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Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther and Work

Theology of Work Project

Mark Roberts

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CONTRIBUTOR/S:

Mark Roberts

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Introduction to Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Most Christians don't find their workplaces very supportive of their faith. Generally, there is limited scope for explicitly Christian witness and action. Moreover, workers may feel pressure to violate the ethical requirements of biblical standards, either explicitly or implicitly. In a pluralistic society, some such limits may be appropriate, but they can make the workplace feel like alien territory to Christians. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther depict what it is like for God's people to work in unwelcoming workplaces. They show God's people working in jobs ranging from construction to politics to entertainment, always in the midst of environments openly hostile to God's values and plans. Yet along the way they receive surprising help from nonbelievers in the highest positions of civic power. God's power seems to crop up for his people's good in surprising places, yet they face extremely challenging situations and decisions, upon which they don't always agree.

Ezra had to ponder whether to trust an unbelieving ruler to protect the Jewish people as they returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the temple. He had to find financial support within the corrupt economic system of the Persian Empire, yet to be true to God's laws about economic integrity. Nehemiah had to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which required him to both trust God and be pragmatic. He had to lead people whose motivation ranged from altruism to greed, and get them to overcome their divergent self-interests to work towards a common purpose. Esther had to survive both the oppression of women and the deadly intrigue within the Persian royal court, yet remain ready to risk everything to save her people from genocide. Our titles and institutions have changed since their days, but in many ways our workplaces today have much in common, for better or worse, with the places where Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther labored. The real life situations, challenges and choices found in these biblical books help us develop a theology of work that matters in how we live each day.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

In 587 BC, the Babylonians, under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem. They killed the leaders of Judah, plundered the temple before burning it to the ground, destroyed much of the city,

including its walls, and took the cream of Jerusalem's crop of citizens to Babylon. There, these Jews lived for decades in exile, always hoping for God's deliverance and the restoration of Israel. Their hopes were heightened in 539 BC when Persia, led by King Cyrus, overthrew Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Cyrus issued a decree inviting the Jews in his kingdom to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and, therefore, their life as God's people (Ezra 1:1-4).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, originally two parts of a single work,^[1] narrate crucial aspects of this rebuilding story, beginning with the edict of Cyrus in 539 BC. Their purpose, however, is not simply to describe what happened long ago out of antiquarian curiosity. Rather, Ezra and Nehemiah use historical events to illustrate the theme of restoration. These books show how God once restored his people and how people played a central role in this work of renewal. Ezra and Nehemiah were written by an unknown author, probably in the fourth-century BC,^[2] to encourage the Jewish people to live faithfully even under foreign rule, so that they might be participants in God's present and future work of restoration.

Ezra and Nehemiah are highly theological books, but they do not directly address the theology of *work*. They do not include legal imperatives or prophetic visions having to do with our daily labors. The narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah do describe arduous work, however, implicitly placing work in a theological framework. Thus we'll find beneath the surface of these books rich soil from which a theology of work might sprout. In particular, Ezra and Nehemiah were called to restore God's kingdom (Israel), in the midst of a partially-hostile, partially-supportive environment. Today's workplaces are also partially hostile and partially supportive of the work of God. This encourages us to work out how our work may contribute to implanting God's kingdom in today's world.

ESTHER

The Book of Esther tells the story of one curious episode during the era depicted in Ezra and Nehemiah. It focuses, not on the restoration of Jerusalem, but rather on events happening in Persia when Ahasuerus, better known to us by his Greek name, Xerxes, was king (485-465 BC). The narrative of Esther accounts for the origins of the Jewish festival of Purim. The unidentified author of this book wrote, in part, to explain and encourage celebration of this national holiday (see Esther 9:20-28).^[3] His broader concern was to examine how Jews could survive and even thrive as exiles in a pagan and often hostile land.^[4]

In contrast to Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther is not explicitly theological at all. In fact, God is never mentioned. Yet no faithful reader could fail to see the hand of God behind the events of the book. This invites the reader to ponder how God may be at work in the world unnoticed by those without eyes to see.

Restoration of the Temple (Ezra 1:1-6:22)

The Book of Ezra begins with a decree from King Cyrus of Persia, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC (Ezra 1:2-4). The introduction to this decree specifies when it was proclaimed: “In the first year of King Cyrus” (539-538 BC, shortly after the Persian defeat of Babylon). It also introduces us to one of the principal themes of Ezra-Nehemiah: the relationship between God’s work and human work. Cyrus made his proclamation “that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished,” and because “the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus” (Ezra 1:1). Cyrus was doing his work as king, seeking his personal and institutional ends. Yet this was a result of God’s work within him, advancing God’s own purposes. We sense in the first verse of Ezra that God is in control, yet choosing to work through human beings, even Gentile kings, to accomplish his will.

Workplace Christians today also live in trust that God is active through the decisions and actions of non-Christian people and institutions. Cyrus was God’s chosen instrument, whether or not Cyrus himself recognized that. Similarly, the actions of our boss, co-workers, customers and suppliers, rivals, regulators or a myriad of other actors may be furthering the work of God’s kingdom unrecognized by either us or them. That should prevent us from both despair and arrogance. If Christian people and values seem absent from your workplace, don’t despair — God is still at work. On the other hand, if you are tempted to see yourself or your organization as a paragon of Christian virtue, beware! God may be accomplishing more through those with less visible connection to him than you realize. Certainly, God’s work through Cyrus — who remained wealthy, powerful, and unbelieving, even while many of God’s people were only slowly recovering from the poverty of exile — should warn us not to expect wealth and power as a necessary reward for our faithful work. God is using all things to work towards his kingdom, not necessarily towards our personal success.

God’s work continued as many Jews took advantage of Cyrus’ decree. “Every one whose spirit God had stirred” prepared to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). When they arrived in Jerusalem, their first job was to build the altar and offer sacrifices on it (Ezra 3:1-3). This epitomizes the chief sort of work chronicled in Ezra and Nehemiah. It is closely associated with the sacrificial practices of Old Testament Judaism, which took place in the temple. The work described in these books reflects and supports the centrality of the temple and its offerings in the life of God’s people. Worship and work stride hand and hand through the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Given the focus in Ezra upon the rebuilding of the temple, people’s jobs are mentioned when they are relevant to this effort. Thus the list of people returning to Jerusalem specifically itemizes “the priests, the Levites... and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants” (Ezra 2:70). The text identifies “masons and carpenters” because they were necessary for the building project (Ezra 3:7). People

whose skills did not equip them for working directly on the temple contributed to the task through the fruit of their work in the form of “freewill offerings” (Ezra 2:68). Thus, in a sense, the rebuilding of the temple was the work of all the people as they contributed in one way or another.

Ezra identifies political leaders in addition to Cyrus because of their impact, positive or negative, on the construction effort. For example, Zerubbabel is mentioned as a leader of the people. He was the governor of the territory who oversaw the rebuilding of the temple (Haggai 1:1). Ezra mentions “Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe,” officials who wrote a letter opposing the temple’s reconstruction (Ezra 4:8-10). Other kings and officials show up according to their relevance to the rebuilding project.

The temple is what the project was about, but it would be a mistake to think that God blesses craftsmanship and material work only when it is devoted to a religious purpose. Ezra’s vision was to restore the whole city of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:13), not just the temple. We will discuss this point further when we come to Nehemiah, who actually undertook the work beyond the temple.

Ezra describes several efforts to squelch the construction (Ezra 4:1-23). These were successful for a while, stopping the temple project for about two decades (Ezra 4:24). Finally, God encouraged the Jews through the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah to resume and complete the job (Ezra 5:1). Moreover, Darius, king of Persia, underwrote the building effort financially in the hope that the Lord might bless him and his sons (Ezra 6:8-10). Thus the temple was finally completed, thanks to the fact that God had “turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them” so that “he aided [the Jews] in the work on the house of God” (Ezra 6:22).

As this verse makes clear, the Jews actually did the work of rebuilding the temple. Yet their labors were successful because of help from two pagan kings, one who inaugurated the project and the other who paid for its completion. Behind these human efforts loomed the overarching work of God, who moved in the hearts of the kings and encouraged his people through the prophets. As we have seen, God is at work far beyond what meets the eye of his people.

Restoration of Covenant Life, Phase One: The Work of Ezra (Ezra 7:1-10:44)

Ironically, Ezra himself does not appear in the book bearing his name until chapter 7. This learned man, a priest and teacher of the law, came to Jerusalem with the blessing of the Persian king Artaxerxes over fifty years after the rebuilding of the temple. His assignment was to present offerings in the temple on behalf of the king and to establish the law of God in Judah, both by teaching and by appointing law-abiding leaders (Ezra 7:25-26).

Ezra did not explain the king’s favor in terms of good luck. Rather, he credited God with putting “such

a thing as this into the heart of the king” to send Ezra to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27). Ezra “took courage” and acted on the king’s order because, as he said, “the hand of the Lord my God was upon me” (Ezra 7:28). This language of God’s hand being upon someone is a favorite of Ezra, where it appears six times out of eight times in the whole Bible (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). God was at work in and through Ezra, and that explains his success in his endeavors.

Ezra’s confidence in God’s help was tested when it came time for his entourage to journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. “I was ashamed,” Ezra explained, “to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way; since we had told the king, ‘The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him’” (Ezra 8:22). For Ezra, to depend on a royal escort implied a failure to trust in God’s protection. So he and his retinue fasted and prayed rather than seek practical assistance from the king (Ezra 8:23). Note: Ezra was not following any particular Old Testament law in choosing not to receive royal protection. Rather, this decision reflected his personal convictions about what it meant to trust God in the real challenges of leadership. One might say that Ezra was an “idealistic believer” in this situation, because he was willing to stake his life on the idea of God’s protection, rather than to ensure protection with human help. As we’ll see later, Ezra’s position was not the only one deemed reasonable by godly leaders in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra’s strategy proved to be successful. “The hand of our God was upon us,” he observed, “and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes along the way.” (Ezra 8:31). We do not know, however, if members of Ezra’s party carried weapons or used them for protection. The text seems to suggest that Ezra and company completed their journey without a threatening incident. Once again, the book of Ezra shows that human efforts are successful when God is at work in them.

The last two chapters of Ezra focus on the problem of Jews intermarrying with Gentiles. The issue of work does not emerge here, except in the example of Ezra, who exercises his leadership in faithfulness to the Law and with prayerful decisiveness.

Restoration of the Wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1-7:73)

The first chapter of the Book of Nehemiah introduces the book bearing his name as a resident of Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were still broken down more than a half-century after the completion of the rebuilding of the temple, he “sat down and wept,” fasting and praying before God (Neh. 1:4). Implicitly, he was formulating a plan to remedy the situation in Jerusalem.

Bridging the Sacred-Secular Divide (Nehemiah 1:1-1:10)

The connection between the temple and the wall is significant for the theology of work. The temple might seem to be a religious institution, while the walls are a secular one. But God led Nehemiah to work on the walls, no less than he led Ezra to work on the temple. Both the sacred and the secular were necessary to fulfill God's plan to restore the nation of Israel. If the walls were unfinished, the temple was unfinished too. The work was of a single piece. The reason for this is easy to understand. Without a wall, no city in the ancient Near East was safe from bandits, gangs and wild animals, even though the empire might be at peace. The more economically and culturally developed a city was, the greater the value of things in the city, and the greater the need for the wall. The temple, with its rich decorations, would have been particularly at risk. Practically speaking, no wall means no city, and no city means no temple.

Conversely, the city and its wall depend on the temple as the source of God's provision for law, government, security and prosperity. Even on strictly military terms, the temple and the wall are mutually dependent. The wall is an integral part of the city's protection, yet so is the temple wherein dwells the Lord (Ezra 1:3) who brings to nothing the violent plans of the city's enemies (Neh. 4:15). Likewise with government and justice. The gates of the wall are where lawsuits are tried (Deuteronomy 21:19, Isaiah 29:21), while at the same time the Lord from his temple "executes justice for the orphan and the widow" (Deut. 10:18). No temple means no presence of God, and no presence of God means no military strength, no justice, no civilization and no need for walls. The temple and the walls are united in a society founded on God's "covenant and steadfast love" (Neh. 1:5). This at least is the ideal towards which Nehemiah is fasting, praying and working.

Does Trusting God Mean Turning to Prayer, Taking "Practical" Action, or Both? (Nehemiah 1:11-4:23)

The last line of Nehemiah 1 identifies him as "cupbearer to the king" (Neh. 1:11). This means not only that he had immediate access to the king as the one who tested and served his beverages, but also that Nehemiah was a trusted advisor and high-ranking Persian official.^[5] He would use his professional experience and position to great advantage as he embarked upon the work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

When the king granted him permission to oversee the rebuilding project, Nehemiah asked for letters to the governors through whose territory he would pass on his trip to Jerusalem (Neh. 2:7). In Nehemiah's view, the king granted this request "for the gracious hand of my God was

upon me” (Neh. 2:8). Apparently, Nehemiah did not believe that trusting God meant he should not seek the king’s protection for his journey. Moreover, he was pleased to have “officers of the army and cavalry” escort him safely to Jerusalem (Neh. 2:9).

The text of Nehemiah does not suggest there was anything wrong with Nehemiah’s decision to seek and accept the king’s protection. In fact, it claims that God’s blessing accounted for this bit of royal assistance. It is striking to note how different Nehemiah’s approach to this issue was from Ezra’s. Whereas Ezra believed that trusting God meant he should not ask for royal protection, Nehemiah saw the offer of such protection as evidence of God’s gracious hand of blessing. This disagreement demonstrates how easy it is for godly people to come to different conclusions about what it means to trust God in their work. Perhaps each was simply doing what he was most familiar with. Ezra was a priest, familiar with the habitation of the Lord’s presence. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king, familiar with the exercise of royal power. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were seeking to be faithful in their labors. Both were godly, prayerful leaders. But they understood trusting God for protection differently. For Ezra, it meant journeying without the king’s guard. For Nehemiah, it meant accepting the offer of royal help as evidence of God’s own blessing.

We find signs in several places that Nehemiah was what we could call a “pragmatic believer.” In *Nehemiah 2*, for example, Nehemiah secretly surveyed the rubble of the former wall before even announcing his plans to the residents of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:11-17). Apparently he wanted to know the size and scope of the work he was taking on before he publicly committed to doing it. Yet, after explaining the purpose of his coming to Jerusalem and pointing to God’s gracious hand upon him, when some local officials mocked and accused him, Nehemiah answered, “The God of heaven is the one who will give us success” (Neh. 2:20). God would give this success, in part, through Nehemiah’s clever and well-informed leadership. The fact that success came from the Lord did not mean Nehemiah could sit back and relax. Quite to the contrary, Nehemiah was about to commence an arduous and demanding task.

His leadership involved delegation of parts of the wall-building project to a wide variety of people, including “Eliashib, the high priest, [and] his fellow-priests” (Neh. 3:1), “the Tekoites,” minus their nobles who didn’t want to submit to the supervisors (Neh. 3:5), “Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths” and “Hananiah, one of the perfumers” (Neh. 3:8), “Shallum, ...ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, [and] his daughters” (Neh. 3:12), and many others. Nehemiah was able to inspire collegiality and to organize the project effectively.

But then, just as in the story of the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra, opposition arose. Leaders of local peoples attempted to hinder the Jewish effort through ridicule, but “the people had a

mind to work” (Neh. 4:6). When their words did not stop the wall from being rebuilt, the local leaders “all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it” (Neh. 4:8).

So what did Nehemiah lead his people to do? Pray and trust God? Or arm themselves for battle? Predictably, the pragmatic believer led them to do both: “We prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night” (Neh. 4:9). In fact, when threats against the wall-builders mounted, Nehemiah also stationed guards at key positions. He encouraged his people not to lose heart because of their opponents: “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes” (Neh. 4:14). Because of their faith, the people were to fight. Then, not long thereafter, Nehemiah added a further word of encouragement, “Our God will fight for us!” (Neh. 4:20). Yet this was not an invitation to the Jews to put down their weapons and focus on building, trusting in supernatural protection alone. Rather, God would fight for his people by assisting them in battle. He would be at work in and through his people as they worked.

We Christians sometimes seem to act as if there were a rigid wall between actively pursuing our own agenda and passively waiting for God to act. We are aware that this is a false duality, which is why, for example, orthodox/historic Christian theology rejects the Christian Science premise that medical treatments are acts of unfaithfulness to God. Yet, at moments, we are tempted to become passive while waiting for God to act. If you are unemployed, yes, God wants you to have a job. To get the job God wants you to have, you have to write a resume, conduct a search, apply for positions, interview, and get rejected dozens of times before finding that job, just as everyone else has to do. If you are a parent, yes, God wants you to have enjoyment in raising your children. But you will still have to set and enforce limits, be available at times when it’s inconvenient, discuss difficult topics with them, cry and suffer with them through bumps, broken bones, and broken hearts, do homework with them, ask their forgiveness when you are wrong, and offer them forgiveness when they fail. You don’t get time off as a reward for good behavior such as taking your kids to church. Nehemiah and company’s arduous work warns us that trusting God does not equate with sitting on our hands waiting for magical solutions for our difficulties.

Connecting Lending Practices to the Fear of the Lord (Nehemiah 5:1-5:19)

Nehemiah’s wall-building project was threatened, not just from the outside, but also from the inside. Certain wealthy Jewish nobles and officials were taking advantage of economically difficult times to line their own pockets (Nehemiah 5). They were loaning money to fellow Jews, expecting interest to be paid

on the loans, even though this was prohibited in the Jewish Law (for example, Exodus 22:25).^[6] When the debtors couldn't repay the loans, they lost their land and were even forced to sell their children into slavery (Neh. 5:5). Nehemiah responded by demanding that the wealthy stop charging interest on loans and give back whatever they had taken from their debtors.

In contrast to the selfishness of those who had been taking advantage of their fellow Jews, Nehemiah did not use his leadership position to enhance his personal fortune. "Because of the fear of God," he even refused to tax the people to pay for his personal expenses, unlike his predecessors (Neh. 5:14-16). Instead, he generously invited many to eat at his table, paying from this expense from his personal savings without taxing the people (Neh. 5:17-18).

Sohrab Vossoughi, CEO of Ziba Design, quit his job, tightened his belt, and with just \$400 he started what has become an award-winning international industrial design firm.

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In a sense, the nobles and officials were guilty of the same kind of dualism we have just discussed. In their case, they were not waiting passively for God to solve their problems. Instead, they were actively pursuing their own gain as if economic life had nothing to do with God. But Nehemiah tells them that their economic lives are of utmost importance to God, because God cares about all of society, not just its religious aspects: "Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies [to whom the nobles had forced the sale of Jewish debtors as slaves]?" (Neh. 5:9). Nehemiah connects an economic issue (usury) with the fear of God.

The issues of Nehemiah 5, though emerging from a legal and cultural setting distant from our own, challenge us to consider how much we should profit personally from our position and privilege, even from our work. Should we put our money in banks that make loans with interest? Should we take advantage of perks made available to us in our workplace, even if these come at considerable cost to others? Nehemiah's specific commands (don't charge interest, don't foreclose on collateral, don't force the sale of people into slavery) may apply differently in our time, but underlying his commands is a prayer that still applies: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:19). As it was to Nehemiah, God's call to today's workers is to do everything we can for our people. In practice, that means we each owe God the duty of caring for the cloud of persons who depend on our work: employers, co-workers, customers, family, the public and many others. Nehemiah may not tell us

exactly how to handle today's workplace situations, but he tells us how to orient our minds as we decide. Put people first.

Nehemiah Gives Credit to God (Nehemiah 6:1-7:73)

The external and internal problems facing Nehemiah did not halt work on the wall, which was completed in only fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). The enemies of Judah “were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God” (Neh. 6:16). Even though Nehemiah had exercised his considerable leadership to inspire and organize the builders, and even though they had worked tirelessly, and even though Nehemiah's wisdom enabled him to fend off attacks and distractions, nevertheless he saw all of this as work done with God's help. God worked through him and his people, using their gifts and labor to accomplish God's own purposes.

Restoration of Covenant Life, Phase Two: Ezra and Nehemiah Together (Nehemiah 8:1-13:31)

After the wall surrounding Jerusalem was completed, the Israelites gathered in Jerusalem in order to renew their covenant with God. Ezra reappeared at this point in order to read the Law to the people (Neh. 8:2-5). As they heard the Law, they wept (Neh. 8:9). Yet Nehemiah rebuked them for their sorrow, adding, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord” (Neh. 8:10). However central work might be to serving God, so is celebration. On holy days, people are to enjoy the fruits of their labors as well as sharing them with those who lack such delights.

Yet, as Nehemiah chapter 9 demonstrates, there was also a time for godly sorrow as the people confessed their sins to God (Neh. 9:2). Their confession came in the context of an extensive recital of all the things God had done, beginning with creation itself (Neh. 9:6) and continuing through the crucial events of the Old Testament. The failure of Israel to be faithful to the Lord explained, among other things, why God's chosen people were “slaves” to foreign kings and why those kings enjoyed the fruits of Israelite labors (Neh. 9:36-37).

Among the promises made by the people as they renewed their covenant with the Lord was a commitment to honor the Sabbath (Neh. 10:31). In particular, they promised not to do business on the Sabbath with “the peoples of the land” who worked on this day. The Israelites also promised to fulfill their responsibility to support the temple and its workers (Neh. 10:31-39). They would do so by giving to the temple and its staff a percentage of the fruit of their own work. Now, as then, the commitment to

give a percentage of our income to support the “service of the house of our God” (Ezra 10:32) is both a necessary means of financing the work of worship and a reminder that everything we have comes from God’s hand.

After completing his task of building the wall in Jerusalem and overseeing the restoration of society there, Nehemiah returned to serve King Artaxerxes (Neh. 13:6). Later, he came back to Jerusalem, where he discovered that some of the reforms he had initiated were thriving, while others had been neglected. For example, he observed some people working on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15). Jewish officials had been letting Gentile traders bring their goods into Jerusalem for sale on the day of rest (Neh. 13:16). So Nehemiah rebuked those who had failed to honor the Sabbath (Neh. 13:7-18). Moreover, in his typically pragmatic approach, he closed the city gates before the Sabbath began, keeping them shut until the day of rest had passed. He also stationed some of his servants at the gates so that they might tell potential sellers to leave (Neh. 13:19).

The question of whether and/or how Christians ought to keep the Sabbath cannot be answered from Nehemiah. A much broader theological conversation is necessary.^[7] Nevertheless, this book reminds us of the centrality of Sabbath-keeping to God’s first covenant people and the threat posed by economic interaction with those who do not honor the Sabbath. In our own context, it was certainly easier for Christians to keep the Sabbath when the malls were closed on the Lord’s Day. However, our contemporary culture of round-the-clock commerce puts us in Nehemiah’s situation, in which a conscious — and potentially costly — decision about Sabbath-keeping is required.

Working Within a Fallen System (Esther)

The Book of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus (known to history outside the Bible as Xerxes) throwing a lavish party to display his glory (Es. 1:1-8). Having consumed ample amounts of wine, Ahasuerus commanded his servants to bring Queen Vashti before him in order that he might show her off to the other partygoers (Es. 1:10-11). But Vashti, sensing the indignity of the request, refused (Es. 1:12). Her refusal disturbed the men in attendance, who feared that her example would encourage other women in the kingdom to stand up to their husbands (Es. 1:13-18). Thus Vashti was “fired,” if you will, and a process was begun to find Ahasuerus a new queen (Es. 1:21-2:4). To be sure, this episode depicts a family matter. But every royal family is also a political workplace. So Vashti’s situation is also a workplace issue, in which the boss seeks to exploit a woman because of her gender and then terminates her when she fails to live up to his fantasies.

The king seeks to replace Vashti, and a young Jewish woman named Esther ends up in the harem being extensively prepared to be tried out by the king for one night (Es. 2:8-14). From our point of view, she is caught in an oppressive, sexist system and is soon to lose her virginity at the hands of a selfish tyrant.

But she is not a passive victim. She plays the system to her own advantage, sleeping with the king, keeping silent about the oppression of Vashti, deceiving the king about her ethnicity (Es. 2:20). Because of Esther's exceeding beauty, she wins the king's favor and is crowned as the new queen (Es. 2:17). Esther's willingness to join a royal harem and become the wife of a pagan king is even more striking, given the emphasis in both Ezra and Nehemiah on the wrongness of intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles (Ezra 9:1-4; Neh. 13:23-27). After reading Ezra's grief-filled prayer of confession following his learning that some Jews had married Gentiles (Ezra 9:13-15), we can only wonder what he might have thought about Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus.

The contrast between Ezra and Nehemiah's faithful adherence to Jewish law and Esther's religious and moral compromises could not be more starkly drawn. Esther is willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead. She is eager to take advantage of another woman's misfortune and more than willing to submit herself to exploitation. Moral compromise - whether or not to Esther's extent - is familiar to almost all workplace Christians. Who has never taken morally dubious action in the course of their work? Who has never kept silent when the mistreatment of another has rebounded to our own advantage - failing to stand up when the boss hides his or her own incompetence by firing a subordinate, or watching the dirtiest, most dangerous job fall once again to the ethnic outsider? Who has never shaded the truth to gain what we wanted - implying greater responsibility than we really had for a past success or pretending to know more than we really do in class or on the job?

Esther enters the palace with its access to high power and influence. She does not seem interested in whether God has any plan or purpose for her there. In fact, God is not even mentioned in the book of Esther. But that doesn't mean that God has no plan or purpose for her in Ahasuerus' court. As it happens, her cousin Mordecai is more scrupulous in keeping Jewish law, which after some time puts him in conflict with Ahasuerus' highest official, Haman (Es. 3:1-6). Haman responds by plotting to kill not only Mordecai, but the whole Jewish people (Es. 3:7-15). Mordecai learns of the plot and sends word of the plot to Esther. Although her entire people are about to be destroyed, she seems unmoved.

Esther's excuse is that getting involved could jeopardize her position, and even her life (Es. 4:11). Already she seems to be losing the king's interest, having not been called into his presence for the past 30 days. It is inconceivable that the king is sleeping alone, therefore some other woman or women have been "called to come in to the king" (Es. 4:11). To intervene on behalf of her people would be too risky. Mordecai responds with two arguments. First, her life is at risk, whether or not she intervenes. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews" (Es. 4:13). And second, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Es. 4:14). Together, these arguments lead to a remarkable about-face by Esther. "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (Es. 4:16). The social climber interested in no one's good but her own suddenly offers to risk her neck for the good of others.

Notice that Mordecai's two arguments appeal to different instincts. The first argument appeals to self-preservation. You, Esther, are a Jew, and if all the Jews are ordered killed, you will be found out and slain eventually. The second argument appeals to destiny, with its hint of divine service. If you wonder, Esther, why you of all young women ended up the king's wife, perhaps it is because there is a larger purpose to your life. The first argument seems base, while the second seems noble. Which argument produced the change in Esther?

Perhaps both of Mordecai's arguments are steps towards Esther's change of heart. The first step is identification. At long last, Esther identifies herself with her people. In this sense, she takes the same step Jesus was to take at his birth, identification of himself with humanity. And perhaps this step, selfishly taken as it may be in Esther's case, is what opens her heart to God's purposes.

The second step is service. Identifying now with her people's mortal peril, Esther takes on the service of intervening with the king. She risks her position, her possessions, her life. Her high position now becomes a means of service, instead of self-service. Despite her initially faithless and unobservant history, God uses Esther, no less than he uses the morally exemplary Ezra and Nehemiah. Esther's service corresponds to today's workplace in several ways:[\[8\]](#)

- Many people — Christian or not — make ethical compromises in their quest for career success. Because we all stand in Esther's shoes, we all have the opportunity — and responsibility — to let God use us anyway, despite our history of moral failure. Did you cut corners to get your job? Nonetheless, God will use you to call an end to the deceptive practices in your workplace. Have you made improper use of corporate assets? God may still use you to clean up the falsified records in your department. Past hypocrisy is no excuse for failing to heed what God needs from you now. Prior misuse of your God-given abilities is no reason to believe you cannot employ them for God's good purposes today. Esther is the model for all of us who have fallen short of the glory of God. You cannot say, "If you knew how many ethical shortcomings I made to get here — I can't be of any use to God now."
- God makes use of the actual circumstances of our lives. Esther's position gives her unique opportunities to serve God. Mordecai's position gives him different opportunities. We should embrace the particular opportunities we have. Rather than saying, "I would do something great for God, if only I had the opportunity," we should say, "Perhaps I have come into this position for just such as time as this."
- Our positions are spiritually dangerous. We may come to equate our value and our very existence with our positions. The higher our positions, the greater the danger. Esther ceases to see herself as a young Jewish woman, but only as the queen of Persia. To do the same makes us slaves to factors beyond our control. If becoming CEO or getting tenure or keeping a good job becomes so important that we cut off the rest of ourselves, then we have lost ourselves already.
- Serving God requires risking our positions. If you use your position to serve God, you might lose your position and your future prospects. This is doubly frightening if you have become self-identified with your job or career. Yet the truth is our positions are also at risk if we don't serve God. Esther's case is extreme. She may be killed if she risks her position by intervening, and she will be killed if she doesn't

intervene. Are our positions really any more secure than Esther's? It is no foolishness to risk what you cannot keep in order to gain what you cannot lose. Work done in God's service can never truly be lost.

For Esther and the Jews, the story has a happy ending. Esther risks approaching the king unbidden, yet receives his favor (Es. 5:1-2). She employs a clever scheme to butter him up over the course of two banquets (Es. 5:4-8; 7:1-5) and to manipulate Haman into exposing his own hypocrisy in seeking to have the Jews annihilated (Es. 7:6-10). The king revokes the judgment against the Jews (Es. 9:11-14) and rewards Mordecai and Esther with riches, honor and power (Es. 8:1-2; 10:1-3). They in turn improve the lot of Jews throughout the Persian Empire (Es. 10:3). Haman and the enemies of the Jews are slaughtered (Es. 7:9-10; 9:1-17). The dates of the Jews' deliverance — Adar 14 and 15 — are marked thereafter as the festival of Purim (Es. 9:17-23).

God's Hidden Hand and Human Response (Esther)

As noted earlier, God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther. Yet it is a book of the Bible. Commentators therefore look for the veiled presence of God in Esther and generally point to the crucial verse: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this?" (Es. 4:14). The implication is that she has come to her position not by luck, or fate, or by her own wiles, but by the will of an unseen actor. We can see the divine handwriting on the wall here. Esther has come to her royal position because the "good hand of God was upon [her]," as Ezra and Nehemiah might have said (Ezra 8:18, Nehemiah 2:18).

This challenges us to ponder how God might be at work in ways we don't recognize. When a secular company eliminates bias in promotions and pay scales, is God at work there? When a Christian is able to end deceptive record-keeping practices, does she have to announce that she did so because she's a Christian? If Christians have a chance to join with Jews and Muslims to make a case for reasonable religious accommodations in a corporation, should they see it as a work of God? If you can do good by taking a job in a compromised political administration, could God be calling you to accept the offer? If you teach in a school that pushes you to the limits of your conscience, should you seek to leave, or should you redouble your commitment to staying?

Conclusions to Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther have several common features. All three are relatively short narratives about events happening during the reign of the Persian Empire. All three involve Persian kings and other government officials. All three focus on the activities of Jews who are seeking to thrive in an environment that is, in many ways, hostile to their exercise of faith in God. All three books bear witness to the fact that a Persian king could be helpful to the Jews in their effort to survive and thrive.

All three feature key leaders whose actions are held up as models of imitation. And all three books show people at work, thus providing an opportunity for us to reflect upon how these books impact our understanding of work and its relationship to God.

Yet all three books represent a wide difference in opinion about crucial matters. This is true even of Ezra and Nehemiah, which were originally two parts of one book. In Ezra, trusting God requires that God's people travel through dangerous territory without a royal escort. In Nehemiah, the offer of a royal escort is taken as evidence of God's blessing. Ezra represents what might be called "idealistic faith," while Nehemiah practices "pragmatic faith." In Esther, God's hand is hidden, revealed primarily in Esther's shrewd use of her wits and position in the service of her people. We could call hers a "clever faith."

Nevertheless, Ezra and Nehemiah uphold a similar vision of God's work in the world. God is involved in the lives of all people, not only his chosen ones. God moves in the hearts of pagan kings, leading them to support God's purposes. The Lord inspires his people to devote their work to him, using a wide variety of strong leaders and prophetic voices to fulfill his purposes. In Ezra, God uses a faithful priest to rebuild his temple. In Nehemiah, God uses a faithful lay person to rebuild the walls of his capital. In Esther, God uses a deeply compromised, initially unobservant Jew to save the Jewish people from genocide. From the perspective of all three books, God is at work throughout the world, making use of the work of all kinds of people.

Key Verses and Themes in Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

VERSE(S)	THEME
Ezra 1:1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also in a written edict declared...	God is at work throughout the world, even in and through a pagan king
Ezra 7:28b I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.	Human work is successful when God blesses the work

<p>Ezra 8: 22 I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way; since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.”</p>		<p>Sometimes trusting in God means not relying on human help</p>
<p>Nehemiah 2: 8b-9 The king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and cavalry.</p>		<p>Sometimes trusting in God means recognizing his provision of human help</p>
<p>Nehemiah 4:9 We prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.</p>		<p>Trust in God should not lead to passivity</p>
<p>Nehemiah 5:19 Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.</p>		<p>The key to determining the right thing to do is how it affects the people involved</p>
<p>Nehemiah 13:19 When it began to be dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the sabbath. And I set some of my servants over the gates, to prevent any burden from being brought in on the sabbath day.</p>		<p>Keeping the Sabbath is commanded, even when it puts believers at an economic disadvantage</p>

<p>Esther 2:14 In the evening she went; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.</p>		<p>People — especially women— may find themselves in economic circumstances where there is no completely virtuous resolution. Nonetheless God is with them</p>
<p>Esther 4:13b Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.</p>		<p>It is an illusion to think that power, position or wealth insulates us from the hazards of life</p>
<p>Esther 4:14b Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this?</p>		<p>God's work among us is sometimes subtle, and sometimes should not even be identified specifically</p>
<p>Esther 4:16b If I perish, I perish.</p>		<p>The only way to serve God is to acknowledge that we cannot control the outcomes of our actions</p>

ENDNOTES

- [1] H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 16 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), xxi.
- [2] "Ezra-Nehemiah, Books of" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

- [3] Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 326-335.
- [4] Mark D. Roberts, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, in *The Preachers Commentary*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 315-318.
- [5] "Nehemiah (person)" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
- [6] The question of whether the Bible prohibits lending money at interest has a long and contentious history in Christian theology. See Theology of Work Project's article, *Finance Overview* at www.theologyofwork.org.
- [7] See Theology of Work Project's article, *Rest and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.
- [8] Ideas in this section are drawn from the sermon, "If I Perish, I Perish," by Tim Keller, preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York on April 22, 2007, available for download at: <http://www.gospelinlife.com/if-i-perish-i-perish-5610.html>.