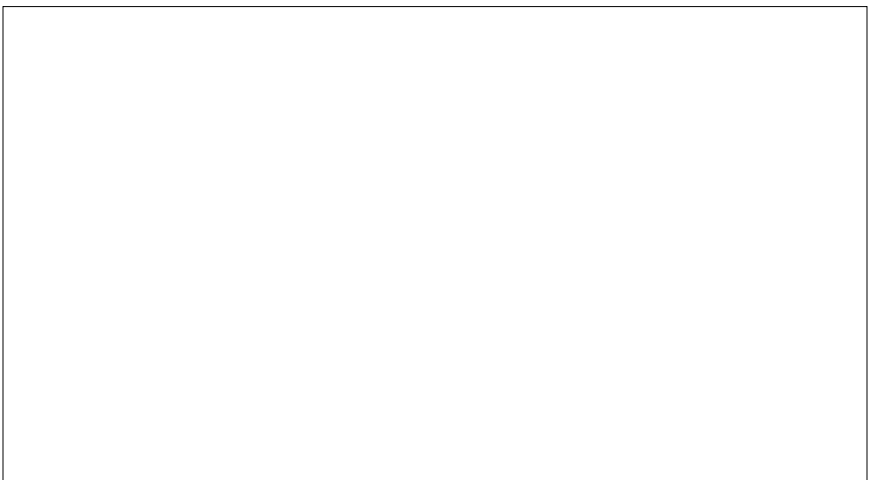
*Observation*

1. What did Zechariah see in the sixth vision and what would be the effect of what he saw on the land? (5.1-4)
2. What was seen in the seventh vision? What happened to “wickedness” in the land? (5.5-11)
3. Describe the eighth vision Zechariah saw. What are the similarities and differences between this and his first vision? (1.8-11)



*Interpretation*

1. What does the scroll symbolise (c.f. Exodus 20.15, 7)?  
What is unusual about it?
2. What does God sending the scroll out tell us about his treatment of sin?
3. What does the seventh vision reveal about God's desire for Israel, and how he will accomplish that desire?
4. What is the difference between the "rest" mentioned in 1.11 and 6.8? What contributes to this difference?





*Application*

1. How does the message of God wanting to eradicate sin completely from the land convict you? Specifically, are there any ways God wants us to deal with the sin of “stealing” or “swearing falsely in his name” in our lives (c.f. 5.3)? (Think about “stealing” not just in terms of money but in terms of work ethic, recognition etc., and “swearing falsely in his name” in terms of not living consistently with our beliefs.)

**5. Zechariah 6.9-15**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What is Zechariah asked by the LORD to do? (6.9-11)
2. What is the promise of God regarding the Branch (6.12-14)
3. What is the condition Israel must meet in order for them to participate in this promise? (6.15)

### *Interpretation*

1. What does a crown signify?
2. What is unusual about setting the crown on the high priests' head? What was this act meant to demonstrate?
3. Who does the "Branch" point to, and how will the "Branch" ultimately fulfil the promise of God here? Likewise, beyond those in Zechariah's day, who does "those who are far away" refer to (v.15), and how have they rebuilt the temple of God? (c.f. 1 Peter 2.4-5)

### *Application*

1. How does knowing that God's people have a role to play in the fulfilment of God's promises (v.15) encourage you to "diligently obey the LORD your God"?

## Zechariah 1.1-6, 3.1-4.14, 6.9-15

### GROUPSTUDY

Some scholars, such as Joyce G. Baldwin, conceive of the eight visions that Zechariah received in a chiastic structure, as follows:

- a. Vision 1. A patrol of the whole earth reports (1.7–17)
- b. Vision 2. The nations meet retribution (1.18–21)  
(Hebrew 2.1–4)
- b<sup>1</sup>. Vision 3. Jerusalem has a divine protector (2.1–13)  
(Hebrew 2.5–17)
- c. Vision 4. The high priest reinstated (3.1–10)
- c<sup>1</sup>. Vision 5. Divine resources for high priest and prince (4.1–14)
- b<sup>2</sup>. Vision 6. Evil meets retribution (5.1–4)
- b<sup>3</sup>. Vision 7. Jerusalem is purified (5.5–11)
- a<sup>1</sup>. Vision 8. God's patrols compass the earth (6.1–15)

(From: *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, p. 89)

Given that in a chiasm, what is central is of most importance, this study will focus on the introduction to Zechariah, the two central visions (visions 4 and 5), as well as the conclusion to this segment of the book.

1. What is the call of God to Israel, and how does he want them to *not* be like their fathers? (1.1-6) From here, what do we see is the relationship between restoration (to God) and repentance?

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2. What happens to Joshua in Zechariah's fourth vision? (3.1-5) What is Joshua's role in the community, and thus the significance of this vision?

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3. What is the LORD's assurance to Joshua and what are the conditions that must be met before Joshua can enjoy the promised privileges? (3.6-10) Who does Joshua ultimately point to? (c.f. Hebrews 4.14-16) How so?

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4. What does Zechariah see in the fifth vision and what is the interpretation of the vision given to him? (4.1-5, 10b-14) What is prophesied over Zechariah and who does he foreshadow? (4.6-10a)

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5. How does the fourth and fifth vision relate to God's call in 1.1-6? How will God ultimately rebuild his temple and restore his people? (c.f. 6.9-15)

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6. One of the theological emphases in the first section of Zechariah is found in 4.6, "not by might, nor by power,

but by my Spirit". How might this be applied to the work God is doing to restore and build his Church? How does this promise encourage you personally?

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7. From this study, what do you understand to be the role of the God's people in the work God is doing to build his Church? In what ways is he inviting you to participate in this work?

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## NOTES

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# STUDYSIX

## Zechariah 7-8

### 1. Zechariah 7.1-7

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What did the people of Bethel want to find out from the LORD? (v.2-3)
2. How did the LORD respond to this entreaty through Zechariah (v.4-7)

##### *Interpretation*

1. What did the fast in fifth month commemorate? (c.f. 2 Kings 25.8-10) Why did the people of Bethel want to find out if they still needed to uphold this fast?
2. What does the LORD desire of his people from fasts? What was the state of the people's hearts when they fasted during the exile? (v.4-7)

*Application*

1. How may we guard against empty fasting and feasting or carrying out spiritual disciplines legalistically?

**2. Zechariah 7.8-14**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. Instead of empty fasting, what did God desire from his people? (v.8-10)
2. How did Israel's forefathers respond to God and what was the result of their disobedience? (v.11-14)

*Interpretation*

1. What does God's instruction to Zechariah in v.8-10 reveal about his priorities for his people?
2. Why did God recount the response of Israel's forefathers and its consequences to this generation of Israelites?

*Application*

3. What is one practical way we can live out God's instructions in v.9-10?

### 3. Zechariah 8.1-8

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What phrase is constantly repeated in this passage?
2. How does the Lord feel toward Zion and how does he pledge to bless her? (v.2-3, v.7-8)
3. What will be the effect of this blessing on Jerusalem's inhabitants and families? (v.4-5)

##### *Interpretation*

1. How does the opening of Zechariah 8 contrast with the closing of Zechariah 7?
2. Why is the phrase "this is what the Lord says" constantly repeated?
3. How does the promised state of Jerusalem contrast with its present state? What do these promises reveal about God's nature?
4. How would the people who heard these promises have felt in their present situation?
5. What do these promises look forward to?

*Application*

1. What do God's promises to Israel in this passage teach you about his work in history for his people?

**4. Zechariah 8.9-17**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What is God encouraging the people to do? (v.9)
2. What were some factors that kept the earliest returnees from exile from rebuilding the temple? (v.10)
3. What will God do for Israel that will enable her to accomplish this task? (v.11-15)
4. What does he expect from Israel in return? (v.16-17)

*Interpretation*

1. Why did God tell Israel to “let (their) hands be strong”?
2. Why is God treating the present generation of Israelites differently from previous generations?
3. What does God’s expectation of Israel in v.16-17 reveal about his expectations for us as believers?

*Application*

1. What encourages you from this passage as you seek to do God’s work of building his temple (the church)?
2. What are some difficulties you face in this regard that require you to “let your hands be strong”?

## 5. Zechariah 8.18-23

### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

#### *Observation*

1. What does God desire fasts to become occasions for? (v. 19)
2. What will be the result of fasts turning into happy festivals on the peoples of the nations? (v.20-23)

#### *Interpretation*

1. In 8.19, God returns to the subject of fasts, last referred to in 7.5-7. What is the relevance of all that was said from 7.8 to 8.18 concerning fasts?
2. Why did God want fasts to become occasions of joy?
3. How does the nations coming to Jerusalem fulfil the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12.3?



*Application*

1. How does this passage apply to, and motivate you, in your call to make disciples of all nations? (c.f. Matthew 28.19-20)

## **Zechariah 7.1-8.23**

### **GROUPSTUDY**

1. What did the people of Bethel want to entreat of the LORD and why did they want to find out if they still needed to uphold this practice? (7.2-3, c.f. 2 Kings 25.8-10)

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2. From the LORD's response, what was the motivation of the people when they practised the communal discipline of fasting, and why was this unacceptable to God? (7.4-7)

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3. Instead of empty fasting, what did the LORD desire of Israel? How did Israel's forefathers respond and what were the consequences of their actions? (7.8-14) Why did God recount this to the present generation of Israelites?

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4. What does Zechariah 7 teach us about God's priorities for his people? How may we guard against empty fasting or carrying out spiritual disciplines legalistically?

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5. How does the LORD feel toward Zion and how does he promise to bless it? (8.2-8) How do these promises contrast with the tone of God's words in Zechariah 7 and what might be some reasons for this contrast? What do these promises look forward to?

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6. What work does God encourage the people to do and why must their hands be strong for this work? (8.9-11) How would God resource the people to do this work, and what does he expect in return from them? (8.12-17)

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7. In 8.19, God returns to the theme of fasts. What will they become occasions for, and what would be the effect of this on the peoples of the nations? (8.19-23) From these two chapters, how is God expanding Israel's vision concerning the purpose and result of her spiritual practices?

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8. How does this study challenge us to relate our spiritual practices with our being effective witnesses for God?

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# **STUDY**SEVEN

## **Free Topic**





# STUDYEIGHT

## Zechariah 9-11

### 1. Zechariah 9.1-8

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

The cities mentioned in this passage are found on the Mediterranean coast. Although this region had been designated as Israel's territory (c.f. Numbers 34.5-6), Israel never fully possessed it. The judgment declared here against these cities took place through the eventual conquest of Alexander the Great.

#### *Observation*

1. What will the LORD do to the Syrian cities/regions of Hadrak, Damascus, Hamath? (v.1-2a)
2. What is the contrast between Tyre's state in v.3 and v.4?
3. What will happen to the land of Philistia and her cities? (v. 5-7)
4. What was God's assurance to his people? (v.8)

### *Interpretation*

1. What does the “word of the LORD” going against Hadrak and coming to rest on Damascus and Hamath mean, in the context of this passage?
2. What does the prophecy on the cities of Phoenicia (v. 2b-4) and Philistia (v.5-7) teach us about God and his judgment?
3. What effect would the contrasting fates of all the cities mentioned in v.1-7 and Jerusalem (v.8) have on Zechariah’s hearers? How so?

### *Application*

1. How does God’s promise that he will “encamp at (his) temple” and his assurance that he is keeping watch over his people (v.8) apply to New Testament believers?

## 2. Zechariah 9.9-10.1

### ***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

#### *Observation*

1. How is the coming king of Zion described? (v.9)
2. What will this king do? (v.10-13) On what basis does he do these things? (v.11)
3. How will the LORD appear to Israel and what will be the effect of his appearance on them? (v.14-16)
4. What will happen to the land, and how would God make this happen? (9.17-10.1)

#### *Interpretation*

1. Who does the king of Zion ultimately point to? In what ways?
2. What is the Lord's appearing in 9.14-16 reminiscent of? (Exodus 19.16-19) And how does comparisons with that episode in Israel's history further encourage Zechariah's readers?
3. What do the images of "flock" and "jewels" in reference to God's people (v.16) tell us about the way God sees his people?

*Application*

1. How have you personally experienced Christ's victory and God's provision in your own life?

**3. Zechariah 10.2-12**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What did Judah's shepherds seek instead of seeking God (c.f. 10.1), and what was God's indictment on them? (v. 2-3a)
2. What did God promise he would do for Judah? (v.3b-4), and what would be the effect of the coming Messiah on Judah? (v.5-6)?
3. What would be the effect on the Messiah's coming on Ephraim (v.7-12)

### *Interpretation*

1. How do idols differ from God (v.1-2), and why was God's anger burning against Israel's shepherds?
2. What is the significance of each of the terms used to describe the Messiah in v.4?
3. What do the different effects of the coming Messiah on Judah and Ephraim reveal about his heart for his people, and the scope of his work in their lives?

### *Application*

1. How have you experienced Christ as a "cornerstone" a "tent peg" and a "battle bow" in your life?

#### 4. Zechariah 11.1-17

##### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

###### *Observation*

1. What did Zechariah prophesy will happen to the cedar trees, oaks, pastures and forests of the various lands? (v. 1-3)
2. What did God ask Zechariah to do, and why did he have to do this? (v.4-8)
3. What was the response of the flock to Zechariah and what did he do as a result? (v.9-14)
4. What did God then instruct him to do after the flock rejected him, and what reason did God give for this? (v. 15-17)

### *Interpretation*

1. What do the cedar trees of Lebanon, oaks of Bashan, the pastures of the shepherds and lush thicket of Jordan symbolise? What does this imagery suggest will happen when the Lord establishes his kingdom?
2. Who do the shepherd, the flock, the buyer/sellers in this passage represent?
3. What is the significance of the use of the staffs? (c.f. Numbers 17.1-11, Ezekiel 37.15-17)
4. What is God's intention in his use of enacted parable (i.e. Zechariah representing the shepherd in his actions)?

### *Application*

1. How does this passage speak to Christians leaders today?



## GROUPSTUDY

1. What is Jerusalem instructed to do, and why? How is this response fitting in light of the previous passage? (9.1-8)

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2. How is the coming king of Zion described and what is unique about this description? What will this king do? (9.9-13)

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3. When the king comes, how will the LORD appear to his people? What is the significance of his manner of appearing? What will be the effect of his appearing on his people? (9.14-17)

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4. What is the difference between the LORD and idols? (10.1-2) Why, therefore, is God angry with the shepherds of Judah? (10.3a)

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5. What does God commit to do for Judah? (10.3b) What is the significance of the titles given to the coming Messiah whom God will send? (10.4, c.f. Psalm 118.22, Isaiah 28.16, Exodus 27.19, Isaiah 22.23-24, 2 Kings 13.17)

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6. What will be the effect of the Messiah's appearing on Judah (10.5-6) and Ephraim (that is, Israel, 10.7-12)?

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7. Who does the coming King-Messiah-Shepherd referred to in Zechariah 9-10 ultimately point to? How so?

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8. How have you experienced Christ as a “cornerstone”, a “tent peg”, and a “battle bow” in your life?

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9. Recalling the situation of the original hearers (a remnant post-exilic people struggling to do God’s work of rebuilding his temple, amidst their impoverished lives), how would the promises of God in Zechariah 9-10 encourage them? How does it encourage you, as a Christian called to build his church amidst your own life challenges?

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# STUDYNINE

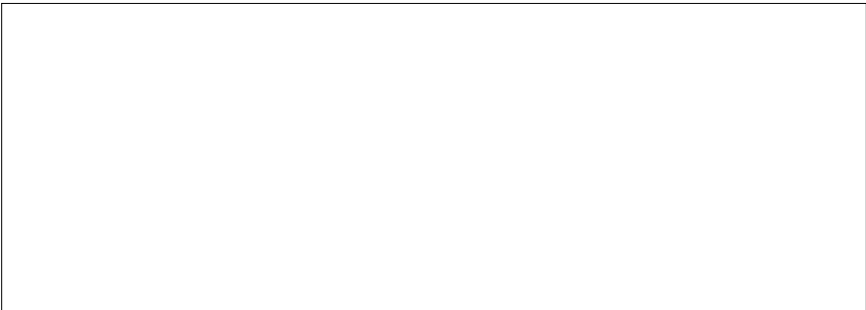
## Zechariah 12-14

### 1. Zechariah 12:1-9

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. How is God described in the opening verse of this chapter? (v.1)
2. What does God say he will make Jerusalem into? And what will be the effect of this on the peoples? (v.2-3)
3. What will God do for Jerusalem “on that day” and how will Judah acknowledge God? (v.4-9)



##### *Interpretation*

1. Why did the author choose to describe God as he did in v. 1?
2. What is the significance of God making Jerusalem into a “cup” (c.f. Jeremiah 25:17, 28) and a “stone”?
3. What of God’s nature and relationship with Jerusalem is revealed in this passage?
4. What does v.7 reveal about the way God treats different groups of people in Judah, particularly the common people?



*Application*

1. Where have you experienced “strength through the LORD of hosts, (our) God” (v.5, c.f. v.8) in your life? Where do you need such strength now?

**2. Zechariah 12:10-13:9**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What are the qualities that will fill the inhabitants of Jerusalem when God pours his Spirit on them? And what will the inhabitants be moved to do? (12:10-13)
2. What will happen “on that day” when the inhabitants of Jerusalem mourn? (13:1) In what specific ways will the land be cleansed? (13:2-6)

3. What will happen to God's shepherd and, subsequently, his sheep? What will be the final effect of the suffering on the people? (13:7-9)

### *Interpretation*

1. Who might Jerusalem be mourning for? (c.f. Isaiah 53:4-6) What does their great mourning for "the one they have pierced" suggest about their inner state before the LORD?
2. How does the LORD cleanse the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and why is this surprising (given what they had done, c.f. 12:10)? Why is this cleansing significant in terms of God's covenantal relationship with his people? (c.f. Jeremiah 31:34)
3. Why is idolatry and false prophecy particularly repugnant to God?
4. What is the link between 13:7-9 and 11:4-17? What is the difference between the shepherds described in these two passages?
5. How does this passage point to the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah?

*Application*

1. What sins of idolatry and impurity need to be purged from your life, and from our land?

**3. Zechariah 14:1-11**

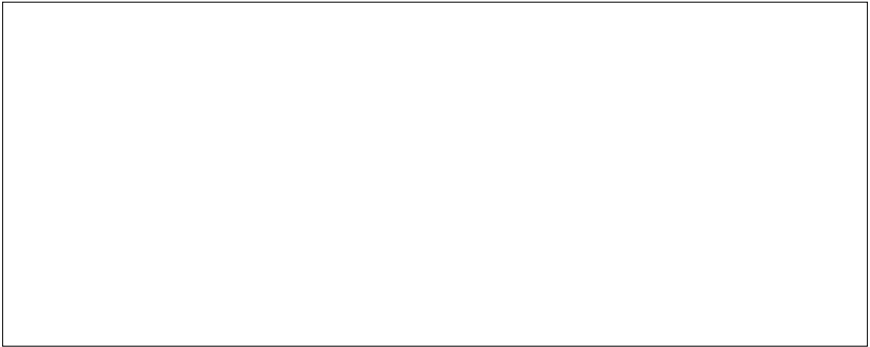
***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What will be the extent of Jerusalem's impending destruction? (v.1-2)
2. How will the LORD defend his people from the nations and keep her from being completely annihilated? (v.4-5)
3. What will be supernaturally unique about "that day"? (v. 6-8, 10-11)
4. What will be the final outcome of "that day"? (v.9)

### *Interpretation*

1. What does the day of Jerusalem's destruction point forward to? (c.f. Revelation 11:3-10)
2. What is the significance of the Mount of Olives, which the LORD will stand on to fight for Jerusalem? (c.f. Ezekiel 11:22-23; Matthew 24:3, 26:30; Acts 1:9-12)
3. What do the supernatural phenomena accompanying God's coming reveal about "that day" (c.f. Isaiah 60:10-20; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 6:12-14) and about what God is going to do to the earth?
4. How does Jesus inaugurate what was prophesied in Zechariah 14:9? (c.f. Mark 1:15; Matthew 6:7-10; Luke 4:43, 8:1; Colossians 2:14-15)



### *Application*

1. How does this passage and the truth that God fights for his people encourage you, especially in the areas of your life where you feel under attack by the enemy?



#### 4. Zechariah 14:12-21

##### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

###### *Observation*

1. What will God strike the nations fighting against Jerusalem with? How will this ailment affect them? (v. 12-15)
2. What will the survivors of the nations be compelled to eventually do? (v.16-19)
3. On that final holy day, what will be the effect of God's reign on the creatures, objects and peoples in the house of God? (v.20-21)

###### *Interpretation*

1. What is the purpose of God judging and inflicting calamities on those who oppose him? (c.f. Deuteronomy 28:15, 21-22, 27; 1 Kings 8:35-38; 2 Chronicles 21:11-15)
2. What is the significance of the Festival of Tabernacles, and why the particular mention of this festival as one the nations will celebrate? (c.f. Leviticus 23:33-44, Nehemiah 8:14-18)
3. Why does it mean for "holy to the LORD" to be inscribed on the bells of horses? (c.f. Exodus 28:36) What does the vision of cooking pots being like sacred bowls, and the removal of Canaanites from the LORD's house, suggest was the situation of the temple in Zechariah's time? What does it reveal about the extent of God's purification?

*Application*

1. How does this passage both encourage and challenge you regarding God's desire for his house to be pure? How can we, as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), grow in our purity?

## **Zechariah 12-14**

### **GROUPSTUDY**

1. How is God described in the opening verse of this final section of Zechariah, and why is this description important in what will follow? (12:1)

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2. What will God do for Jerusalem “on that day” and what does this reveal about God’s heart for his people? (12:2-9)

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3. What will happen when God pours out a spirit of grace and supplication on those in Jerusalem? What does this reveal about the condition of their hearts? (12:10-13)  
What will accompany this mourning, and what does this cleansing reveal about God's desire for his people? (13:1-6)

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4. What will happen when the shepherd of the LORD is struck, and why does God allow this to happen? (13:7-9)

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5. How does God reverse the fortunes of Jerusalem “on that day”? (14:1-10) What do the supernatural phenomena accompanying God’s coming reveal about “that day” (c.f. Isaiah 60:10-20; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 6:12-14) and about what God is going to do to the earth?

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6. What will be the effect of God’s coming “on that day” on the nations? (14:12-19) What is the significance of 14:20-21, bearing in mind the context and purpose of Zechariah’s ministry? (c.f. Ezra 4:24-5:2) How would this final vision have encouraged the people of Judah at that time?

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7. How does Zechariah 12-14 point to the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah?

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8. How does God's work to defend and purify his people and house challenge you in your own pursuit for purity?

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9. How does the eschatological vision of Zechariah 12-14 grow your longing for the return of Jesus? What is one vision from these chapters that particularly captures you?

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# STUDYTEN

## Ezra 7.1-10.44

### 1. Ezra 7.1-8.14

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What does Ezra 7.1 tell us about the context of the passage?
2. What do we know about Ezra from verses 1-11?
3. Summarise the contents of the letter from King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7.11-27).
4. Who wrote verses 27-28 and what did he say?

##### *Interpretation*

1. What is the significance of the description of Ezra in verses 1-6?
2. How long did Ezra travel to get to Jerusalem?
3. What are the implications of the king's letter (Ezra 7.11-28)?
4. Why did Ezra need to return to Jerusalem?

*Application*

1. What lessons do you glean from Ezra 7?

**2. Ezra 8.15-36**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

*Observation*

1. What did Ezra do in preparation for the journey (Ezra 8.15-30)?
2. How was Ezra's journey to Jerusalem (v.31-32)?
3. What did the returnees do upon their arrival at Jerusalem (v.33-36)?

*Interpretation*

1. Why did Ezra recruit the Levites in Ezra 8.15-20 and declare a fast in verse 24?
2. Was it wrong for Ezra to not ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect them (v.22)? Why or why not?
3. Why did Ezra tell us about the silver, gold and sacred articles (v.24-34)?

*Application*

1. If you were one of the Levites, what would be your response to the recruitment plea in Ezra 8.17?
2. What are the things that were surprising or impressive to you about this passage?



### 3. Ezra 9.1-15

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What did the leaders come to Ezra to report about (v.1-2)?
2. What was Ezra's reaction to the news (v.3-5)?
3. What is the content of Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9.6-15?

##### *Interpretation*

1. Why did Ezra react in such a self-abasing way upon hearing the report about the people's sins?
2. What is the severity of the people's sins?
3. What is the significance of each part of Ezra's prayer?

*Application*

1. What can we glean through Ezra's reaction to the report?
2. Do you think we are serious enough about our sins? Why or why not?
3. What are the lessons you have gleaned from Ezra's prayer?

**4. Ezra 10.1-44**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

*Observation*

1. What happened when Ezra was confessing and praying (v. 1-4)?
2. What did Ezra do in response to the words of Shekariah (v.5-8)?
3. At the gathering of the men of Judah and Benjamin, what transpired (v.9-15)?
4. How was the matter resolved (v.16-44)?

### *Interpretation*

1. What do you think is the intention of the author in narrating Ezra 10?
2. What were the actual and potential challenges Ezra faced in this incident?

### *Application*

1. What are some aspects of this narrative that are surprising or even objectionable to you?
2. What does this passage tell us about the severity of sin in the eyes of God and the seriousness of the Israelites in dealing with it?
3. What are some lessons that we can glean with regards to how this sin of intermarriage was resolved?
4. How may we apply or not apply these lessons learnt from this chapter?

## GROUPSTUDY

1. Summarise the contents of the letter from King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7.11-27). In Ezra's view, how was the king's favour possible (Ezra 7.27-28)? How does this passage instruct and encourage (or not) you in your endeavours commissioned by the Lord?

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**Note: How this text MAY or MAY NOT encourage us.**

One needs to remember that this narrative text is descriptive of the experience of the Israelites, and may not be prescriptive for all of us, all the time. While we can draw encouragement from this passage that God can certainly turn the eyes and heart of secular authorities to favour us in our work and endeavours, it is also important first and foremost to ensure that this work or endeavour is indeed what God has commissioned or allowed us to do (i.e. in his will), and not otherwise (i.e. not in his will).

2. Briefly describe Ezra's journey to Jerusalem, including the preparations and arrival (Ezra 8.15-36). Is there anything about the trip that surprised or impressed you?

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3. What was the sin of the people, as reported to Ezra (9.1-2)? What was Ezra's reaction and the content of his prayer in Ezra 9.6-15? In what ways can we emulate his reaction and his prayer in our own journey of discipleship?

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4. As Ezra was praying and confessing, what transpired (Ezra 10.1-15)? How was the sin of intermarriage resolved (Ezra 10.16-44)? Do you think the Israelites overreacted? Why or why not? (Also see Note 1 below).

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5. What are some lessons that we can glean from Ezra 9-10? How may we apply or not apply these lessons today? As compared with the Israelites in the passage, do you think we take our sins seriously enough? Why or why not?

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6. In what ways do you see the book of Ezra as a story of returning, rebuilding and re-consecrating? What was the role of Ezra and the Israelites vis-à-vis what God was doing?

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**Note: Should the foreign wives be sent away?**

One difficult question that may arise from this text is whether it is justified for the Israelite men to send away their foreign wives and children. How does this also apply to us today? In the narrative, we need to keep in mind the context whereby the people of God were in exile because of their unfaithfulness, particularly because they had intermarried with the nations around them and were led to compromise their faith in and worship of God. Now that they had just been allowed to return from exile, this sin of intermarriage must be eradicated lest they fall into the same problem again. For some, it might be painful to send their foreign wives and their children away, but it affected their spiritual integrity and national survival, therefore it had to be done!

Kidner is helpful here: “One fact to be borne in mind about the issue as a whole is that divorce was permitted in Israel, though not without some serious cause (Deu 24.1); and broken marriages had been rife at this time for the very opposite of the present reason: i.e., there had been a scandalous number of Jewish wives

abandoned in favour of heathen women (Mal 2.10-16). While divorce is always hateful to God (Mal 2.16), and a witness to human 'hardness of heart' (Mark 10.5), the situation described in Ezra 9 and 10 was a classic example of one in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen. If a serious reason for divorce could ever exist, this had a better claim than most to come within that category."<sup>6</sup>

For us today, however, we need to keep in mind that we do not live in a theocracy – there is no national survival to defend against any pagan nations. Besides, "in the most nearly analogous situation in which a Christian is ever likely to find himself or herself—namely, married to an unbelieving partner—the NT explicitly rules out divorce as an available option (1 Cor 7.12-13). Indeed, 1 Cor 7 and 1 Pet 3.1-7 encourage, rather, a lifestyle by the believer of such a manner as may win their unbelieving partner to the faith".<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, we must also keep in mind the command for an unmarried believer not to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. "For a believer to enter marriage with an unbeliever is likely both to endanger his or her faith and to weaken their marriage, since they cannot share together those things which one partner holds most dear. This was the intention of the Deuteronomic laws already referred to, and it remains true for the Christian as well (e.g. 2 Cor 6.14)."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, D. (1979). *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 12, pp. 80–81). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, H. G. M. (1985). *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Vol. 16, p. 161). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, H. G. M. (1985). *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Vol. 16, p. 161). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.



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# STUDYELEVEN

## Nehemiah 7.73b-10

### 1. Nehemiah 7.73b-8.8

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What key incidents transpired (in the preceding seven chapters) before all the people gathered?
2. How did this assembly come about and who were there?
3. What was the purpose of the assembly?

##### *Interpretation*

1. What does “the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded for Israel” stand for?
2. What is the purpose of publicly reading from the book (v. 3, 8)?

*Application*

1. How does this passage inform us about our response to the public reading and preaching of God's word at our gathered worship services?

**2. Nehemiah 8.9-18**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

*Observation*

1. What did Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites say to all the people?
2. What happened on the second day? Who were involved?
3. What aspects stood out in this celebration during the feast of the seventh month (v.14-17; cf. Ezra 3.4)?

*Interpretation*

1. Why did the people weep?
2. How is the joy of the LORD to be the people's strength, in this context (v.10, 17)?
3. What are the festivals referred to in this passage and their implications on Israel (cf. Deut. 16.15; and Lev. 23.23-25)?

*Application*

1. How does understanding God's word make a difference to our lives (v.12)?

### 3. Nehemiah 9.1-31

#### ***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

##### *Observation*

1. What is the difference between the setting in v.1-5 and the setting in the previous chapter?
2. What are the theme(s) found in the following verses?
  - a. v.6-8
  - b. v.9-15
  - c. v.16-21
  - d. v.22-25
  - e. v.26-31

*Interpretation*

1. What is the purpose of recounting the past events in this manner?
2. Which Old Testament books/passages are referred to in the following verses?
  - a. v.6-8
  - b. v.9-15
  - c. v.16-21
  - d. v.22-25
  - e. v.26-31

*Application*

1. How can we better embrace God's acts of grace and mercy throughout history in order to enrich our corporate spiritual and prayer lives?
2. What are some "recent" acts of God's grace and mercy in your life and in his church (despite our failings)?



#### 4. Nehemiah 9.32-10.27

##### ***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

###### *Observation*

1. In v.32-37, how does the author describe:
  - a. God?
  - b. the people (and their ancestors)?
2. What were the leaders attempting to achieve in this passage?
3. Compare the list in 10.14-27 with Ezra 2. What are the similarities and differences?

###### *Interpretation*

1. What was the significance of making a covenant in 9.38?

*Application*

1. How can we express or renew our commitment to God's commandments in a concrete and practical way today?

**5. Nehemiah 10.28-39**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible reading***

*Observation*

1. Who were the people involved in this passage?
2. Broadly speaking, what were they trying to achieve (v. 28-29)?

## GROUPSTUDY

1. How did the assembly come about and what can we gather from its setting and purpose that likened it to a “worship service”? (7:73b-8:8)

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2. How can 8:1-8, especially v.3 and 6, shape our response to the public reading and preaching of God’s word at our worship services?

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3. What are the festivals referred to in 8:9-18 and their implications for understanding this passage (cf. Deut. 16:15; and Lev. 23:23-25)?

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4. What portions of Old Testament history are covered by:
- a. v.6-8;
  - b. v.9-15;
  - c. v.16-21;
  - d. v.22-25; and
  - e. v.26-31?

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5. What about God is brought to attention through these accounts?

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6. How might 9:1-37 apply to us as a people today?

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7. Based on 8:9-10:39, how does understanding God's word impact our lives today?

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## NOTES

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# Malachi

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## ORIENTING DATA FOR MALACHI <sup>1</sup>

- **Content:** in six disputes with his people, Yahweh warns them of future judgments and promises redemption to the faithful
- **Prophet:** Malachi (“my messenger”), otherwise unknown
- **Date of prophetic activity:** unknown; perhaps ca. 460 B.C., just before the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah
- **Emphases:** Yahweh is a covenant-keeping God and requires the same of his people; God’s people show disdain for God by their apathy and moral and religious decline; God will judge his people in justice for their halfhearted obedience

## OVERVIEW OF MALACHI

Malachi’s oracle comes by way of six disputes between Yahweh and his people, all having the same root cause: In a time of spiritual disillusionment, Israel has grown weary of Yahweh and of keeping his covenant. The disputes come in two sets of three. The first set takes up the basic issue—their complaint that Yahweh does not love them ([1:2–5](#)), and Yahweh’s “complaint”

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).



that they have shown contempt for him ([1:6–2:9](#); [2:10–16](#)). In the second set, Yahweh twice takes up their complaint that he has done nothing about evil and injustice ([2:17–3:5](#); [3:13–4:3](#)); these two bracket Yahweh’s exposing their own form of injustice ([3:6–12](#)). At the same time they affirm that the great day of Yahweh will come indeed ([3:1–4](#); [3:17–4:3](#)). The book concludes ([4:4–6](#)) with words about the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah).

## **SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING MALACHI**

Although one cannot be sure when Malachi prophesied, if it was just before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, as seems likely, you would do well to review briefly what is said about these times in the “Specific Advice” for reading 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Malachi’s book is a graphic indicator of the moral and spiritual apathy of the time, which expressed itself in various forms of contempt for Yahweh and the covenant. In fact, most of the sins mentioned in Malachi are also mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah—mixed marriages ([Mal 2:11–15](#)/[Ezra 9–10](#)/[Neh 13:23–27](#)); failure to tithe ([Mal 3:8–10](#)/[Neh 13:10–14](#)); corrupt priests ([Mal 1:6–2:9](#)/[Neh 13:1–9](#)); and social injustice ([Mal 3:5](#)/[Neh 5:1–13](#)).

This general malaise and contempt for the covenant probably account in part for the unique form and structure of Malachi. You will see that each of the disputes tends to follow the same pattern:

- Declaration: the issue announced by Yahweh
- The people’s question: basically taking the form of “How so?”
- Yahweh’s response: reminding them of his past or coming actions, or revealing their actions that show contempt

These disputes function as a wake-up call in a time of disillusionment (see [3:14](#)) when the returnees from Babylon felt generally abandoned by Yahweh. So rather than a court setting (as in Hosea and Micah, for example), Yahweh challenges them by means of declaration, question, and explanation.

There is a kind of progression to the disputes. They begin with Israel’s questioning Yahweh’s love (= compassion for and loyalty to them). To this,

Yahweh responds that not only does he indeed love them (look what I did to Edom) but that there is plenty of evidence that they do not love Yahweh, in the form of contempt for the covenant by priests and people alike (offering blemished animals in sacrifice, and divorce and intermarriage with pagans). The final three disputes start the cycle again. Feeling abandoned by Yahweh, the people speak cynically about the prosperity of those who practice injustice. But, Yahweh responds, they themselves practice injustice by withholding tithes, the means of livelihood for the Levites and of provision for the poor ([Num 18:21–32](#); [Deut 14:28–29](#)). In the final set, there are also assurances of God’s coming justice—both judgment of the wicked and salvation of the (new) righteous remnant.

Thus, at the end of the Christian Old Testament (by way of the Septuagint) are prophetic words that Jesus and the New Testament writers see as speaking about his coming. Not only will God send “[his] messenger, who will prepare the way before [him]” so that “the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple” ([Mal 3:1](#)), but the final two words speak of Moses and Elijah, who make their appearance with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

## A WALK THROUGH MALACHI

### □ [1:1](#) *Heading*

As with Joel, Malachi’s heading does not help us identify either the prophet or his times.

### □ [1:2–5](#) *First Dispute: On Yahweh’s Love*

Note how this first dispute sets both the tone and the structure for the rest. Yahweh does love them. How so? By his hating (= rejecting; allying himself against) their “brother”—but ancient foe—Edom, thus fulfilling Obadiah’s prophecy.

### □ [1:6–2:9](#) *Second Dispute: On Offering Unacceptable Sacrifices*

Now it's Yahweh's turn. The basic issue is set forth in [1:6](#)—the priests do not love (= they show contempt for) Yahweh. How so? By offering Yahweh blemished animals (see [Lev 22:17–25](#)) that they would not dare offer even to a governor. Better to close down the temple altogether than to show such disloyalty ([1:10–14](#)), which also dishonors Yahweh's name among the nations. Thus this dispute concludes with strong admonitions for the priests to change their ways ([2:1–9](#)).

□      **[2:10–16](#)**      ***Third Dispute: On Intermarriage and Divorce***

Note that the form changes slightly here: Malachi now speaks for God (v. [10](#)) as the dispute turns to the people themselves—over intermarriage with pagans (vv. [11–12](#)), thus breaking covenant with Yahweh (= capitulation to idolatry). The issue of divorce (vv. [13–16](#)) is related (= breaking covenant with a Jewish wife to marry a local woman).

□      **[2:17–3:5](#)**      ***Fourth Dispute: On Wearying Yahweh with Words***

Back to the people's complaint. In their present malaise, they (cynically) call evil people good and ask about justice. Yahweh's answer is twofold: (1) The Lord whom they seek will come suddenly to his temple—as a refining fire ([3:1–3a](#)), and (2) his coming will result in both acceptable sacrifices at the temple (thus back to [1:6–2:9](#)) and judgment against all forms of injustice ([3:3b–5](#)).

□      **[3:6–12](#)**      ***Fifth Dispute: On Returning to Yahweh***

Notice how this dispute follows closely on what is said at the end of the previous one by putting the ball back in their court: They themselves must return to Yahweh (vv. [6–7](#)). To their "How so?" the answer is to stop their own form of injustice—withholding the tithe (food, which is used for the Levites and the poor). Only then can the curse for covenant disloyalty be removed, so that the nations will see again God's blessing on his people (cf. [Gen 12:3](#)).

□      **3:13–4:3**      ***Sixth Dispute: On Speaking Harshly about Yahweh***

This final dispute both wraps up the second set of three and brings the whole series full circle. It indicates why the first dispute was necessary: The people have been saying harsh things about Yahweh—that it is futile to serve him, and that in any case the arrogant prosper, while those who consider themselves as righteous do not ([3:13–15](#); cf. dispute [4](#)). Thus the final answer indicates that God will indeed divide the house—the arrogant will be judged ([4:1](#))—and the “sun of righteousness will rise” for the righteous ([4:2–3](#)).

□      **4:4–6**      ***Two Appended Words: the Law and the Prophets (Moses and Elijah)***

Malachi concludes by bringing Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets) into the picture. The people are urged to keep the covenant of law; they can anticipate the coming of a second Elijah who will precede the coming great day of Yahweh.

Malachi reminds God’s people that they must take their covenant relationship with him seriously and that a great new day will dawn for them with the coming of Elijah (John the Baptist) to precede the Lord (Jesus Christ).



# STUDYTWELVE

## Malachi 1.1-3.5

In this study, we transit from Nehemiah to Malachi. It is helpful to understand the connection between the two materials. Verhoef is helpful here, “With reference to the dating of Malachi it is important to know that during Nehemiah’s absence from Palestine the people neglected the compulsory contributions for the support of the temple staff, so that these people were obliged to abandon the temple service in order to support themselves (Neh. 13.10). On his return to Palestine Nehemiah saw to it that the tithes were again brought (Neh. 13.12). The period between Nehemiah’s first and second visit to Palestine must be considered the historical background of Malachi’s complaint that the people are robbing God, because they neglected the compulsory contributions, consisting of tithes and offerings.”<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Malachi 1.1-2.9

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What did the LORD say in Mal 1.1-2?
2. What did the LORD say about Edom in Mal 1.4-5?
3. What did the LORD rebuke Israel about in Mal 1.6-14?
4. What would the LORD rather have or not have in Mal 1.10?
5. What are the key words in Mal 1 that speak about the condition of the Israelites?
6. What was the covenant of God with Levi about (Mal 2.4-6)?
7. According to Mal 2.7, what were the priests supposed to do?

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<sup>9</sup> Verhoef, P. A. (1987). *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (p. 304). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

8. What is the LORD's indictment against the priests in Mal 2.8-9?
9. What were the consequences of the priests' sins (Mal 2.2, 9)?

*Interpretation*

1. Why did the Lord mention Esau in Mal 1.2-3?
2. What is the point about mentioning Edom in Mal 1.4-5?
3. What was the LORD feeling towards Israel? Why?
4. What was the supposed example or model for the priests to follow (Mal 2.5-6)?
5. What was the warning of God to the priests in Mal 2.1-9?

*Application*

1. What lessons do you glean from Mal 1.1-2.9?
2. Specifically, what warnings must we take heed based on this passage?
3. How would you apply these warnings in our daily lives today?
4. Is there any hope for forgiveness and redemption for the priests?
5. Is there any hope for us?

**2. Malachi 2.10-16**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. How has Judah been unfaithful (Mal 2.11)?
2. What is the consequence of the sin mentioned in Mal 2.12?
3. What was the second indictment against Judah (Mal 2.13-14)?
4. What is God's demand and warning to his people in Mal 2.15-16?



### *Interpretation*

1. What is the problem with marrying foreign women who worship a foreign god (Mal 2.11)?
2. Why is the LORD so angry about a man being unfaithful to his wife or vice versa?
3. What is the main intention of this passage in Mal 2.10-16?

### *Application*

1. What instructions and warnings have you received through this passage in Mal 2.10-16?
2. What are the challenges you and others may encounter when it comes to heeding these instructions and warnings today?
3. How may we help one another to obey these teachings of the LORD?

### 3. Malachi 2.17-3.5

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. The Lord continues his indictment of the Israelites. What was his next indictment in Mal 2.17?
2. As a result, what did God say he would do (Mal 3.1-5)?

##### *Interpretation*

1. What is the desire of the LORD regarding his people (Mal 2.2-5)? How is this similar and applicable in the New Testament?

##### *Application*

1. In what ways have this passage in 2.17-3.5 instructed and inspired you to be and do?

## GROUPSTUDY

1. What was the LORD's indictment in Mal 1.1-2.9? How were the priests supposed to behave (Mal 2.5-8)?

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2. What were the sins that Israel committed against the Lord in Mal 2.10-16? What would be the consequences and why did the LORD take these sins so "seriously"?

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3. In Malachi 2.17-3.5, what was the people's problem (v. 17) and what did God say he would do? What was God's intention and desire for his people?

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4. What are the lessons and warnings that we must learn and heed from these passages in Mal 1.1-2.9; 2.10-16 and 2.17-3.5?

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5. What are the difficulties or challenges that you and others might encounter in seeking to obey these instructions and warnings? How would you like others in this CG (or Bible study group) to help and support you? Conversely, how do you think you may help others in their journey?

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## NOTES

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# STUDYTHIRTEEN

## Malachi 3.6-4.6

### 1. Malachi 3.6-12

#### *Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading*

##### *Observation*

1. What was the basic problem of the Israelites (Mal 3.6)?
2. What was God's way for the people to return to God (Mal 3.8)?
3. How were the people robbing God and what is the effect (Mal 3.8-9)?
4. What was God challenging them to do (Mal 3.10-12)?

##### *Interpretation*

1. Why was God chastising the people in this passage?



*Application*

1. What are the take-home lessons that you have learnt through this text?
2. In what ways do you think this passage is applicable to you personally and to us communally?

**2. Malachi 3.13-4.6**

***Personal study and one-to-one Bible Reading***

*Observation*

1. What was God accusing the Israelites of in Malachi 3.13-15?
2. What was the response of those who feared the LORD (Mal 3.16)?
3. How did God assure those who feared him (Mal 3.17-18)?
4. What warnings and assurances did God give to the people of Israel (Mal 4.1-3)?
5. What final instructions or words did God have for the people in Malachi 4.4-6?

*Interpretation*

1. Why were the people's words in Malachi 3.14-15 considered arrogant?
2. What is the intent of the LORD regarding Malachi 3.16-4.3?

*Application*

1. What can we learn from God's indictment of the Israelites?
2. In what ways do you think we have the same problem or sin as the Israelites?
3. What encouragement or warning do you derive from this text (Mal 3.13-4.6)?

## GROUPSTUDY

1. What was God chastising the people for in Mal 3.6-12?  
Why was he chastising them?

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2. Does this passage teach and guarantee us that when we give to the LORD, he will bless us many times over (such that we should give to the Lord if we want to be blessed materially)?

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3. What are the take-home lessons that you are learning through this text (Mal 3.6-12)?  
In what ways is this warning about tithes and offerings applicable to you personally and to us communally?

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4. How were the people arrogant towards the LORD? What warnings and assurances do you see in this passage in Malachi 3.16-4.3?

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5. How has Malachi 3.13-4.6 helped you to know God better or differently? How would you apply the lessons in this passage in your lives?

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6. What take-home lessons have you gleaned from Malachi with regard to returning to the Lord, rebuilding the Lord's house and reconsecrating our lives?

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## NOTES

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