

## Nehemiah

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### Notes

I studied Nehemiah with the Cusworth's BS group in second term 2013. We used the Matthias Media booklet but I added quite a few more interesting questions. Most of these additions worked well so I decided to write a BS booklet of my own to incorporate these things as well as add some maps and quotations to make it all a bit more interesting.

My sources were the Matthias Media Interactive Bible Study booklet on Nehemiah Renovator's Dream by Phil Campbell and Greg Clarke, the Bible Speaks Today Commentary The Message of Nehemiah (BST) by Raymond Brown, The Message of Romans (BST) by John R.W. Stott, Lion Handbook to the Bible Second Revised Edition, Israel and the Nations by F.F. Bruce, sermon series on Nehemiah by Mike Paget, St Barnabas, Broadway, April/May 2009.

Ed O'Connor, July 2013

## Study 1, Nehemiah chs 1 & 2, Drives

### Getting started

1. Has anybody studied Ancient History?
2. Who were the main players in Ancient History, in a military sense?
3. What effect did each of these ancient world powers have on God's people, Israel?
4. Did anyone see the 2006 movie "300"? Where did it fit into this history?
5. Where does Nehemiah fit in with all this (Neh 1:1-2, 2:1)?

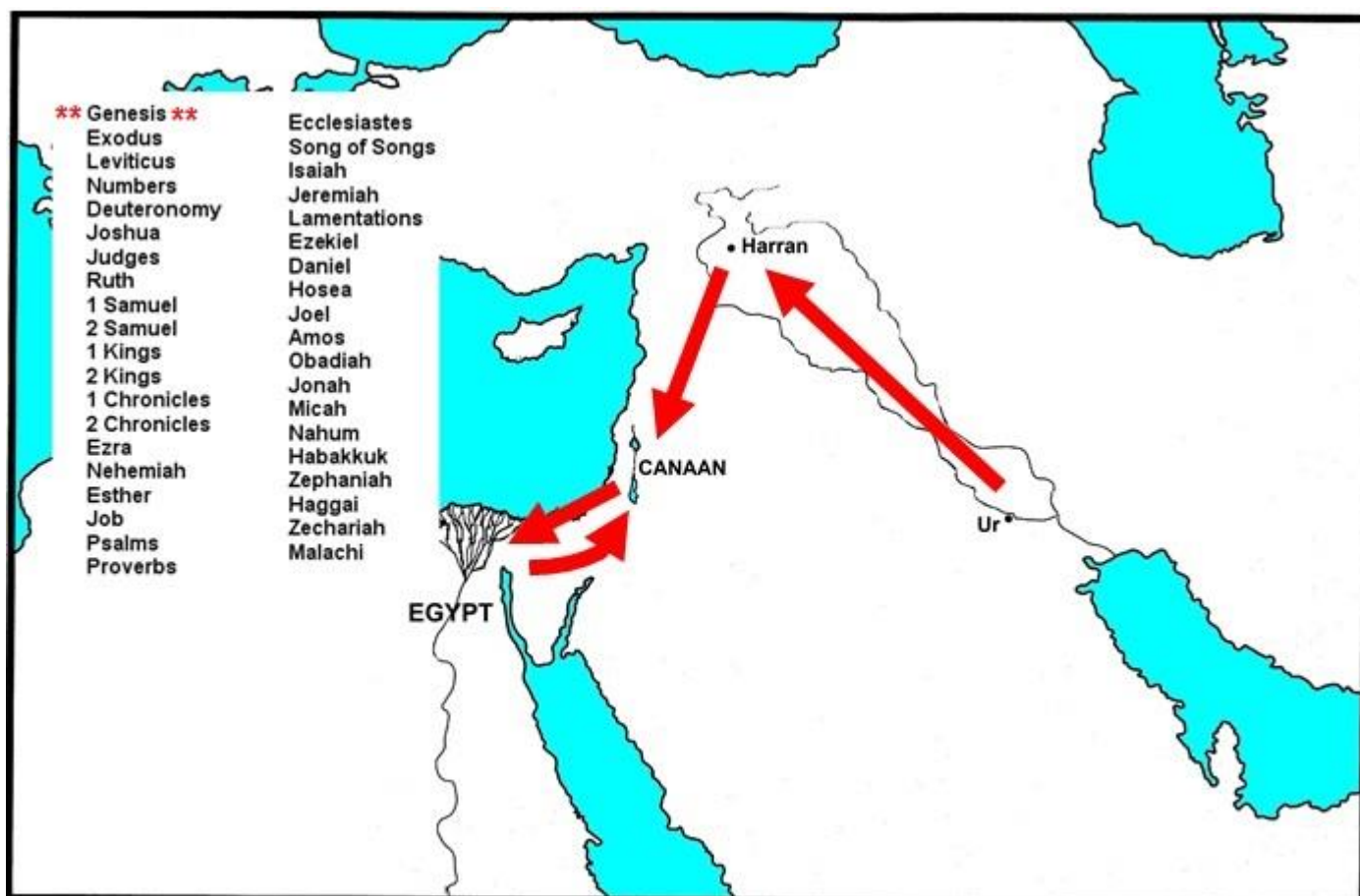
We studied Zechariah in 2011. Where does Zechariah fit in?

We studied Micah in 2008. Where does Micah fit in?

### Introduction

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah begins in a place called Susa (1:1) and the conversation is about the Jewish remnant who survived the exile (1:2). Without knowing the historical background you would be asking questions like where is/was Susa? What was "the exile"? Why are we talking about the Jewish "remnant" and not the Jewish nation? What happened after the exile? Where is all this stuff in the Bible? To answer these and other questions I thought it important to give a brief outline of the historical background to the book of Nehemiah.

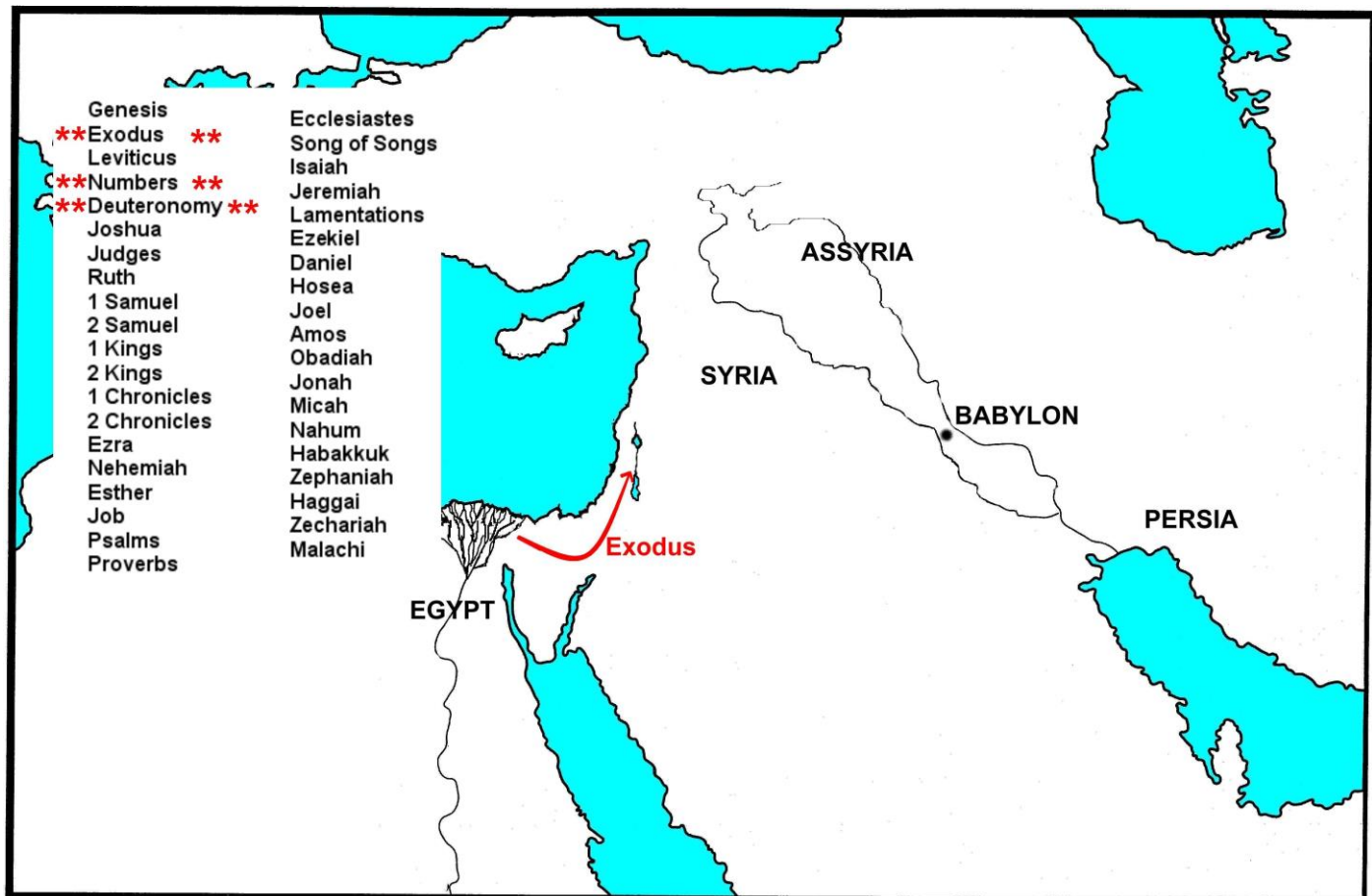
Beginning at roughly 1900 BC, God called Abraham to be a father of a great nation (Gen 12). Genesis relates the story of his travels and eventual settling in the Promised Land, Canaan.



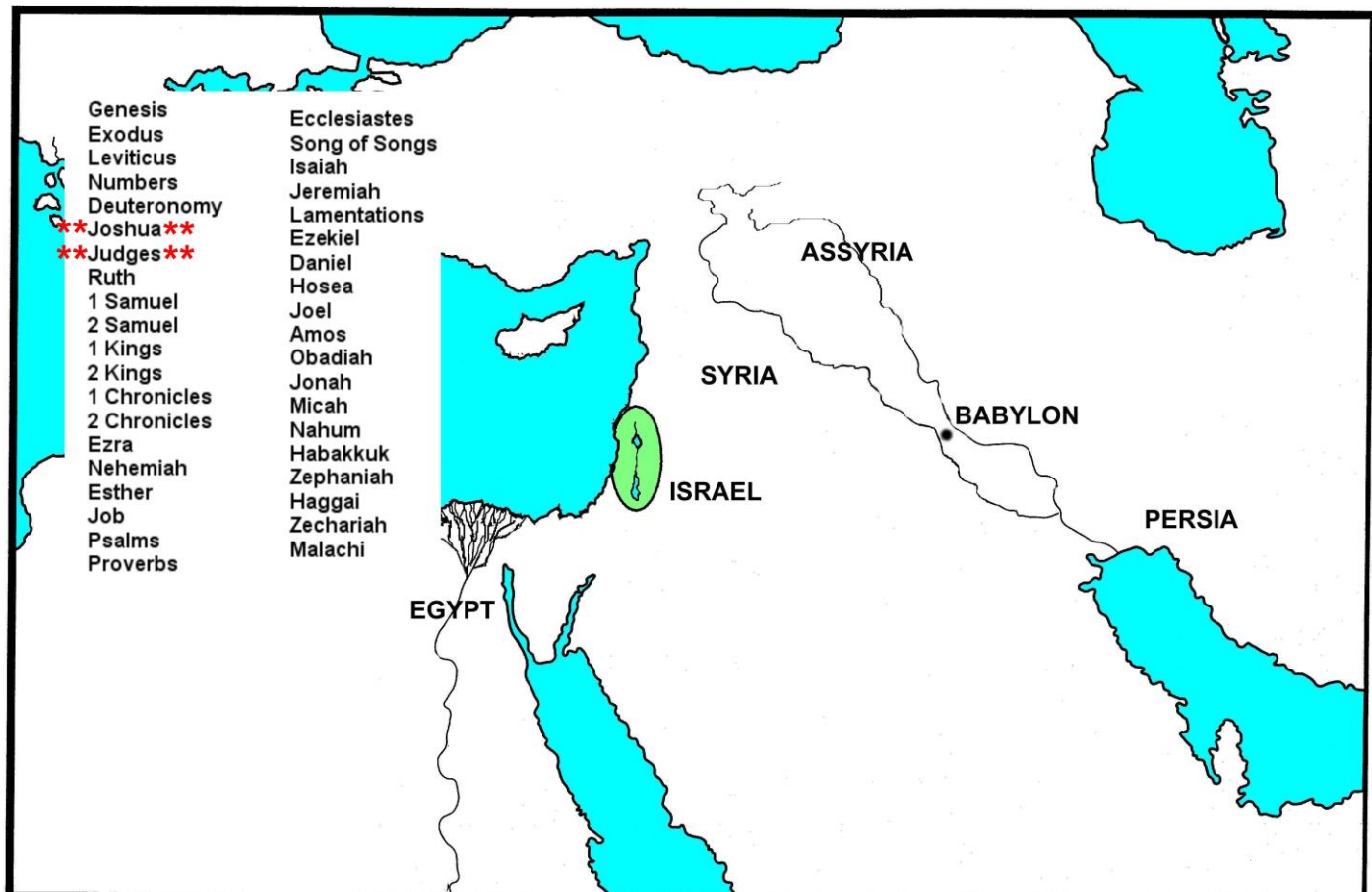
Famine forced God's people to Egypt and they spent more than 400 years in bondage to the Pharaohs. God worked to release them from slavery and, under Moses' leadership, they escaped (the Exodus, roughly 1300 BC) and travelled back to the land God had promised them.

The Egyptians were the major world power from 3000 BC to 1000 BC (these dates are very approximate). The Great Pyramid of Giza was completed in 2600 BC.

The escape from Egypt is described in the book of **Exodus**. The trip of 40 yrs. wandering in the desert before getting to Israel is described in **Numbers**. On the verge of Palestine, Moses lectures his people to prepare them for their new life in a new land as related in the book of **Deuteronomy**.



In Israel, God fights for his people to conquer the indigenous peoples. These battles are described in **Joshua** and **Judges**.



Samuel led God's people after the Judges. After Samuel came the kings with Saul as Israel's first king and David as Israel's second and greatest king until Jesus. David began his reign at about 1000 BC. The history of Samuel and Saul is written in **1 Samuel**.

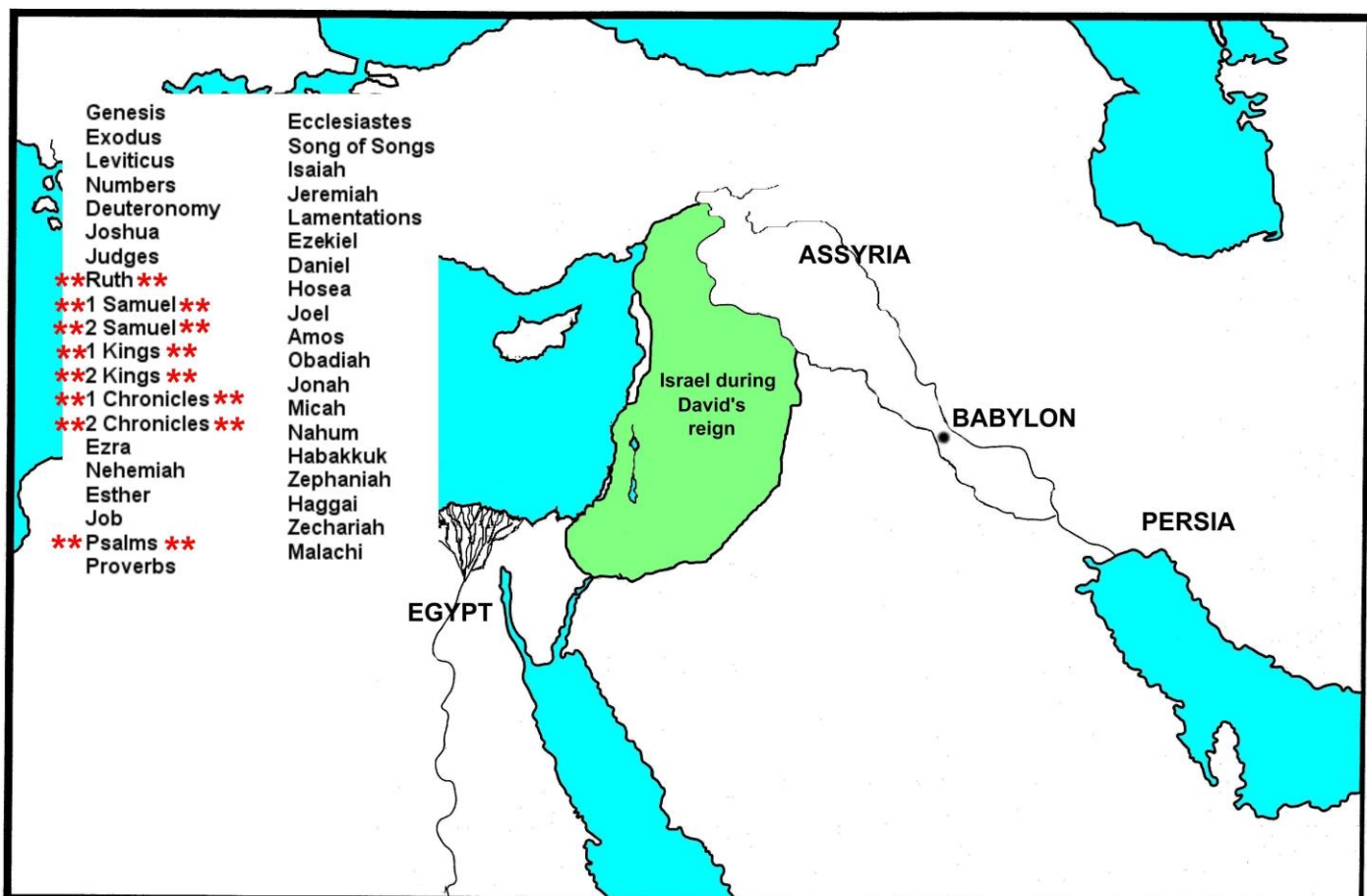
David was a warrior king and expanded Israel's borders (represented by the green area below). David's story begins at 1 Samuel 16 and continues through **1 and 2 Samuel** and **1 Chronicles**, ending with his death in 1 Kings 2. David was also a singer and musician and he wrote many **psalms** describing his feelings, experiences and prayers.

Solomon, David and Bathsheba's second son (2 Sam 12), became king in 961 BC. After Solomon Israel was split in two in 922 BC with the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. This division into two kingdoms weakened them both and it wasn't long before other nations threatened them.

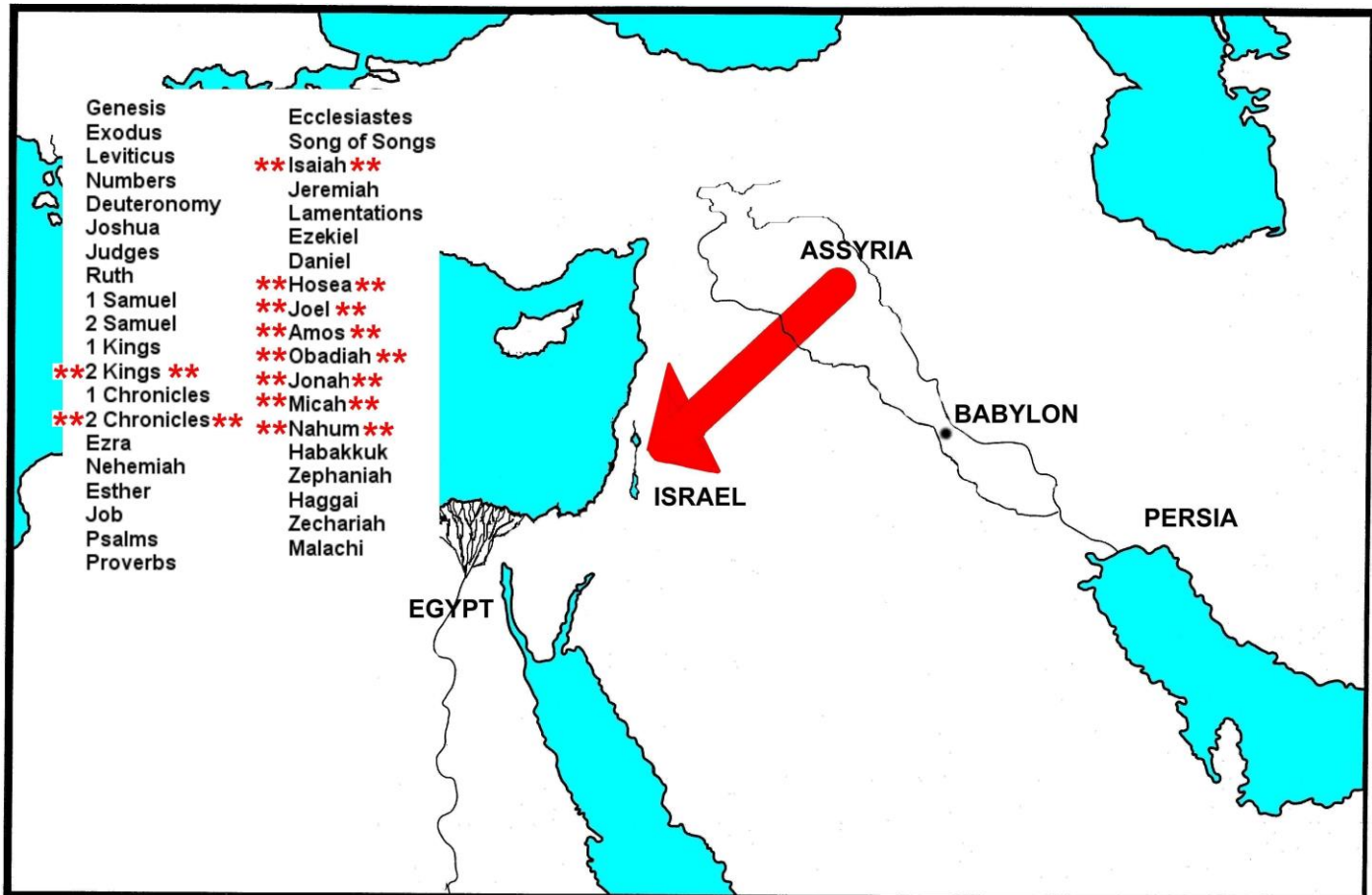
**1 and 2 Kings** account for four centuries of Israel's history with a succession of kings from both the northern and southern kingdoms, ending in exile. 1 and 2 Kings were written as one book from the viewpoint of an Israelite living in exile in Babylon.

**1 and 2 Chronicles** follow the kings from the line of David, ignoring the northern kings. The Chronicler wrote from the viewpoint of an Israelite who had returned from exile with Ezra and Nehemiah.

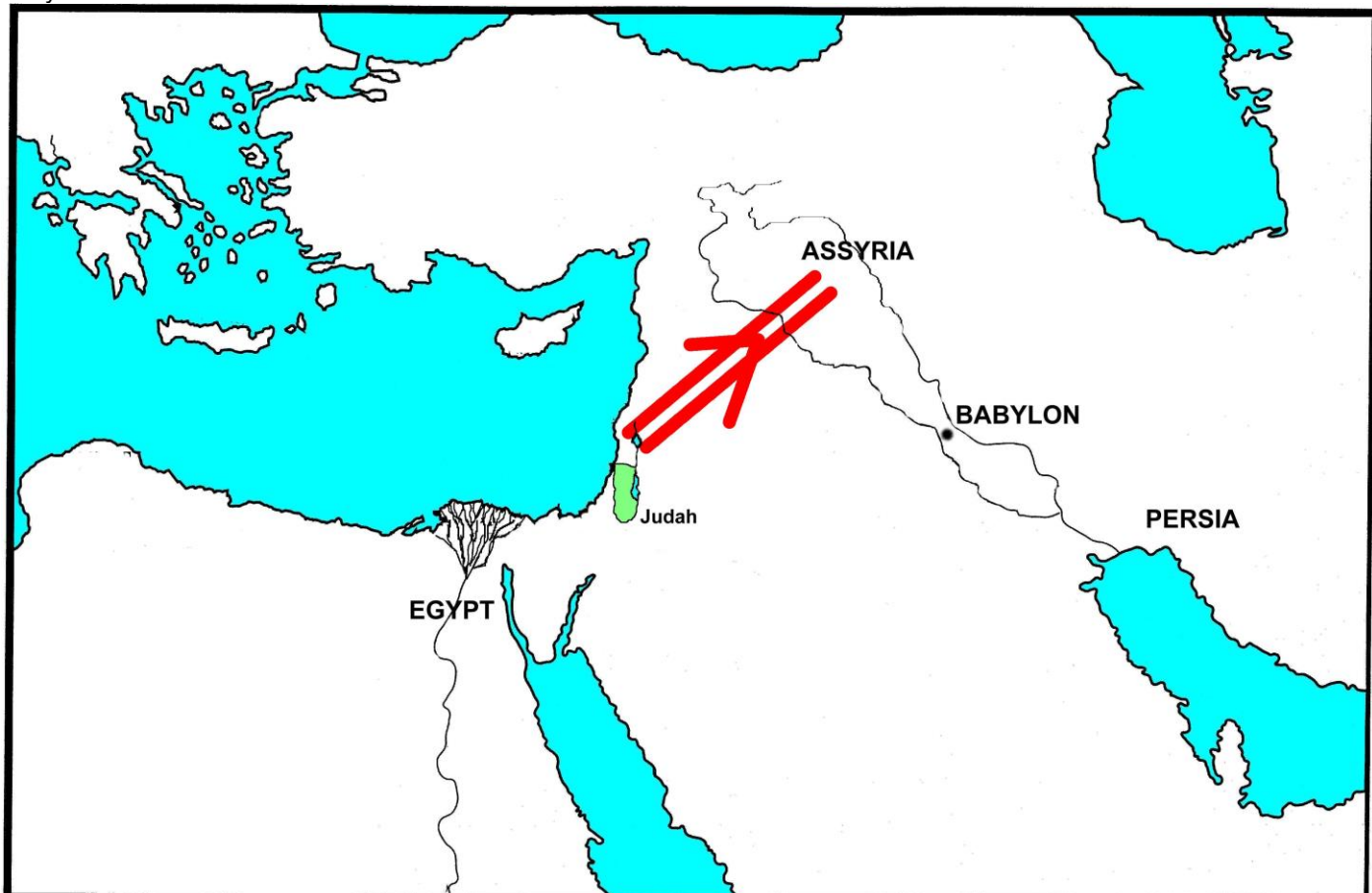
In contrast, **Ruth** is a quiet tale of ordinary life where a mother, Naomi, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, move from Moab to Bethlehem and are treated kindly by Boaz. Boaz and Ruth get married and their great grandson is King David.



Assyria became the major world power from about 900 BC to 612 BC. **Jonah** preached God's message of repentance to Nineveh, Assyria's capital, at about 800 BC. They did repent and avoided God's judgement for a time only to re-commit their sins bringing on God's warning through **Nahum**. Israel also needed to repent and a number of prophets warned that God's instrument of judgement would be Assyria. **Isaiah**, **Joel** and **Obadiah** warned Judah (the southern kingdom), **Hosea** and **Amos** warned Israel (the northern kingdom) and **Micah** addressed both kingdoms.

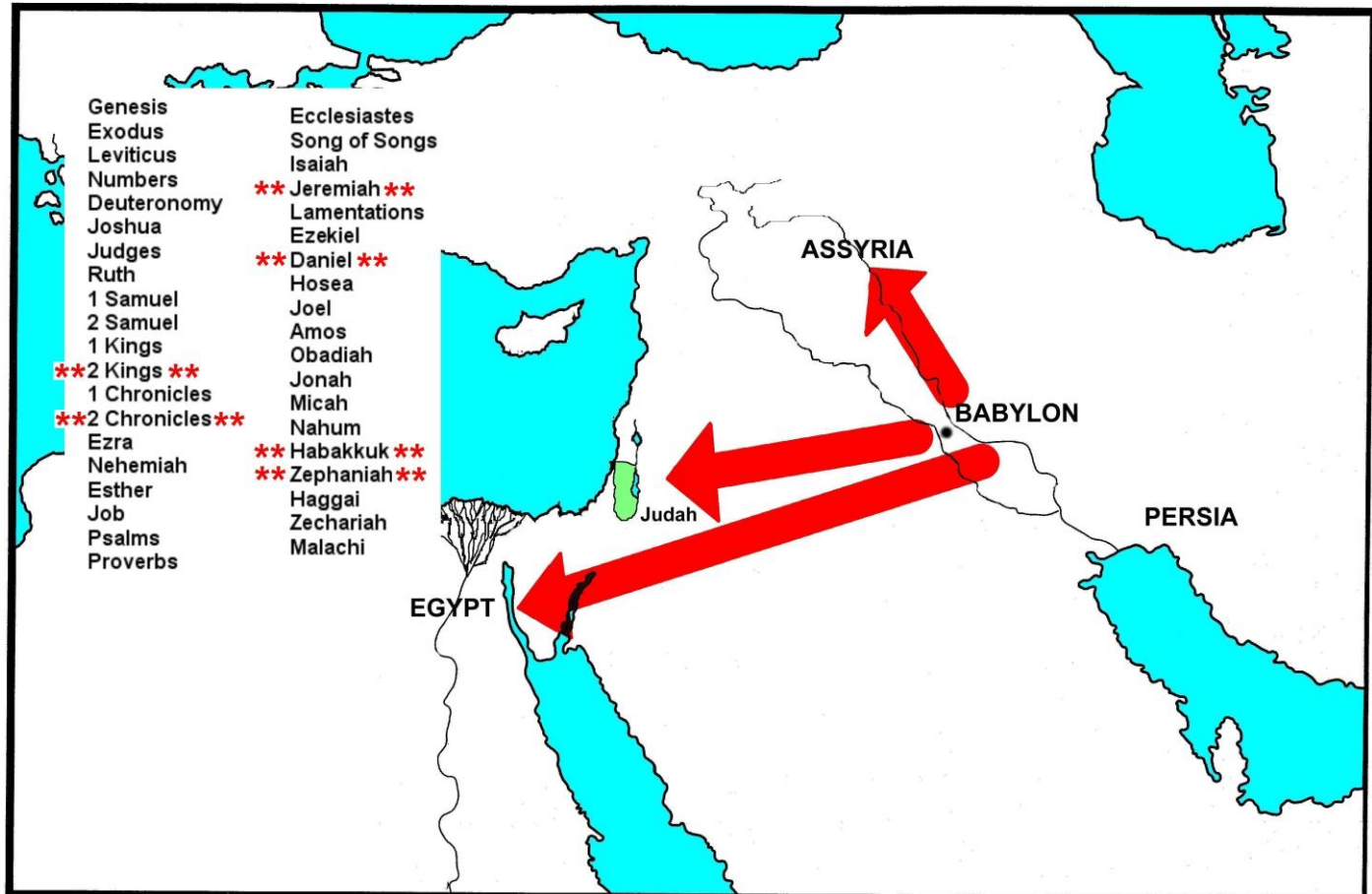


Tiglath-Pileser III became king of Assyria in 745 BC. In 721 BC he defeated Israel (the northern kingdom) and took the people into exile. In 612 BC Nineveh, the capital, was destroyed bringing about the fall of Assyria.



Babylon was the next major world power from 612 BC to 539 BC. They attacked and defeated nearly everybody. **Jeremiah** and **Zephaniah** warned Judah and **Habakkuk** said that, even worse than Assyria, Babylon would be God's instrument of judgement.

Babylon battled with Judah and took people like **Daniel** into exile in 605 BC.



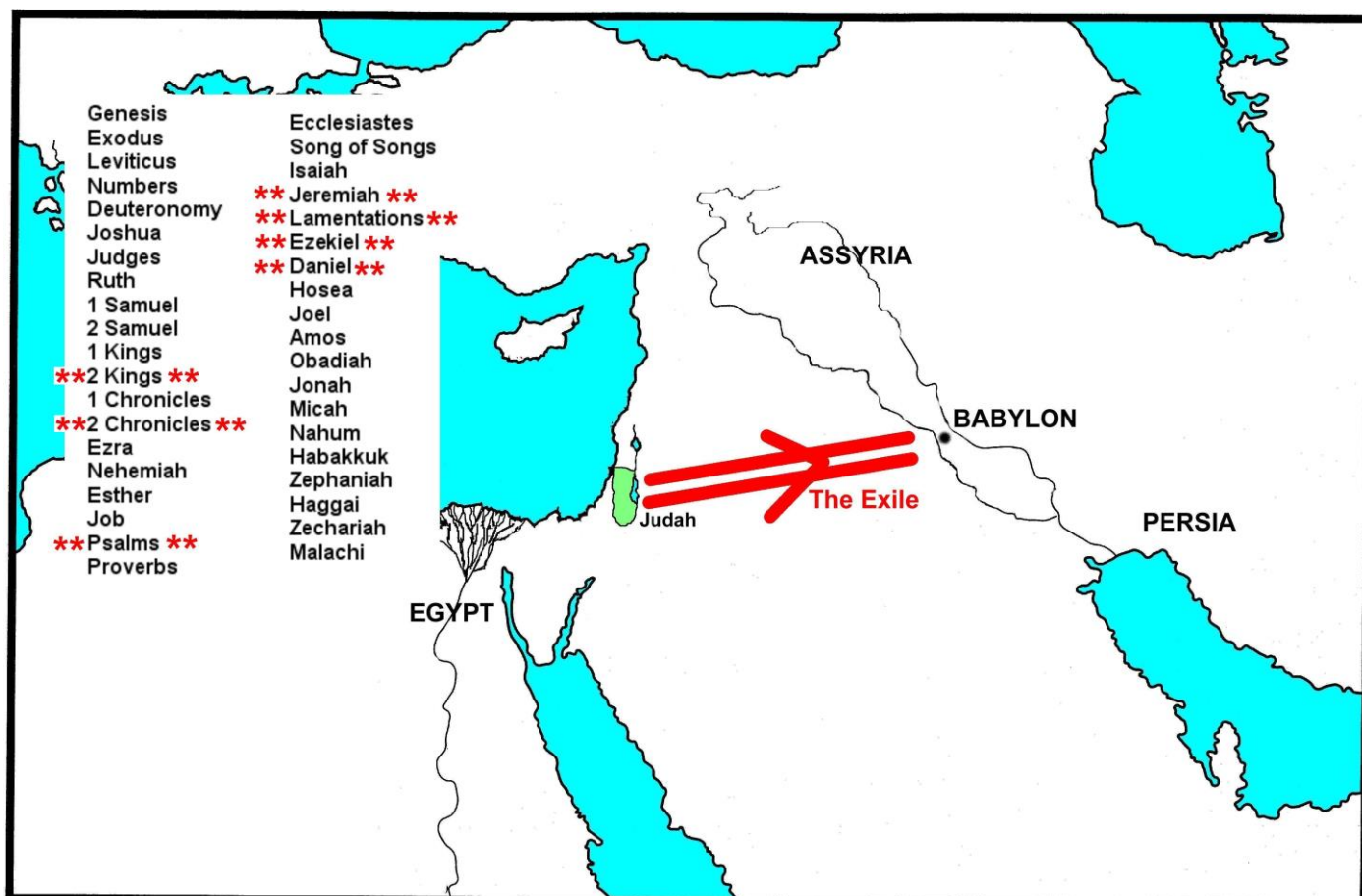
Eventually in 587 BC, Babylon took Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and drove most of the people to Babylon leaving only the poorest behind. This was known as the Exile.

Some **psalms** were written during the exile.

**Jeremiah** was offered a comfortable life in Babylon but chose to remain in Judah.

**Lamentations** was written, probably by Jeremiah, about the suffering of the people in exile.

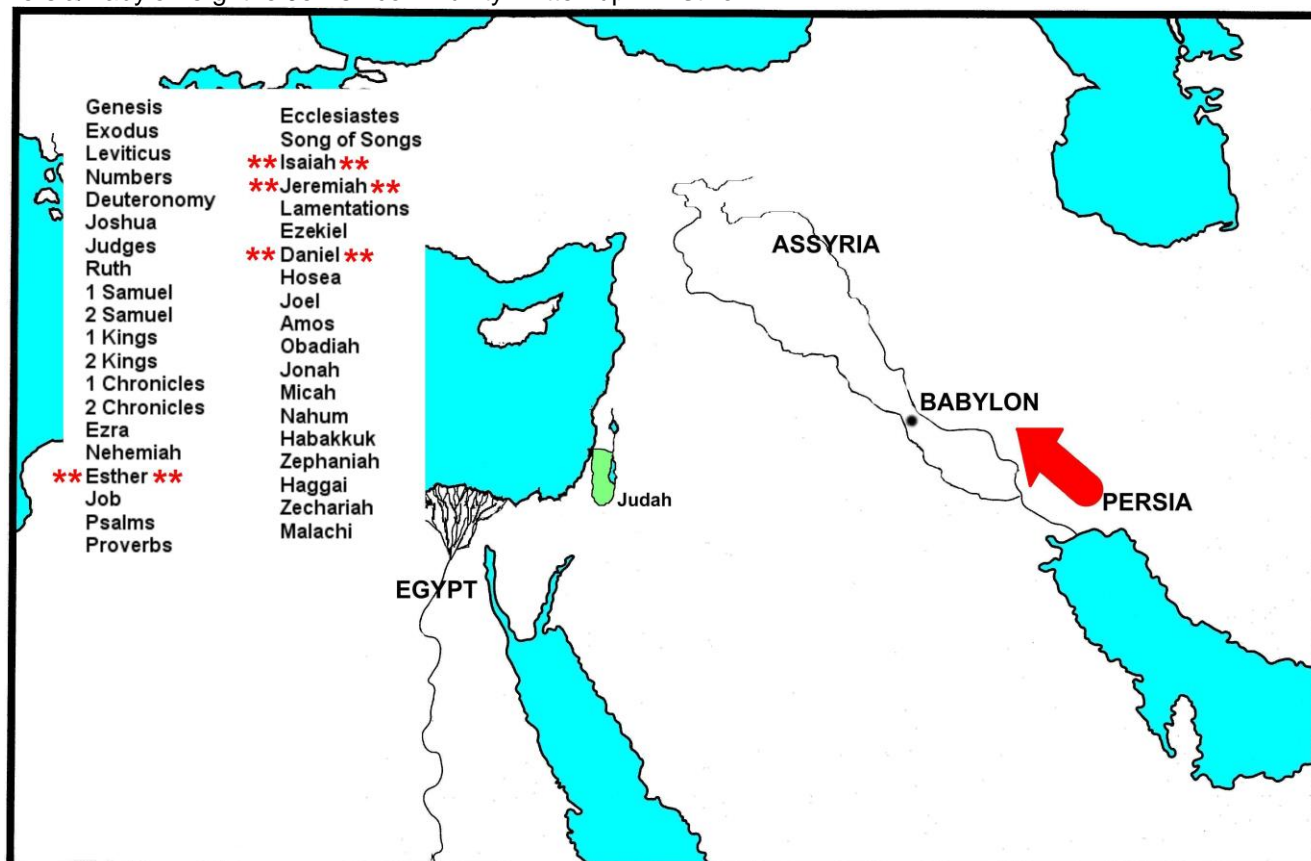
**Ezekiel** and **Daniel** had already been taken into exile.



**Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel** prophesied the defeat of the Babylonians and the return of the exiles.

These prophecies came true when Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC and Persia became the major world power.

The Persians allowed the Israelites (the remnant) to return to Judah although some preferred to stay in Persia/Babylon e.g. the Jewish community written up in **Esther**.



In 538/7 the main group of Israelites returned to Judah with Zerubbabel, their leader.

**Haggai** and **Zechariah** were written during the reign of Darius I of Persia (521-486 BC).

Haggai wrote to encourage the re-building of the walls of Jerusalem.

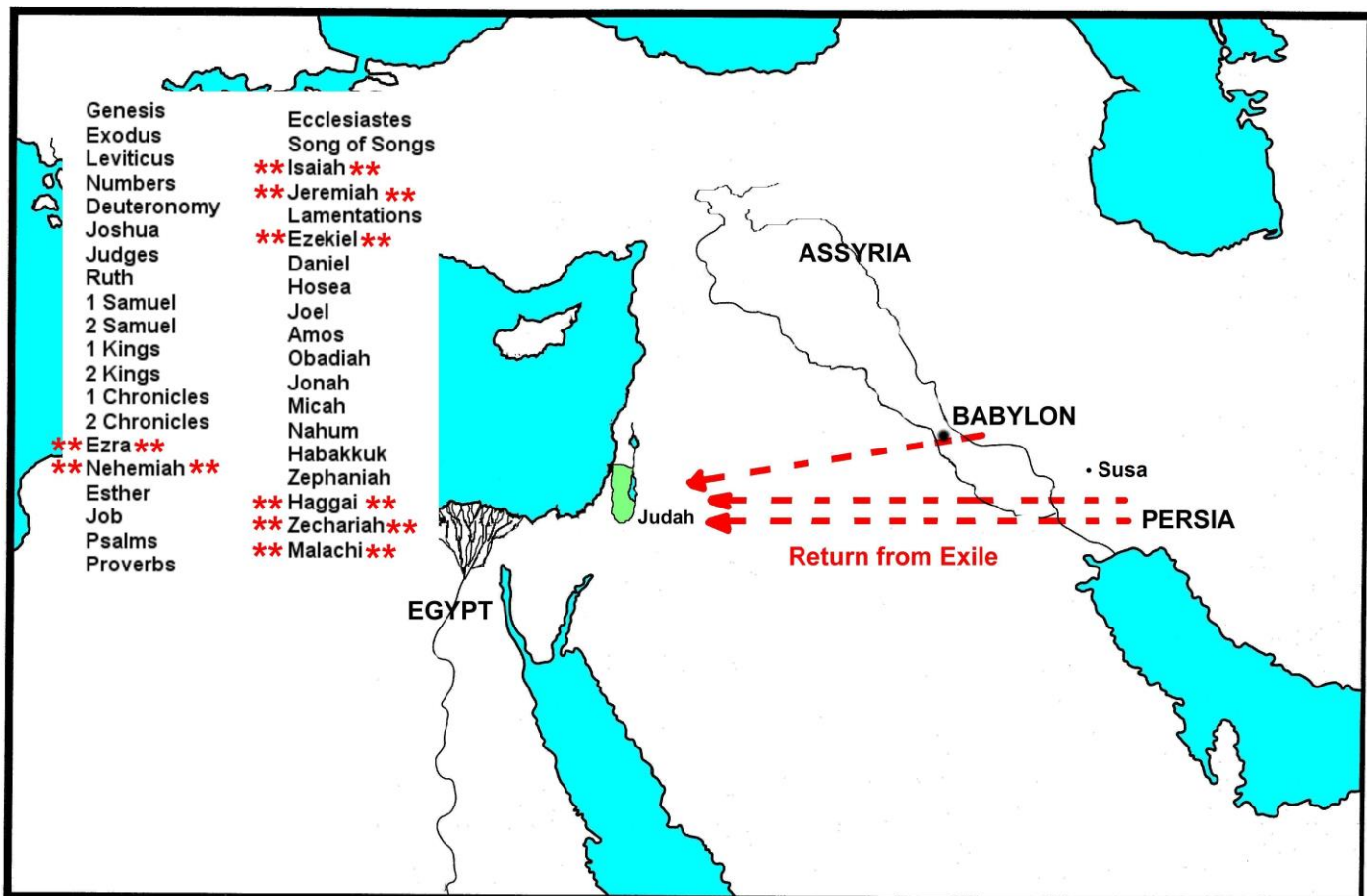
Zechariah looked to the restoration of the Temple and the future of God's people.

(Battle of Thermopylae 480 BC when the Greeks blocked the advance of the massive Persian army under Xerxes I (486-465 BC) depicted in the 2006 movie "300".)

**Ezra** and a group of Israelites returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC to organise the rebuilding of the Temple.

**Nehemiah** returned with his group in 445 BC to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. (Artaxerxes I, son of Xerxes I, was king of the Persians from 465-423 BC, see Neh 2:1.)

**Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah** and **Malachi** all looked ahead to a time beyond the exile, to a time of restoration and a time when God's king, Jesus, would come.



In 331 BC the Greeks, under Alexander the Great, defeated the Persians, under Darius III (336-331 BC).

331-146 BC – Greek rule.

146 BC – 410 AD – Roman rule.

**Bible**

6. Read Neh 1:1-2:1. Any questions about this passage?

(1:1, 2:1 20 yrs after what? Beginning of Artaxerxes reign 465-423 BC)  
 (1:1 – 2:1 Kislev to Nisan = 4 mths in prayer day and night 1:6)  
 (1:8, Lev 26:33, Deut 30:4 God's instructions to Moses 800 or 900 yrs ago)  
 (1:11 what did the cupbearer to the king do?)

7. Read Neh 2:1-2.  
 Why was Nehemiah afraid?

8. Read Neh 2:3-4.  
 What is important about these two verses?

9. Read Neh 2:5-8.  
 What do these verses tell you about Nehemiah?

10. Read Neh 2:9-10.  
 What do these verses tell you about how Nehemiah was written?

11. Read Neh 2:11-20.  
 (a) Why are the walls of Jerusalem so important?

(b) Why would rebuilding the walls suggest a rebellion against the king of Persia (v19)?

(c) Why is Nehemiah excluding Sanballat, Tobiah and Gesham?

**To finish**

12. (a) When you hear the words “Christian spirituality” what do you think of?
  
- (b) Is there a connection between Christian spirituality and the things you do in an ordinary day?
  
- (c) Is Christian spirituality confined to what you do at church or at Bible study or at prayer?
  
13. What do you think drives Nehemiah to do this job on the walls of Jerusalem?
  
14. What do you think are some basic drives that unite all human beings?
  
15. Mike Paget, speaking during a sermon series on Nehemiah at St Barnabas, Broadway in April/May 2009 said there were three basic drives that unite all human beings:
  - (i) to get near to God
  - (ii) to make a mark in the world
  - (iii) to have a sense of belonging.
  - (a) Do you feel near to God?
  
  - (b) Do you feel a need to make a mark in the world?
  
  - (c) Do you feel a need to belong to something?
  
  - (d) Do you think these things were driving Nehemiah?

## Study 2, Nehemiah chs 3 & 4, Buildings, opposition & promises

### Getting started

1. Say you came up with this scenario:  
 St Faiths will be transformed into a community and sports centre which would also be used for church meetings. St Faiths will run this centre free of charge for the wider community if the local government will partner with the church financially to build it. The centre will include:
  - a café for the wider community
  - an indoor soccer comp.
  - a disabilities ministry run by professional Christians for free
  - arts and crafts
  - a food bank where you get a voucher from a doctor or social worker for three days food for free.
- (a) What would be your motivation to see the project to completion?
- (b) What opposition would you see coming against this project?

### The story so far . . .

The exile is over and the Persians have allowed God's people to go back home to Israel. Nehemiah is in Susa, Persian, and he hears that Jerusalem is a mess with its walls and gates broken in pieces and rubble. Nehemiah asks the king of Persia if he can go to Jerusalem to fix it up with some resources from the king. Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem, checks out the mess, decides to re-build but he has people who oppose this, namely, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem.

### Bible

2. Read Neh 4:1-12.  
 What is the nature of the opposition to building the walls?
3. Nehemiah prays in vv 4-5..  
 (a) Is his prayer reasonable? Why/why not?  
  
 (b) Would you pray the same sort of prayer if you had opposition to the scenario described in q. 1? Why/why not?
4. Read Neh 4:13-23.  
 Describe the manner in which the Israelites worked?
5. (a) How do the Israelites gather their strength (vv 9, 14)?  
  
 (b) How would we gather our strength in the face of opposition to the opening scenario?

6. Read Ex 14:13-14 and Deut 1:30.
  - (a) How can Nehemiah confidently assert that “Our God will fight for us” (Neh 4:20)?
  
  - (b) What links the events in Nehemiah’s time with events in Israel’s past?
  
7. (a) Look up God’s promises that Nehemiah refers to:
 

Neh 1:8-9 which refers to Lev 26:33 and Deut 30:4.

Neh 4:20 which refers to Ex 14:14 and Deut 1:30.

  - (b) Do Old Testament promises refer to Christians today?
 

Look up Gal 3:16-22, Rom 4:13-25 and Heb 8:6-13.

    - (i) In these passages what is said about the old promises/old covenant?
  
    - (ii) In these passages what is said about the new promises/new covenant?
  
    - (iii) In what sense do the promises to Abraham or Moses apply to Christians?
  
    - (iv) In what sense do the promises to Abraham or Moses **not** apply to Christians?

### To finish

8. “Our church is undertaking a building project in the spirit of Nehemiah. We are trusting God to protect us from any opposition and to provide for all our needs.” What, if anything, is wrong with this present day application of Nehemiah?
  
9. In times of hardship, how does remembering the Lord help us face opposition? What exactly do you remember about the Lord in order to gain courage and support?

5. The goal is to re-build the walls of Jerusalem.  
The values behind this goal are the values of being God's people and restoring God's honour (Neh 1:3, 2:3, 2:17).  
One of the problems they had was not enough food.  
How did some of them compromise their values in order to achieve their goals (see Ex 22:25, Lev 25:39-41)?

The appalling situation was all the more distressing in that, prior to Nehemiah's return, some impoverished people had been forced to sell themselves or their children as slaves to Gentile homes but, wherever possible, they had been generously *bought back* (8) by their fellow-countrymen. Now, without houses and lands and in deeper poverty still, many were compelled to return to slavery, this time in Israelite homes, enslaved by people who belonged to the same community of faith. Surely the offenders' consciences are disturbed that the abundant generosity of those Israelites who had bought them back from Gentiles had been overshadowed by the appalling greed of their new masters.

From The Message of Nehemiah by Raymond Brown p 90.

6. What do we do if we can't achieve our goals unless we compromise our values?
7. Read Neh 5:9-13.  
What does Nehemiah do about the situation?
8. Read Neh 5:14-19.  
What is Nehemiah's motivation for acting humbly and generously (v 15)?

## To finish

9. Nehemiah ch 5 closes with an appeal to God. Similar appeals are made in Neh 13:14, 22, 31. Which of the following best expresses what Nehemiah is praying?
- (a) Reward me, God, because I have turned your people around.
  - (b) Count up all my good deeds, God, because there are plenty of them.
  - (c) I think I have done good deeds, God, even if everyone else has let you down.
- Give reasons for your choice.

## Study 4, Nehemiah chs 6 & 7, Motivations

### Getting started

1. Think of different things that might motivate you e.g. love, fear, guilt, gratitude, duty, money, passion, pride, status, revenge, beauty, pleasure, intellectual interest and knowing your purpose. Think of a recent task that you had to do. What motivated you to do that task?
  
2. Out of all the different things that might motivate you which one would drive you the hardest?

The reason I brought this up is that in Nehemiah we see a number of people with varying motives and we will examine their motives and look at our own motives for doing things too.

### The story so far . . .

The exile is over and the Persians have allowed God's people to go back home to Israel. Nehemiah travels from Persia to Jerusalem and finds Jerusalem in a mess. He organises the Israelites into re-building the city walls. Nehemiah gets the job done in spite of verbal insults, put downs, the threat of physical violence and lack of money for food forcing the workers to mortgage their land and sell their children into slavery.

### Bible

2. Read Neh 6:1-14.
  - (a) What do you think might have been the motives behind the actions of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem?
  
  - (b) Their first plan, in vv 1-4, was to get Nehemiah to meet with them on the plain of Ono. Why didn't Nehemiah go?
  
  - (c) Their next plan, in vv 5-7, was to circulate a letter falsely claiming Nehemiah was planning a rebellion. What did Nehemiah do?
  
  - (d) The third plan, in v 10, was to get Nehemiah to meet with Shemaiah in the Temple. Why didn't Nehemiah go?
  
3. They continued their intimidation of Nehemiah in vv 17-19. Read Neh 6:15-7:5. There was a lot of pressure on Nehemiah but he was determined to get the job done. In the text we get hints about what motivated Nehemiah.
  - (a) Look up Neh 2:12, 4:6, 5:16. What do these verses tell us about motivation?

(b) Look up Neh 2:17. What motivation is this talking about?

(c) Look up Neh 5:9, 15. What motivation is this talking about?

(d) In Neh ch 8 Nehemiah assembles all the people. Ezra reads the Law of Moses to them and the people mourn and weep because of their sins. In ch 9 the people confess their sins and worship God. In ch 10 the people re-new their promises to be God's faithful people. In a sermon series by Mike Paget, senior minister at St Barnabas, Broadway, he says that the people are motivated by forgiveness i.e. they do all the wall-building because God has forgiven them and brought them back to the land he promised Abraham.

What do you think of forgiveness as a motivation? Does it come into consideration in your daily tasks?

### To finish

4. (a) Rather than forgiveness, perhaps it is God's grace that motivates us. List the things we have been given through the grace of God.

(b) If we are motivated by God's grace what are we motivated to do?

(c) Using your answer to 4 (b), do you feel *obliged* to do those things so your motivation is obligation or duty?

(c) Still using your answer to 4 (b), if you don't do enough of those things do you feel guilty so your motivation is one of guilt?

(d) How do you feel about guilt as a motivator?

(e) How do you feel about duty/obligation to God as a motivation?

5. How can we better motivate others?

## Study 5, Nehemiah ch 8, Reading & remembering

### Getting started

1. What is your favourite book of the Bible? Why is it your favourite?

The reason I ask this is that the Nehemiah passage for this study is about Ezra reading the Law to the Israelites and it affected them deeply. I wonder if we are affected that much when we read the Bible.

### The story so far . . .

The exile is over and the Persians have allowed God's people to go back home to Israel. Nehemiah travels from Persia to Jerusalem and finds Jerusalem in a mess. He organises the Israelites into re-building the city walls. Nehemiah gets the job done in spite of verbal insults, put downs, the threat of physical violence and lack of money for food forcing the workers to mortgage their land and sell their children into slavery. Ch 7 is mainly a record of which Israelite families had been taken into exile and then returned to Jerusalem. Ch 8 introduces a new character called Ezra. Some years before Nehemiah, Ezra had been involved in re-building the Temple in Jerusalem.

### Bible

2. Read Neh 8:1-12.  
What exactly is being read to the people?
3. On what day is it being read? Why is this significant (see Lev 23:23-24)?
4. How do the people respond?
5. What do the Levites do (vv 7-8)?
6. Why do the Israelites weep when they hear God's word (see Neh 6:17-19)?
7. Why does Nehemiah say this is not a day for mourning but for rejoicing?
8. What does Nehemiah tell the Israelites to do? Why is this significant (see Num 29:1-6)?

9. Read Neh 8:13-18.  
What is supposed to happen during the feast of the seventh month (vv 14-15)?
10. What is the festival celebrating (see Lev 23:33-43, esp. v43)?
11. Why do they live in “booths” (or “tents” or “tabernacles”)?
12. Why is it so significant that the Israelites remember their rescue from Egypt here in Nehemiah, at this particular point in their history?

**To finish**

13. Do you think ‘festivals’ of remembrance have a place for Christians today? Why/why not?
14. (a) How often do you read the Bible?  
  
(b) Do you think you should read the Bible more often?  
  
(c) What could you do to organise yourself to read the Bible more often?



**To finish**

6. God had given Israel “saviours” (9:27) to rescue them from their enemies. In Jesus, people are saved from “the curse of the law”. Read Gal 3:10-14:

(a) How was the law a curse on Israel?

(b) What is it that law-keeping could never achieve for Israel?

(c) What are the benefits, for God’s people, from Jesus’ death and resurrection?

(d) What use is the law now, for God’s people?

7. “I have no idea where I fit in the world.” How can the story of God’s covenant with Israel, and its fulfilment in Christ, help people find direction in life?

## Study 7, Nehemiah 12:27-13:31,

## Getting started

1. Think of a recent book or movie you have read or watched. Think of the ending to that book or movie. Was it a good ending or a bad ending?

## The story so far . . .

The exile is over and the Persians have allowed God's people to go back home to Israel. Nehemiah travels from Persia to Jerusalem and finds Jerusalem in a mess. He organises the Israelites into re-building the city walls and gets the job done in spite of great opposition. Ezra reads the law of Moses to all the people and they re-dedicate themselves to following God complete with a great celebration. This study looks at ch 13 where we find that Nehemiah has gone back to Persia for a while and then returns to Jerusalem.

## Bible

2. Read Neh 12:44-13:11.  
What sins have been committed while Nehemiah was away?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Read Neh 13:12-31.  
(a) What other sins have been committed?  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
(b) What does Nehemiah do about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. (a) How do you feel about the ending to this book of Nehemiah?  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
(b) How do you think the Israelites will do if Nehemiah goes back to Persia again?  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
(c) Is there a solution to the problem of God's people ignoring God's laws and going to their sinful ways?

## To finish

5. Read Rom 6:8-11.  
(a) Is this the solution to 4 (c)? If so, how so? If not, why not?

(b) What does it mean to be “dead to sin” (Rom 6:11)?

(c) What about the Law? Are we still in danger of ignoring God’s laws? Read Rom 6:12-14.  
What does it mean to be no longer “under the law” (Rom 6:14)?

We are not to pretend that our old nature has died, when we know perfectly well it has not. Instead we are to realise and remember that our former self did die with Christ, thus putting an end to its career. We are to consider what in fact we are, namely *dead to sin and alive to God* (11), like Christ (10). Once we grasp this, that our old life has ended, with the score settled, the debt paid and the law satisfied, we shall want to have nothing more to do with it. . . .

To be *under law* is to accept the obligation to keep it and so to come under its curse or condemnation [Gal 3:10]. To be *under grace* is to acknowledge our dependence on the work of Christ for salvation, and so to be justified rather than condemned, and thus set free.

From The Message of Romans by John R.W. Stott pp 179, 181.

6. So, Christians are dead to sin and no longer under the law but alive to Christ and under grace BUT we keep on sinning. Does this mean that our salvation through Jesus is NOT the solution to the problem of always going back to our sinful ways (like the Israelites in Nehemiah)?

What is the solution?

(Hint: Read Gal ch 5 where Paul groups sin, law, slavery, flesh and we can add death from Rom 6 as one way of living and he groups grace, righteousness, freedom, spirit, love and life from Rom 6 as another way of living i.e. 2 modes of living, 2 kingdoms.)