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Ezra: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record some of the history of the Jews following their return to the land. Within them, we read some of the last events recorded in the Old Testament canon. While Daniel Chapter 11 prophesies many events that would occur within what has been termed the Intertestamental Period, in these books, we have the last historical accounts of the period prior to the advent of Christ.

2 Chronicles, the book immediately preceding Ezra in our Bibles, even though Ezra precedes the book of Chronicles in some Jewish ordering, not least in that implicit in the Gospel of Matthew, ends with the following words in Chapter 36, verses 22-23. Ezra, which begins with the Decree of Cyrus, recorded in similar language, has a seemingly resumptive character to it. It is taking up the story where Chronicles left it off.

Gary Knoppers observes some of the ways in which Ezra connects with the book of Chronicles. Ezra begins by recalling the prophetic word of Jeremiah the prophet, who is an important figure at the end of Chronicles. The end of Chronicles is an account of going into exile.

The beginning of Ezra is an account of return, a reversal. Nebuchadnezzar took the items of the temple into exile in Babylon and destroyed the temple. In Ezra Chapter 1, the items of the temple are restored to Shesh-Baza, the prince of Judah.

Chronicles ended with the destruction of the temple, and Ezra then is continuing the history of Chronicles, taking it forward past the exile. As Andrew Steinman claims in his discussion of the question, there is little consensus on the question of the authorship or dating of Ezra and Nehemiah, or on the question of whether they should be understood as one book or as two. The literary and thematic connections between Ezra and Chronicles invite hypotheses of common authorship or editing.

Various opinions have been advanced on the question of authorship, among others, that Ezra largely wrote or compiled the material of Ezra and Nehemiah, and perhaps Chronicles too, that Ezra wrote Ezra and Nehemiah wrote Nehemiah, that some unknown person wrote Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, or that a later editor assembled earlier texts into these books. Ezra is characterised as a scribe, and so traditionally he was often identified as the writer of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles, drawing upon various sources in his writing. Both Ezra and Nehemiah contain first-person material, and Nehemiah 1.1 introduces words that follow as the words of Nehemiah, which lend strong support that they both played some part in the authorship of their respective books, or at the least, of sources used within them.

On the other hand, the shift between first- and third-person material might suggest that they were not the final authors and compilers of the books. Steinman argues that chronological issues raise some difficulties for hypotheses of Ezra's authorship and compiling of the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, as certain figures named in the genealogies would seem to post-date Ezra's time. The theory that the books all had a

common author or compiler, not Ezra, but some unknown figure commonly known as the chronicler, has been popular, but it's not without problems, and its popularity has declined after being robustly challenged by Sarah Jafet.

Steinman also lists some of James Newsom's arguments against the supposed theological commonality of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah. Newsom argues that the theological emphases and framing of the narratives of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah are rather different, and if they were by the same author, it should surprise us to see prominent features of the theological vision of the author of Chronicles, such as the importance of the monarchy and the guidance of the Lord, so neglected in Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah have often been treated as two parts of a single book, not least in the Jewish canon.

The antiquity of this view is an argument in its favour. Questions about dating are also important here, as according to the dating of the books by many more contemporary scholars, it's hard to read their material as sequential. The narrative of Ezra begins in the first year of Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, after his defeat of Babylon, around 539 BC.

The first year then would be 538 or 537 BC. This is not the first year of his reign as King of Persia, which was back in 559 BC. This is the first year of his imperial rule, as it were.

Cyrus encouraged the return of groups to their homelands. Isaiah chapter 45 verses 1 to 6 speaks of the special purpose that Cyrus, a pagan king who is nonetheless referred to as an anointed figure or messiah, will play in the Lord's purposes. Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hordes in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. I name you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord and there is no other.

Besides me there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me. I am the Lord and there is no other.

Perhaps we should see this remarkable prophecy as lying behind Cyrus' decree. He has become aware of this prophecy that calls him by his very name, a prophecy that declares the Lord's gift of dominion to him and earlier on in chapter 44 declares that he will be the one to establish the temple. One can imagine Cyrus welcoming such a prophecy and seeking to fulfil it.

In authorising the building of the temple and presenting him as the fulfilment of this prophecy, he has his kingdom and his rule over the Jews authorised by the Lord himself. The precise chronological order of the return to the land and the different stages of rebuilding are much debated however and it is not entirely clear from the text. Haggai and Zachariah also record events of this period.

While Ezra speaks of some building on the temple occurring in this initial period, Haggai chapter 1 verse 1 dates the beginning of new rebuilding efforts to the second year of Darius who reigned after Cyrus' successor Cambyses around 520 BC. James Jordan has argued that Artaxerxes is a throne name and that Artaxerxes in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is Darius I who reigned from around 521 to 486 BC. He bases this claim largely upon internal textual evidence in the book such as the lists of returnees.

In chapters 10 and 12 of Nehemiah we have similar lists of names of priests and Levites, one of persons returning with Zerubbabel and the other of those signing the covenant. With the short chronology Jordan suggests these events would have been 34 years apart. With the longer chronology that many others propose the gap would have been around 90 years making it impossible that the persons in question were the same.

And the number of similar names stretches credulity even on the recognition that the same names often recurred in the same family. However other commentators account for these similarities by arguing that many of the names are not of individuals but of ancestral priestly houses. Other internal evidence includes the succession of high priests.

The external supporting evidence for Jordan's position is much weaker and more disputed though. Most scholars believe that with the aid of the external evidence we can date Nehemiah's governorship to the time period of around 445 to 432 BC and that this can be done with quite a high degree of certainty. For theologically conservative readers dating of relevant events will also play into our interpretation of Daniel's 70 weeks of years in Daniel chapter 9. On Jordan's chronology Ezra and Nehemiah largely covers the period from 538 to 490 BC.

On more mainstream chronologies however it stretches from 538 the decree of Cyrus in Ezra chapter 1 to around 428 BC around 60 years later than Jordan's dating. Cyrus's decree is a sort of proto-great commission. Indeed the great commission seems to be an intentional allusion to it.

Compare verses 2 and 3 of this chapter. The Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people may his God be with him and let him go up.

To the great commission of Matthew chapter 28 verses 18 to 20. And Jesus came and

said to them all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and behold I am with you always to the end of the age.

The similarities between these two statements should jump out at us. The dominion of Cyrus is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 44 verses 24 to 28 along with the opening verses of chapter 45 which we've already read. Thus says the Lord your Redeemer who formed you from the womb I am the Lord who made all things who alone stretched out the heavens who spread out the earth by myself who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers who says of Jerusalem she shall be inhabited and of the cities of Judah they shall be built and I will raise up their ruins who says to the deep be dry I will dry up your rivers who says of Cyrus he is my shepherd and he shall fulfill all my purpose saying of Jerusalem she shall be built and of the temple your foundation shall be The focus of Cyrus's decree in this chapter is specifically upon the rebuilding of the temple not upon the re-establishment resettlement and re-fortification of the city of Jerusalem.

However within the prophecies of these events those things are also in view. This matter is debated as it has some bearing upon the dating of the beginning of the period of Daniel's 70 weeks. Is Cyrus's decree the decree that initiates their numbering as Jordan and various others have argued or is it a different decree concerning the rebuilding of the walls and the re-fortification of Jerusalem almost a century later? The Lord instigates the entire process of return and rebuilding.

In verse 1 of our chapter we see that the Lord stirred up Cyrus's spirit. In verse 5 we see that the Lord stirred up the heads of the father's houses of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites and many others to return to rebuild the temple. The Lord is driving everything stirring people up to act willingly to fulfill the word of his prophets.

We might see this as similar to the way the Lord stirs up the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel chapter 37. There's a national resurrection occurring here. There is also a clear set of parallels to be observed between Cyrus's instructions and the people's return.

Gordon Davies describes this as a sort of call and response. The people are responding to the Lord's stirring but also to the charge of the man whom the Lord stirred. There is no Davidic king here but the gentile king Cyrus and the willing people take the place that the Davidic king once occupied.

The story of Ezra also continues several exodus themes which will be apparent as we work through it. At various points in both pre- and post-exilic prophecy the return to the land is cast as a form of new exodus that is awaited. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are framed in ways that invite comparisons with that earlier story although as Joshua

Williams observes the pilgrimage character of exodus is far more to the foreground here.

There is not the same pharaoh figure. Indeed Cyrus king of Persia could be seen as an example of what pharaoh could or should have been had he not opposed the Lord and his people. Ezra chapter 1 verses 4 to 6 is a good example of a feature of the return to the land that recalls the original deliverance from Egypt and the journey to the land in the exodus.

Chapter 12 verses 35 to 36 of exodus describes the people of Israel's plundering of the Egyptians. The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

Much of the material for the tabernacle and the riches of the exodus generation largely came from the Egyptians so the material for the restoration temple and the riches of the generation of the return from exile largely came from the peoples around them. Likewise the emphasis upon free will offerings recalls the building of the tabernacle in exodus. In several respects Ezra is a new Moses figure.

He leads a group of Jews from a foreign land by royal decree being assisted by resources taken from gentiles in order to establish a dwelling place for the Lord among his people and to build a temple or sanctuary. The concluding verses of this chapter give an inventory of the temple vessels restored to Sheshbaza. There is a glaring problem in that the numbers don't add up.

The enumerated items of verses 9 and 10 total to 2499 whereas the total given in verse 11 is 5400. Some propose that either the list or the total was corrupted at some point in the transmission of the text. Others see the list as a mere selection of items within the larger inventory yet others think that the discrepancy might have something to do with the silver second bowls referred to in verse 10.

Steinman notes that first Ezra's chapter 2 verses 12 to 13 inelegantly tries to solve the problem by translating second as 2000 yielding a total of 5469 now well in the ballpark of 5400 even if not the same figure. Other possible solutions have been proposed but we may not be able to determine the correct one with any degree of certainty. A question to consider comparing and contrasting the figure of Cyrus in this second exodus with the figure of Pharaoh in the first what might we learn concerning the Lord's purposes for the relationship between gentile rulers and his people.

The book of Ezra begins with the record of the decree of Cyrus in 538 or 537 BC by which the exiles of Judah were encouraged to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple. Ezra himself would not arrive on the scene for another 80 years. Reading chapter 2 we might wonder whether this is the same return as that referred to in chapter

1 where Shesh Bazo was described as the prince of Judah.

Here however the company seems to be led by Zerubbabel. It's possible that Zerubbabel did not yet hold formal office but was recognised as chief of the people as the heir of David. Other commentators hold the position that this was likely a later wave of returnees although I think there are details in the context that push against this interpretation.

The people who return are described as the people of the province. They are exiles no longer but dwelling in their own land in their various cities and settlements. In Nehemiah chapter 7 where we find an almost identical list we are told that it is a list of those who came up at the first in verse 5 so it is reasonable to believe that this was the very first wave or waves of returnees.

The fact that neither the temple vessels nor Shesh Bazo are mentioned raises the question of how this ought to be related to chapter 1. Hugh Williamson argues that the list seems to be a composite, that elements of it such as the listing of groups by their towns suggest that it was composed after the return had occurred and that consequently it is best not to understand it as a reference to a single event. The origin of the list of names in this chapter divides commentators especially given its relationship with the list of Nehemiah chapter 7. Williamson supports his claim that the list is likely a composite by observing inconsistencies in its material. For instance ordering of the people by family and by dwelling place are interspersed when we might expect a tidier ordering were it a single unified composition.

Likewise the use of both the men of and the sons of alongside each other in reference to the inhabitants of towns is a stylistic variation that might be surprising to find in a text arising from a single hand. The claim that the list was likely a composite is not however accepted by all commentators. The early origins of the text are suggested by various considerations.

Williamson observes that the sons of Hakovs, excluded from the priesthood on the grounds of their uncertain ancestry in verse 61, seem to have members among the priests by the time of chapter 8 verse 33. The resolution of the status of such persons seems to have awaited the establishment of a high priest. Furthermore the listing of the sites of their exile that we see in verse 59 would be less plausible many years after the return.

On the relationship with the list in Nehemiah chapter 7 there are several things to be observed. In Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 5 Nehemiah says that he found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first which suggests that Nehemiah was drawing from a prior source. The lists in Ezra and Nehemiah are largely identical but there are many differences in the numbers and some differences in the names, differences that are more pronounced nearer to the end of the list.

Despite these differences the number given for the whole company is identical 42,360. Williamson is quite possibly correct in attributing many of these discrepancies to later textual corruption or perhaps they are drawn from two different versions of an earlier document and the variations precede them. James Jordan, arguing for a short chronology, has claimed that the Nehemiah and Mordecai mentioned in verse 2 are the famous persons of those names.

I do not find this position persuasive. An important piece of evidence raised in relation to the question of lines of dependency is the fact that Nehemiah chapter 7 verses 70 to 72 lists the same items as are listed in Ezra chapter 2 verse 69 but Ezra chapter 2 seems to summarise and round up the numbers that we are given in Nehemiah. So for instance 30 priest's garments from the heads of father's houses and 67 priest's garments from the rest of the people in Nehemiah's account, 97 priest's garments in total, is rounded up to a single figure of 100 priest's garments in Ezra.

It is unlikely that, had Nehemiah worked with Ezra's text, he would have divided a single rounded number in Ezra's text into two unrounded numbers. This suggests that either Ezra was working with the text of Nehemiah or alternatively that both were working with a pre-existing text or texts. Andrew Steinman's claim that both Ezra and Nehemiah were likely working from an original document seems a reasonable position to me given the evidence.

An interesting detail is that general commonality of the text between Ezra and Nehemiah is not limited to the list itself but extends beyond it. Ezra chapter 2 verse 70 in chapter 3 verse 1 read Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns. When the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 73 in 8 verse 1 read So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived in their towns. And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns, and all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate. As the accounts that follow these verses differ, many commentators see this as further evidence for the direct dependence of one of the texts upon the other.

The continuation of the shared text into the narrative material that follows it could partly be explained by positing an original text that was not merely a list of returnees but included such a list within a larger prose chronicle. Steinman presses this point against those who, like Williamson, claim that the shared narrative material between Ezra and Nehemiah is evidence that one is dependent upon the other, most typically Ezra upon Nehemiah. Williamson argues that the reference to the seventh month and the conclusion of the shared material fits more neatly into Nehemiah's context than Ezra's,

as Nehemiah chapter 8 verse 2 also refers to the seventh month.

Yet Ezra chapter 3 verse 4 refers to the feast of booths, a feast of the seventh month, and also directly to the seventh month in verse 6. The claim that the transitional text is incongruous in its context in Ezra may not be so persuasive on closer examination, that the reference to the seventh month fits relatively tidily in both contexts, especially given the fact that the events that are introduced with this reference are different ones, divided by several decades, is a peculiar fact. Even if we do not believe that one text is simply drawn from the other, within the context of the canon their commonalities invite us to read the episodes that follow them alongside each other. Such a reading is in fact quite illuminating.

Ezra recounts the re-establishment of the altar and the subsequent celebration of the feast of booths, while Nehemiah's account is of the great celebration of the seventh month and the feast of booths and the renewal of the covenant, following the final completion of the work of building the wall. That Nehemiah returned to the genealogy of those who first came up and started the work was a fitting bookend when the work was finally finished and tightens connections between Ezra and Nehemiah. The list of returnees is divided into several categories, listed by Steinman as follows.

Laity in Jerusalem and laity in other cities accounted for 81% of the number. Priests, Levites, Temple servants, servants of Solomon and priests who could not prove their ancestry made up the remaining 19%. Verses 3 to 20 likely list the members of clans who returned to Jerusalem, while the verses that follow list returnees to other cities and regions, although the very large number of sons of Senea perhaps suggests that this number refers to members of a clan rather than to inhabitants of a village.

The clans listed are also found elsewhere in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In Ezra chapter 8, members of many of the clans mentioned in this chapter are listed as part of the group returning with Ezra at a later point. Members of several of these families are described as having intermarried in chapter 10 and as parties to the Solomon agreement in Nehemiah chapter 10.

The servants of Solomon listed along with the priests and Levites were perhaps members of a group appointed by Solomon to assist the priests in secular aspects of the running of the Temple. Of the places mentioned, the significant majority of them are in the historical tribal territory of Benjamin. While, as we have noted, the same total number of returnees is given in Ezra, Nehemiah and also in 1st Ezras, 42,360, the other numbers given neither add up to 42,360 nor to the same numbers as each other.

By Steinman's reckoning, the persons mentioned in Ezra add up to 29,818, while those mentioned in Nehemiah add up to 31,089. Various explanations have been proposed to make sense of these discrepancies. Perhaps the subtotals only include males, but the total includes females.

Perhaps the subtotals are only of persons above a certain age, as 1st Ezras suggests. Perhaps some clans are not mentioned. The fact that each of the three differing accounts of the number of the returnees contains the same grand total, and a difference with the subtotals of around 12,000, suggests that the discrepancy likely should not be attributed to textual corruption, even if some of the differences between the subtotals should be.

Steinman claims that the most likely explanation is that the women were not included in the subtotals, but were included in the grand total. The significant difference between the number of male and female returnees that this implies is arresting, but by no means implausible. Considering the danger of the journey and the challenges of the situation that the returning exiles were arriving into, it would not be surprising if the returning exiles were predominantly young men.

This would also, as Steinman notes, help us to understand some of the demographic pressures that underlay the problem of intermarriage. Some of the heads of the families gave gifts for the house of the Lord, something recorded in verses 68 and 69. The fact that there was more than one servant for each six persons in the company suggests that they had some wealthy persons among them.

Their numbers, while considerable, represent but a tiny remnant of the people's former population. Much of Judah's original population settled in the lands of their exile and never returned. The numbering of persons here might recall the book of Numbers, which begins and ends with the census of the people.

The former exiles returned to and resettlement of the land is bookended by references to this initial numbering of them. The attention given to the numbering of the returnees is noteworthy when, as Steinman observes, we consider that no comparable attention is given to the details of the rebuilt temple. That the rebuilding of the people, as it were, eclipses the rebuilding of the temple structure is perhaps instructive concerning the relationship between and relative priority of the two.

A question to consider. Like Ezra chapter 1, Ezra chapter 2 speaks of a company returning to the land and concludes with a list of the gifts that they brought with them for the temple. How might this shape the way that we read these chapters and how we relate them to what follows? After a number of them had returned from exile to Jerusalem, the people sought to re-establish the true worship of the Lord and to rebuild the temple.

In Ezra chapter 3 we read of the first stage of this and also receive some foreboding of the opposition that the returnees would face in the future. Jerusalem had been the center of Israel's life and at the center of Jerusalem had been the temple and vocal to all of the worship practices of the people was the altar. Rebuilding the altar, re-consecrating it for worship and then doing the same for the temple were matters of the utmost importance if Israel was to re-establish its life as the worshippers of the Lord.

As Israel and then Judah had fallen to foreign invaders, the Israelites had been sent off into captivity and the land had been occupied by their enemies. Israel as a people and a nation had unraveled in many ways. On their return the challenge was to pick up the threads that had been dropped and to mend that which had frayed.

On their return to the land they re-established settlement again. In verse 1 they are described as the children of Israel, terminology that is reminiscent of the exodus. After having made a solid start to resettling the land, the next task was to re-establish Jerusalem at the heart of Israel's worship.

The necessity of a central site of worship that drew together all the people of the land was one of the commands in the book of This commandment among other things was to ensure that Israel did not develop a multitude of different competing cults, each with their own regional forms of worship of the Lord. Such a situation had existed during the period of the judges. After the division of the kingdom, Jeroboam the son of Nebat had also set up false cultic centers designed to compete with Jerusalem to ensure that the people of his land did not join with the people in Jerusalem in a way that might empower the kingdom of Judah against him.

The possession of a unified cult and worship, especially at the pilgrimage feasts, the feasts of unleavened bread, weeks and tabernacles, was one of the most powerful nation-building forces, bringing together groups from many different tribes and many different regions of the land as one single people. Consequently the re-establishment of worship in this way was a means by which Israel would return to itself once more, even while many of them were still scattered in various parts of the Persian empire, a central site of worship would give them a focal point as a people, a way of conceiving of their identity and their unity once more. Unsurprisingly given this fact, the re-establishment of central worship and of the temple building would be a cause of opposition from the surrounding peoples who would be concerned seeing this as a reassertion of Israel's people and nationhood.

The same would be the case for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its walls. The exile had snapped a number of threads of Israel's identity, chief among them things such as their dwelling in the land, their having a king, their having a central site of worship in Jerusalem and also their possession of a fortified capital city. Now the task of the returnees was to re-establish these things.

In Ezra chapter 3 we get a sense of how mindful they were of the importance of doing these things properly. One of the ways that we see this is in the many recollections of the building of the first temple. All the people gather together, they are led by the priest Yeshua the son of Jozedak and by a descendant of David, Zerubbabel the son of Sheal-Teal.

Just as David and his son Solomon had presided over the building of the first temple, now

a son of David, Zerubbabel, is going to be involved in the overseeing of the process. While a son of David, Zerubbabel seems to have had a complicated genealogy. In the book of Jeremiah, his ancestor Jeconiah or Jehoiachin was cursed in chapter 22 verses 28 to 30 with having no children.

However elsewhere we see that he had a son, Sheal-Teal, through whom Zerubbabel came. It seems that the curse was relieved and through Sheal-Teal, an adopted son, he had heirs. Matters might be further complicated if Zerubbabel is the same man mentioned in 1st Chronicles chapter 3 verse 19.

There spoken of as the son of Padiah. Some commentators such as James Bajor have suggested that what we see here is evidence of a leverant marriage. Jeconiah and his sons are cut off from inheriting the throne as a result of the curse.

However Jeconiah's adopted son, Sheal-Teal, raises up seed for the dead son, Padiah. Zerubbabel then, along with Israel returned after the exile, is his life from the dead. With the curse upon Jeconiah or Jehoiachin, it seems as if that line of the family had been wiped out.

But the Lord raises it up again through adoption and leverant marriage. Jeshua and Zerubbabel lead the rebuilding of the altar. It is made clear that it is done according to the law of Moses.

The altar is made according to Moses' specifications and it is placed where the altar was supposed to be placed in Jerusalem. With the rebuilding of the altar, the practices associated with the temple and the altar there could be re-established too. The morning and evening burnt offerings are re-introduced.

The offerings at the new moon and the appointed feasts are also started. All of this is done in the seventh month, the month where most of Israel's feasts were to be found. In particular, it's the time of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The seventh month was also often a time of covenant renewal, so it was an apt time to pick things up again. Much as King Solomon in building the first temple had sought resources from the Sidonians and the Tyrians, so the people of Israel in rebuilding the temple looked to them once again. King Solomon had received foreign support in building the temple from Hiram of Tyre.

Cyrus the King of Persia is the great gentile sponsor of the project on this occasion. In the second year after their coming to the house of God in Jerusalem and in the second month, they start the process of rebuilding the temple. It's an auspicious time to do so.

In 1 Kings chapter 6 verse 1, it was in the second month that Solomon began the building of the first temple. In 1 Chronicles chapter 23, the Levites from the age of 20 were set apart for the service of the Lord. The returnees follow David's pattern here and

the whole process of rebuilding the house of God is overseen by the priests.

They were well trained in the law and they knew the specifications that it must meet. The dedication of the first temple is described in 2 Chronicles chapter 5 verses 11 to 14. And when the priests came out of the holy place, for all the priests who were present had consecrated themselves without regard to their divisions.

And all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jaduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters. And it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. And when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments in praise to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever, the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud.

For the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. The ceremony surrounding the beginning of the foundation of the temple here recalls that earlier ceremony for the dedication of the completed Solomonic temple. Once again, the people under Yeshua and Zerubbabel are carefully following the pattern given to them by Solomon.

However, while they are following the pattern of Solomon's activity in many respects, the temple that they are building pales in comparison with his. Solomon's temple had been destroyed about 50 years previously, and some of the oldest among the people who had returned still remembered its glories. Verses 12 and 13 describe a poignant mix of emotions, people shouting with the greatest joy as they see the prospect of the worship of the Lord being established once more in its fullness, and on the other hand, people reflecting upon the great glories that had been lost as a result of Israel's sin.

Weeping and joyful shouting mingled together in a great and indistinguishable noise. A question to consider, can you think of any reasons why the Feast of Booths would be an especially apt festival for the re-establishment of the worship of the people? The rebuilding of the temple represented a threat to other groups in the region. The returnees contained many priests and Levites and descendants of the old Judahite elite and ruling classes, the sort of people who would be able to unite a more general population of Jews together, unsettling the existing balance of power.

Unsurprisingly, there were plenty of surrounding people who were interested in undermining, compromising, manipulating or otherwise controlling the temple project. Ezra chapter 4 introduces these parties as the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. Their initial approach might have seemed encouraging to the naive.

They presented themselves as worshippers of the Lord who wanted to be involved in the rebuilding project. Their underlying hostility towards the project became more apparent

as their initial offers were rebuffed. The primary source of opposition came from Samaritans, who had descended from a mixture of pagan peoples resettled by the Assyrians and the remnant of the ten Israelite tribes who had formerly occupied that land.

After the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians around 722 BC, the Assyrians resettled various pagan groups in the former territory of Israel, each of them continuing to worship the gods of their place of origin, a situation which is described in more detail in 2 Kings 17. Later waves of resettled populations were brought in under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal as verses 2 and 10 of this chapter mention. After many of the new people settling in the land were killed by lions, the king of Assyria commanded that an Israelite priest be sent to instruct the people in the law of the god of the land of Israel.

However, the situation that resulted was one of syncretistic worship, with the Samaritans worshipping both the Lord and their various pagan deities. 2 Kings 17 verses 33 to 41 describes the situation that resulted. The Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.

The Lord made a covenant with them and commanded them, You shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them. But you shall fear the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm. You shall bow yourselves to him and to him you shall sacrifice.

And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear other gods and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the Lord your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies.

However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the Lord and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise and their children's children as their fathers did.

So they do to this day. Much more about the Samaritans and their worship had changed by the time of Christ when they were monotheists who worshipped on Mount Gerizim, where prior to its destruction they had worshipped the Lord in their own temple, a rival to that in Jerusalem. However, at this point in their history, at the time of the return, while the Samaritans could claim that they worshipped the Lord, they definitely did not do so exclusively.

Compromising with such a group at this stage would have set an incredibly dangerous course for the returnees. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are suspicious of the Samaritans and dodged the deeper issues by refusing their help on the basis of the fact that the returnees alone had been authorised to undertake the task of rebuilding. If they

permitted the Samaritans to join in the task, they might jeopardise their authorisation by King Cyrus of Persia.

Nevertheless, the Samaritans succeeded in thwarting the rebuilding of the temple by harassing the returnees, intimidating them, bribing Persian officials to prostrate their efforts and other such things. This process lasted for the entirety of the reign of Cyrus, his successor Cambyses, and continued into the beginning of the reign of Darius. While the rebuilding of the temple was completed in the reign of Darius, opposition continued into the reign of Xerxes or Ahasuerus.

Following the longer chronology, this verse links the earlier persecution, resistance and harassment in the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses and Darius I with the later harassment that they experienced in the reign of Artaxerxes. Verse 8 of this chapter to chapter 6 verse 18 is an Aramaic document. Andrew Steinman argues that we should understand this as a collection of different correspondents joined by narrative sections compiled by the people mentioned in verse 7. Bishlam, Mithradath and Tabil are officials who gathered together correspondents from the most recent all the way back to the time when the temple was built.

Steinman suggests that it was likely compiled by Persian officials under the supervision of Nehemiah. The first letter is sent by key officials in the Trans-Euphrates region, the province of Beyond the River. The authors of the letter are described in a way that seems to be calculated to gain the sympathies of its recipient.

Although they are situated beyond the river, they were largely sent there by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. They themselves are Persians, Babylonians, Medians and other people who had come from the other side of the river. As such, they have a natural kinship with the Persian king to whom they are writing.

Within their correspondence, they present the city of Jerusalem as a constitutionally and historically rebellious city, a city that had a long history of causing trouble in the region, rebelling against those to whom it had to pay tribute, breaking covenants and betraying loyalties. They of course are writing purely as those concerned with the king's honour. As persons disinterested in the matter, save for the fact that they are loyal subjects of the king, they write to him as if they were concerned with nothing other than his own sovereignty.

They encourage him to search the historical records, not just the records of the kings of the Medes and the Persians, but also the records going back to the time of Babylon. If Artaxerxes permits the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, he will only be inviting trouble. Artaxerxes responds favourably to them.

He commands the cessation of the rebuilding efforts in the city. While people may be settled there, it should not be re-fortified and re-established as a city. Jerusalem has too

much of a history of troublemaking, and Artaxerxes' sense from the historical chronicles seems to support the writers of the letter.

The claims being made concerning Jerusalem are ridiculously overblown. While Jerusalem proved to be unfaithful at many points in its past, little good reason was given that this would be the case in the future. Jerusalem's situation had much changed.

Of course the writers of the letter were not primarily concerned with the rule of Artaxerxes, but with their own power in the province. The re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem would pose a threat to them far more than it would pose any threat to Artaxerxes. Verses 6 to 23 of this chapter are digressionary, taking us beyond the time of the rebuilding of the temple to a time when the larger city was being re-established.

Verse 24 moves us back, connecting us with the earlier narrative. A question to consider, of what earlier episodes in Israel's history might we be reminded by the opposition that they face in this chapter? Ezra chapter 5 continues an Aramaic section of the book, which runs from chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18, largely containing correspondence with Persian kings. These are key witnesses to the Jews' life during the Persian period.

They also serve as an apologetic for the rebuilding efforts more generally, especially for the later period of Nehemiah. At the beginning of this chapter, we have references also to two important prophetic voices of the period, Haggai and Zechariah, who played pivotal roles in encouraging the rebuilding of the temple. While much of the preceding chapter addressed the period of the reign of Artaxerxes several decades later chronologically, at least according to the longer chronology that most scholars adopt, at the end of that chapter, we will return to a period shortly after the events described in the very beginning of chapter 4, during the reign of Darius I. The Jews had faced concerted opposition to their project of rebuilding the temple from surrounding peoples, and this had discouraged their efforts, preventing them from making progress during the rest of the reign of Cyrus, through the reign of his successor Cambyses, and into the reign of Darius I. While they had started to lay the lower foundation, the actual rebuilding of the temple had been placed on hold.

In the book of Ezra, the explanation for the stalling of the rebuilding project, chiefly focuses upon the opposition faced by the people. In the books of Haggai and Zechariah, there is more criticism of the people themselves for their failure to advance the work. They are accused of being too preoccupied with their own affairs to rebuild the house of God.

Zechariah is here referred to as the son of Iddo. In Zechariah chapter 1 verse 1, he is identified as the son of Barakaya, the son of Iddo. Later, in Nehemiah chapter 12 verse 4 and verse 16, we see that Zechariah was the head of the priestly family of Iddo, his grandfather.

In the joining together of Zerubbabel, a governor descended from David, Jeshua the high priest, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, figures representing all of the traditional offices of Israel's public life, king, priest and prophet, we see the unity of the temple rebuilding effort. The prophet brings the word of the Lord and the vision that inspires the people. The king or the governor gives his strength to the project, and the consecration of the new temple and its priesthood will be achieved through the high priest.

The reference here to the name of the God of Israel who was over them might refer to the Lord's rule over his people, or perhaps even to the way that the people were set apart by the Lord's name placed upon them. The final verse of chapter 4 spoke of the second year of King Darius, which is the context given for Haggai's prophecy in his first chapter, where he gives his account of the recommencement of the rebuilding efforts. In Haggai chapter 1 verses 12 to 15, Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jehozadag, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him.

And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, I am with you, declares the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Jeshua the son of Jehozadag, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, in the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. The governor of the province of beyond the river, or the trans-Euphrates province, which included the land of Israel, along with Syria and Lebanon, was Tatanai. He, along with his associates, questioned the temple rebuilders.

They did not directly oppose the project in the way that the Jews Samaritans neighbors had. However, they wanted to know their authorization. While wanting to confirm that the returnees were authorized, they did not put a halt to the project, determining rather to wait to hear a response from Darius.

As in the prophetic guidance, and the Lord's stirring up of various people's hearts, the hand of the Lord is seen in this. The rest of the chapter contains the letter written by Tatanai and his associates to Darius, describing what they had witnessed in their inspection, and asking for direction in how to treat the temple rebuilders. They give a careful report of what's taking place, and the speed with which things are progressing.

If the rebuilding of the temple is not to go ahead, it should be addressed with some urgency. They had inquired concerning the authorization for the rebuilding, and also concerning the names of those who were involved. Their primary identification of themselves is as the servants of the God of heaven and earth.

They make clear that they are not building a temple where none has been previously, rather they are rebuilding a great former temple that was destroyed. The cause of the temple's destruction was not the greater power of some foreign gods, but the anger of the Lord against his people who had proved unfaithful, giving them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Later, however, as the kingdom of Babylon had passed into the hands of the Medes and Persians, Cyrus had returned the gold and silver vessels, and authorized the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed.

The items had been delivered into the hands of a former governor, Shesh-Baza. The way that Shesh-Baza is referred to here suggests that he has not been a leader in the region for some years now. Tatanae asked King Darius for a confirmation of the claims made by the temple rebuilders.

If Cyrus had in fact authorized the rebuilding, then there should be a reference to the decree to be found in the royal archives in Babylon. The relevant records will later be found in Ecbatana. A question to consider.

In this chapter we see the involvement of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the priest, Jeshua, and a governor descended from King David, Zerubbabel, in the rebuilding of the temple. Where else in scripture do we see examples of how figures associated with these three different officers could be involved in the building and the upkeep of temples? Ezra chapter 6 continues and concludes the Aramaic section that began in chapter 4 verse 8. The section ends in verse 18 of this chapter. This section of the book, according to the more widely accepted chronology, moves between several different times relating a number of different periods of resistance.

Chapter 4 verses 1 to 5 recounts opposition during the period of Cyrus from around 536 BC. Then in chapter 4 verses 5 to 6 and chapter 4 verse 24 to the end of the Aramaic section in chapter 6 verse 18, it recounts opposition or challenges during the reign of Darius I from around 522 to around 515 BC. Chapter 4 verse 6 mentions opposition during the reign of Ahasuerus or Xerxes from around 486 BC.

Chapter 4 verses 7 to 23 describes the opposition during the period of Artaxerxes from 465 BC. This movement backwards and forwards in time can be confusing and somewhat disorienting. Some commentators such as Charles Fensham and Karl Kiel have argued that chapter 4 verses 6 to 23 should be regarded as largely parenthetical.

Others giving more weight to the shift to Aramaic in chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18 have suggested that there is an underlying apologetic source addressed to Artaxerxes, perhaps one ordered by Nehemiah. Andrew Steinman argues for this, noting 2 Maccabees' reference to Nehemiah's possession of a library with a collection of official documents in his archives. Once again, according to the more standard chronology, there are two distinct construction projects.

The first is the rebuilding of the temple which occurred over a period of around 20 years from around 536 to 515 BC. The second is the rebuilding and re-fortification of the city. James Jordan has strongly disputed this treatment, arguing that Artaxerxes and Ezra Nehemiah is actually Darius I and that the wall restoration was completed by 502 BC, something typically dated about 60 years later.

In the preceding chapter, Tatanai, the governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates, inquired about the authorization of the temple rebuilders, although without halting their work. He suggested that a search be conducted for the decree of Cyrus concerning the temple in the archives in Babylon. However, in verse 2 we see that the relevant records were actually found in Ectbactana, where, according to the history of Xenophon, Cyrus' summer palace was situated.

The decree of Cyrus gives a number of distinct instructions. First, that the house is to be rebuilt on its original site and foundations. Second, that its dimensions should be 60 cubits height and 60 cubits breadth.

Presumably, Cyrus was concerned to ensure that it was kept within reasonable limits. The width, likely of 20 cubits, seems to have been omitted here. Some commentators argue that this is likely the result of a transcription error earlier in the transmission of the text.

Third, the materials of the temple should be three layers of stone and one of timber. Fourth, the project would be funded by the Persian royal treasury. And fifth, the vessels that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar were to be returned.

Derek Thomas notes the importance of the fact that the project was funded by a gentile power, suggesting a connection with Haggai chapter 2 verse 7. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in. And I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The Lord's temple is here being funded by tax revenue from gentile pagan powers.

While the Israelites spoiled the Egyptians in the time of the Exodus, through their fear of the Israelites, here gentile authorities, their hearts stirred by the Lord, are willingly supporting this project. Cyrus seems to have supported other similar projects in other provinces, presumably as a means of currying favor with the diverse groups throughout his empire. As Steinman and others note, bricks with the stamp of Cyrus have been found elsewhere in various temples.

Darius confirms all of the claims made by the rebuilders in response to Tatanai's investigation. He instructs Tatanai and his associates not to trouble the rebuilders, but to give them their full assistance, granting them the tax revenue that they need, animals for sacrifices, and other necessary materials on a daily basis. Darius expected the Jews to pray to the Lord for him and his kingdom in the temple.

While Darius was clearly a polytheist, and would have expected prayers for him to be made to various gods, the Lord had also called his people to pray for the well-being of their gentile rulers and nations. Jeremiah chapter 29 verses 4 to 7. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, take wives and have sons and daughters, take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters.

Multiply there, and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. We find similar teaching in the New Testament in places like 1 Timothy chapter 2 verses 1 to 2. First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. Darius threatens anyone who alters or resists his decree with a terrible judgment and with a curse, they will suffer a punishment at the hands of men and at the hands of God.

The authorities obey Darius' decree and cooperate with and support the rebuilding project, which proceeds rapidly. The project is especially propelled by the ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Surprisingly, verse 14 mentions not merely Cyrus and Darius, but also Artaxerxes, a detail that seems to be inconsistent with the standard chronology, on the surface of it at least, for which Artaxerxes is identified as reigning some 50 years after the time of the completion of the temple.

Joseph Blenkinsop argues that the point of mentioning him here is merely to round out the Aramaic narrative. The author was not unaware of the chronology. Rather, Artaxerxes is mentioned because he acts decisively in support of the temple and its worship, as we see in the chapter that follows, establishing it.

Steinman argues that he was included for rhetorical effect. He writes, The authors of the Aramaic report were urging that Artaxerxes would, like his noble predecessors, honour the singular and consistent decree of Persian kings to complete the house, thereby aligning himself with both God and his illustrious predecessors. Chapter 6, verse 14.

Thus, the purpose of including the correspondence between Tatana and Darius and its results in the Aramaic report was to demonstrate that Jerusalem was no longer the rebellious city portrayed in the correspondence between Reham and Artaxerxes, but was now the obedient, pious, and industrious city of the men who carried out the order of Cyrus and Darius. They were obeying both God and the king. This is part of the larger theological message of Ezra, chapter 3, verse 6. Most importantly here, it is the decree of the Lord that is the primary decree mentioned.

The Lord is the one who stirs up all of the other parties involved. Without his instigation, no one else would have acted. The temple was completed around 70 years after the first

temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, likely on March 12, 515 BC.

The completion is around three and a half years after the time of Haggai's prophecy. The dedication of the temple is then completed, although it pales in comparison with the dedication of Solomon's temple, described in 1 Kings, chapter 8, verse 63. Solomon offered as peace offerings to the Lord 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep.

So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord. Hezekiah and Jeziel's contributions of animals in 2 Chronicles, chapter 30, verse 24, and chapter 35, verse 7, also dwarfed those given here. They also established the priests and the Levites in their proper appointed offices, according to the law of Moses.

Perhaps a particularly interesting detail here is that they offer for all Israel 12 male goats. As Thomas notes, this evidences their continued sense of themselves as the 12 tribes, even after the loss of the Northern Kingdom and the fact that the remnant was largely from Judah, Benjamin, and the Levites. They still retain a strong sense of themselves as 12.

The Aramaic section ends at this point. Steinman argues that this should be understood as Nehemiah's report to King Artaxerxes, seeking his support to rebuild the wall. However, the report also shows the purpose and sovereign activity of God behind all else, even the actions of kings.

Everything culminates in a joyous celebration of the Passover and the feast of unleavened bread. The author of this section is likely different from that of the Aramaic section, and not merely on account of the language change. The month, as Steinman notes, is here referred to by its number, rather than by its name, as in the Aramaic section.

Special celebrations of the Passover occurred at various pivotal moments in Israel's history, such as the time of their departure from Egypt, their first entry into the land, and the two great covenant renewal Passovers of King Hezekiah and King Josiah. All of these Passovers recalled that original deliverance from Egypt, aptly having experienced a sort of a new exodus, being brought out of the land of their exile and re-established in the promised land, they celebrate another great Passover here. This Passover, then, is one of the great Passovers.

It's a time of re-consecration, of a renewal of covenant. It's a huge milestone in their re-entry into the land, as the temple is finally completed. Surprisingly, verse 22 speaks of the Lord turning the heart of the King of Assyria to them.

The great empire of Assyria had fallen to the Babylonians almost 100 years previously, and then Babylonia's own empire had fallen to the Medes and the Persians. Perhaps the point here is that the Persian empire is the heir of what once belonged to the Assyrian

empire. And the reference to them also recalls the history of Israel and of Judas suffering at the hand of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the two great empires that the Lord had raised up against them.

A question to consider. Verse 22 speaks of the Lord turning the heart of the King of Assyria to them. What are other examples in scripture of the Lord acting in the hearts of pagan kings to establish his purposes for his people? Finally, in chapter 7 of the book named after him, Ezra himself comes upon the stage.

His voice isn't heard until verse 27, though. Ezra is a priest with a known lineage stretching back to Aaron, through several high priests, Saria, Hilkiah, Phineas, Eleazar, and Aaron. We have a fuller genealogical list in 1 Chronicles 6, verses 3-15.

It is quite likely that a number of names were dropped out between Azariah and Miriath. The names between these two are included in the list in 1 Chronicles. There seems to be no reason to leave them out here, and it's easy to imagine the eyes of an early scribe copying the text, accidentally skipping, as two Azariahs and Amariahs are in the list.

This sort of scribal error is known as parablepsis. Ezra is here described as the son of Saria. In 2 Kings chapter 25, verses 18-21, Saria's death at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is described.

His death occurred around 586 BC, with the downfall of Jerusalem. It seems likely that there were at least two or three generations dividing Ezra and Saria. They probably aren't mentioned here, as the priesthood wasn't exercised in the ordinary way during the period of the exile.

The events of the chapter are dated to the 7th year of King Artaxerxes, around 458 BC. The temple had been finished about 60 years previously, according to the typical chronology. Ezra is a priest and a devoted scribe, skilled in the law of Moses.

On these two accounts, he is well qualified for the task ahead of him. He seems to have exercised some administrative authority, as a skilled scribe in the Persian Empire, in addition to being a trained and gifted Torah scholar. As such a scribe, he would have been well able to teach the people and to lead a party of priests and Levites back to Jerusalem.

Although he has a high priestly lineage, however, he does not appear to be the high priest himself. Nevertheless, we should consider affinities between Ezra and Moses. Moses played a priestly role in the setting up of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system.

He led the people, but also instructed the people in the law, in the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra's party would re-establish a fuller and more ordered worship in the temple, and he would also instruct the people in the law, much as Moses had instructed the people in the law in the book of Deuteronomy. Ezra travels from the first to the fifth month to get

from Babylonia to Jerusalem, around from April to August.

The first few days of the journey seem to be days of gathering the party together and preparing them for what lies ahead. In Ezra chapter 8 verse 31, we see that they set out properly on the twelfth day of the first month. Then we departed from the river Aheba on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem.

The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and from ambushes by the way. Once again, the agency of the Lord is highlighted. At various other points in Ezra, God is spoken of as stirring up the people's hearts to take certain actions.

In the preceding chapter, we were told that the rebuilding of the temple took place according to God's decree. Here the Lord's agency is described as a matter of the good hand of God being upon Ezra. Ezra set his heart to study, to observe, and to teach the law of the Lord, and the Lord set his good hand upon him.

The hand of the Lord being upon people is usually associated with prophecy. However, its use of Ezra the scribe could perhaps be seen as an extension of the notion of receiving the guidance of the Lord, typically associated with prophecy, to the skilled study of the scriptures. A man like Ezra, gifted in the study of the scriptures, is bringing the guidance of the Lord much as the prophet does to the people.

The role of such teachers would become much more important in the years that followed, as there would not be inspired prophets in the same way. In verses 12 to 26, we have another Aramaic section of the book, a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest. This letter, along with Ezra's expression of praise in response to it in verses 27 to 28, is probably taken from Ezra's personal memoirs.

King Artaxerxes and his seven counsellors send Ezra to set up the true worship of God within Jerusalem. While the king was a pagan and a polytheist, this was the more general policy of the empire. He sends Ezra to superintend matters in Jerusalem, but also to teach the word of the Lord.

With Ezra, he sends a great quantity of silver and gold, with which Ezra can buy materials for the temple and its worship. Once again, God is building up his house with the gifts of Gentiles. Ezra is clearly a trusted servant of the king.

He's given a lot of prudential latitude in how he handles the expenses. The king also seems to have a measure of understanding of the worship of the Lord that may perhaps evidence the influence of high-ranking Jewish officials and counsellors. Over this period of time in the Persian empire, there were figures like Esther and Mordecai, Nehemiah and Ezra, all figures enjoying high office and with the ear of various Persian kings.

As a new superintendent, Ezra is instructed to set up magistrates and judges,

establishing the law of the king, but also establishing the law of God by teaching the people the Torah. Ezra is distinguished in the eyes of the king as a man who has wisdom that has been given to him by God. Perhaps the king has seen in Ezra the character of a man who has devoted himself to study of the word of God and wants to support Ezra in his teaching of the Jewish people.

He puts the full weight of the Persian government behind Ezra. Anyone who doesn't cooperate with the law of the king, but also with the law of God, will be liable to suffer death, banishment, confiscation of goods or imprisonment. Ezra is astonished and encouraged by the strength of the king's authorization, and as he gathers people together he praises the Lord for what he has done.

The king's commitment to beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem recalls prophecies such as that of Isaiah chapter 60 verses 6 to 10. The angels from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.

All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nibiath shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house.

Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their windows? For the coastland shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them. For the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful. Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you.

For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. The Lord is starting to fulfill such promises as he is using pagan kings to rebuild his house and his walls, to glorify the temple, and also to upbuild his people. A question to consider.

A number of commentators note parallels between the story of Ezra in this and following chapters and the story of Moses in the Exodus. What parallels can you see and what greater theological connections might they help us to draw? In Ezra chapter 8, Ezra playing the role of a sort of miniature Moses leads a group of people from Babylonia back to Jerusalem. As in the book of Numbers, the group is divided by families and is counted.

The families mentioned here are also mentioned in Ezra chapter 2 verses 3 to 15. They're connected with the earlier migration. The reference to the sons of Adonaichem who came later, or who came last in verse 13, might be a reference to a whole family that had returned in these two migrations.

The first part in the first migration and then those that remained in the second. Among the numbers of those returning are two representative priests and also a descendant of David, HATHASH. Phinehas was the son of Eleazar who was the son who inherited the high priesthood from Aaron.

In the return he was represented by Gershom. Ithamar, the other son of Aaron, was represented by Daniel. Along with these men there were 12 lay families.

Andrew Steinman notes that Pehath-Moab was split in two. The household of Joab mentioned in verse 9 is also mentioned in chapter 2 verse 6. There he is mentioned as one of the two halves of the family of Pehath-Moab. Altogether they number 1,512 men.

There are 12 heads of the lay families. There's Ezra, two representatives of the priestly families and a descendant of David. There was a slight possibility, given the focus on the number 12 throughout this passage, that we're supposed to see some significance in the fact that 1,512 is 12 plus 12 times 5 cubed.

When Israel first departed from Egypt they had left with around 600,000 people, ordered in fifties, which is 12 times 10 to the power of 3 fifties. The group gathered together around the river near Ahava. Encamped there for three days they prepared for the journey.

During this time Ezra found that there were none of the sons of Levi among the company. As he needed such a group among his company he sent a delegation to Cassiphia to summon some qualified Levites. Commutators have speculated whether there was some sort of temple or site of Jewish worship at Cassiphia, something that would have explained why Ezra summoned people from them and why it's referred to as the Place Cassiphia.

We know for instance of the existence of a Jewish temple at this period at Elephantine in Egypt. Perhaps there were other sites in Babylonia. This of course raises difficult questions about how to relate this to the single site of worship that is spoken of in Deuteronomy.

Were special allowances being made for diaspora communities for instance? Ezra hadn't sought for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect the company. Rather the company fasts and prays seeking that the Lord would give them the protection that they need. There are a lot of similarities between the story of Ezra's company and their journey towards Jerusalem and the story of the Exodus.

But there are also several differences. In the Exodus the children of Israel face military opposition. Military opposition from the Egyptians which has defeated the Red Sea and then military opposition from the Amalekites which the Lord also delivers them from.

By contrast Ezra's company does not face military opposition. However they are protected by the Lord. The Lord is their defence.

In Ezra's company we see the character of this Exodus as one that is much more akin to a pilgrimage. They are numbered like the children of Israel. There are priests and Levites specially charged with the management and the carrying of holy items.

They leave around the time of Passover, two days before Passover on the twelfth day of the first month. Similar to but not the same day as the departure from Egypt in the Exodus. Artaxerxes and presumably some rich private benefactors have entrusted to Ezra an immense quantity of riches.

All of which has been dedicated to the service of the Lord in the temple. Ezra commits this to the charge of twelve of the leading priests and ten of their relatives. They and the Levites must guard it until they reach Jerusalem where they will weigh it out to the priests and the leaders of the people in the chambers of the house of the Lord.

After arriving in Jerusalem they wait for three days and then on the fourth day they weigh out all of the treasures to the leaders. As a scrupulous and careful official Ezra ensures that everything is registered. At this time the returning company also offer a great number of sacrifices to the Lord.

The number of sacrifices of the bulls, rams, lambs and goats can with the exception of the seventy seven lambs all be divided by twelve. This along with other numbers in the chapter suggest that Ezra's company had a strong sense of themselves as representing all of Israel. Some variants of the text have seventy two instead of seventy seven lambs.

A number that would be divisible by twelve. However on textual grounds the number seventy seven does seem to be the one to be preferred. Ezra's company also delivers commissions from the king to the satraps and the governors of the province beyond the river.

The reference to plural satraps perhaps suggests the presence of satraps of other realms beyond that of the province of beyond the river or the trans-Euphrates. The instructions that they are being given presumably relate to the way that they are to treat Jews within their territories. Along with the support they should give to Ezra's mission.

A question to consider. In verse twenty two Ezra recounts his expression of confidence in the protection of the Lord to King Artaxerxes. In the prophets God had condemned his people for causing his name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles.

How in the return from exile are the Jews becoming a reason for Gentile people and nations to honour the Lord and his name? The focus of the concluding two chapters of the book of Ezra, Exogamie, marrying outside of Israel, is one that unsettles the sensibilities of many modern readers. It has provoked much discussion among commentators. The insertion of ill fitting categories such as ethnicity, race and nationality into our consideration of these passages can easily produce confusion of what is actually at issue.

Concern about intermarriage is hardly a theme peculiar to Ezra and Nehemiah. The same issue is a prominent one at the time of the Exodus for instance. In Exodus chapter thirty

four verses eleven to sixteen we see the Lord speaking to this issue.

Emphasizing the importance of resisting intermarriage with the pagan nations. Observe what I command you this day. Behold I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites.

Take care lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go. Lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asheron.

For you shall worship no other god. For the Lord whose name is Jealous is a jealous god. Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice their gods and you are invited.

You eat of his sacrifice and you take of their daughters for your sons. And their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. The warning here is about covenants with surrounding pagan peoples leading to idolatry and syncretism.

Followed by intermarriage which will confirm the Israelites in such idolatrous worship. Deuteronomy chapter 7 verses 1 to 4 present a similar warning. But with intermarriage in this case preceding and leading to idolatrous worship.

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it. And clears away many nations before you. The Hittites, the Gurgishites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites.

Seven nations more numerous and mightier than you. And when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them. Then you must devote them to complete destruction.

You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me to serve other gods.

Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you and he would destroy you quickly. The story of Israel contain notable cautionary tales of intermarriage with pagans. The sin of Israel in Numbers chapter 25 when they yoked themselves to Baal or Peor.

As a result of their intermarriage with idolatrous Moabites is one example. More famously the heart of King Solomon was led away from the Lord by his many foreign wives. On the other hand there are examples of Israelites having positive relations with foreign wives.

Ruth the Moabites is the most prominent example of a foreign woman who married into

Israel. Rahab is another. Moses married a Midianite woman Zipporah and the Lord defended him from the complaints of Miriam and Aaron in Numbers chapter 12.

The chapter opens with Ezra being informed of extensive intermarriage between the Israelites and the peoples of the lands. We ought to pay attention to the use of the phrase with their abominations and the inclusion of a typical list of nations. Characteristic of that associated with the first entry of Israel into the land.

The Hivites and Girgashites are not mentioned in Ezra but the Ammonites, Moabites and Egyptians are. Groups that were mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 3 to 8. The concern here is not as many have mistakenly understood it one of mere ethnic purity. But is rather about preserving the holy status of the people themselves.

They are the holy seed replanted in the land after having been uprooted by the Lord's judgment. It is imperative that they be a people set apart to the Lord lest they suffer a similar judgment once more. And indeed such a judgment would almost certainly be final.

The danger of mixing the holy seed with the wild seed of the nations is one that is often highlighted in scripture. Indeed one could understand the rite of circumcision as representing a pruning of the seed of Israel. We might also see this principle of separation symbolically represented in the law of Leviticus chapter 19 verse 19.

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed.

Nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made with two kinds of material. While the concern not to intermarry with the nations has a straightforward moral concern underlying it. The concern that the people not be drawn away from the Lord in their hearts and their worship.

There are also principles of cultic holiness present here. Principles of cultic holiness concern being set apart and rendered distinct from others. Israel's principles of endogamy, of marrying within itself, were not merely about avoiding negative influences.

But were also about jealously maintaining its own separateness and distinctiveness as a people. Not because ethnic separateness as such is so to be protected but because of the covenant. We should remember that many people of different ethnic backgrounds became part of Israel over time.

Israel departed from Egypt with a great mixed multitude that assimilated into the people for instance. However, whereas persons of other ethnic backgrounds and people groups could convert to the true worship of the Lord, become Israelites and members of set-apart people and then intermarry with Israelites. Israel itself was not to mix itself with the nations around it and allow itself to be assimilated into them.

Or have mixed marriages that encouraged religious syncretism which compromised Israel's set-apart holy status. This would likely also have restricted intermarriage with Gentile God-fearers, who while true worshippers of the Lord would compromise the covenant status of any children born. In addition to faith in the Lord, becoming an Israelite would be necessary for free intermarriage.

The importance of maintaining distinctiveness that came with the set-apart status of Israel was especially pronounced for priests as we see in Leviticus chapter 21 verses 6 to 7. Restrictions were even stronger for the high priest. Again, we need to beware of treating these restrictions simply as if moral ones. There is nothing sinful or compromised about marrying a widow for instance.

Indeed elsewhere scripture encourages widows to remarry. The point is rather that the high priest needs to be set-apart and a virgin of his own people and tribe was the sort of wife that he would need to maintain the optimal separateness and integrity of the high priesthood. The issue of intermarriage in Ezra chapter 9 is greatly exacerbated by the fact that the priests and the Levites have also been intermarrying.

Not only was the separateness of the priesthood more imperative, but in intermarrying as they had, the priests and Levites were setting a bad example for everyone else. We should also consider here the fate of the people of the former northern kingdom of Israel who had been displaced among and assimilated into other nations. The Samaritan population contemporary with Ezra for instance was one that resulted from intermarriage and religious syncretism.

Few things were more important than that the returnees not fall into a similar condition. We should also appreciate the way that the holiness of the entire people of Israel is more pronounced here. All, not merely the priests, are a holy people and must jealously guard that status.

The people are here described as the holy seed, language that is elsewhere only found in Isaiah chapter 6 verse 13. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

The hope of the people rests upon this holy seed. It is absolutely imperative that it not be corrupted, adulterated or compromised. Intermarriage would always have held appeal when Israel was not the only group in the land.

Intermarrying with wealthy and powerful Canaanite neighbours and other peoples would be a means of increasing influence, status, wealth and security. In the early years of Israel's life in the land, for instance, when they were vulnerable and often surrounded by more powerful neighbours, intermarriage would be a shrewd means to establish greater security. For a king like Solomon, marriages would be ways of making alliances, treaties and alignments with wealthy and powerful families within the land and other nations

around it.

While desire for attractive women was part of what was occurring, it was far from the full picture. When he heard the news, Ezra was deeply shaken. The returnees were supposed to be the faithful seed from which a great people would be regrown.

That they were so compromised, their set-apartness, both their moral and religious holiness in avoidance of the iniquity of idolatry and paganism, but also their covenantal holiness as distinct priestly people set apart from their neighbours, strikes at the very core of Ezra's hope for the people. He responds by dramatic acts of distress and mourning, expressing his horror at what he has discovered. After many hours of publicly expressing his distress, at the time of the evening sacrifice, he begins to pray.

He expresses his own shame and embarrassment as he comes towards the Lord, recognising that he comes as a representative and member of a people that has utterly disgraced itself. This is not just a matter of the current generation of Israelites, the returnees who have intermarried with the pagan peoples, but also their ancestors whose sins had led to them being in exile in the first place. At this point in history, after they've been put into exile, the Lord has shown great grace to them in giving them some measure of restoration.

Ezra expresses this in verses 8 and 9, where, as Andrew Steinman notes, he expresses on four occasions the different gifts that God has given to them. God has given them a secure hold within his holy place. God has given them a little reviving in their slavery.

God has given them some reviving, in verse 9, to set up his house, and then has also given them protection in Judea and Jerusalem. That the people would sin as they have done at this moment in time, in the face of such grace, and also to jeopardise such grace, is scandalous and appalling. The Lord has not forsaken them.

He has caused the kings of Persia to show mercy and grace to them. He has granted them hope. He has not destroyed them.

That they would be prepared so to forsake him at this time, is an expression of the most wicked ingratitude and faithlessness. Ezra expresses the sin that the people have committed. The Lord has instructed them through his prophets, not least Moses himself, that they were given the promised land in part on account of the impurity of the peoples, and also in a manner contingent upon their not confusing themselves with the peoples.

Their failure to observe this commandment, repeated on many occasions in scripture, threatens their very presence in the land. Just as the Lord seems to be granting them a foothold in the land once again, they seem to be prepared to throw it all away in their wickedness. Ezra's prayer, more than anything else, is an expression of his distress at the faithlessness of the people, in the face of the gracious goodness of God.

In contrast to great prayers of intercession that we find elsewhere in scripture, he presents no arguments that the Lord should show mercy, no appeals to the Lord's purpose for his people, to the promises and commitments of the covenant, or to the Lord's name among the Gentiles. He merely declares the sin of the people, declares the justice of God, and places himself and the people before the Lord. A question to consider, where in the New Testament do we see the principle of the separateness of the people of God being applied to Christians? What can we learn from the example of Ezra and the people here? The book of Ezra ends with the crisis surrounding intermarriage.

The crisis is not merely about observance of some detail of Mosaic legislation. It's a crisis in which the people's entire status as a holy seed is seen to be in jeopardy. If intermarriage is normalized, the returnees are in considerable danger of assimilating and disappearing into the surrounding pagan people groups, when they have been called to be a distinct people, the seed of a restored nation.

In chapter 9, Ezra, shocked by the discovery of the situation, mourned publicly and turned to the Lord in prayer. In chapter 10, Ezra and the other leaders act in response to the problem. In the previous chapter, the account was a first-person one, presumably taken directly from Ezra's personal memoirs.

In this chapter, there is a shift to third-person narrative, likely, as Andrew Steinman argues, the narrator is here paraphrasing material from Ezra's memoirs, as he seemingly does elsewhere. Ezra leads by example, and the people follow. Seeing Ezra's distraught response, the people join him in weeping bitterly over their sins.

Speaking for the people, Shekinah addresses Ezra, seemingly treating him as the spokesperson and representative for the Lord. Shekinah's family were early returnees to Jerusalem, as we see in Ezra chapter 2, which perhaps is part of the explanation for the prominent role that he is playing among the people here. He acknowledges that they have broken the covenant in taking wives from the pagan people of the lands, and proposes a covenant with the Lord to put away the foreign wives and their children from among the people, in keeping with Ezra's own counsel as the faithful teacher of the law.

It is not entirely clear the extent to which the proposed policy is one which Ezra himself had outlined, or whether Shekinah is advancing a policy of his own, in line with but going beyond Ezra's own teaching. It seems more likely to me that Shekinah and the community that he represents are the ones taking the initiative at this point, perhaps even presenting a more radical policy than might otherwise have been demanded. The sin of intermarriage is also mentioned in prophetic literature around this period, in Malachi chapter 2, verses 10 to 11, for instance.

In considering the problem of intermarriage, one possible factor to weigh up is the possibility that men greatly outnumbered women among the returnees. If we look at the list of returnees in Ezra chapter 2, for instance, and consider the number of women who

have been married to men, and compare the total numbers for the sons of various houses, and then the number of the whole assembly, there is a significant discrepancy. Some have accounted for this discrepancy by arguing that, while the separate numbers for the various houses number only the men, the total number given also includes the women.

If this were the case, then the women were greatly outnumbered in the company, by about two and a half to one. However, this is quite a speculative interpretation, and very far from certain. In Malachi chapter 2, written around this period, the Jews are condemned, not merely for taking foreign wives, but for putting away Jewish wives in order to do so.

This would weaken the argument for a significant dearth of women precipitating the situation. Another intriguing possibility that Steinman highlights is that Shekinah's own father might have been one of the guilty parties. Shekinah is introduced to us as the son of one Jehiel, of the sons of Elam.

Later, in verse 26, we read that one of the parties guilty of taking a foreign wife was a Jehiel, of the sons of Elam. Even more intriguing is the possibility that Shekinah himself was the child of such a union, one of the persons whose place among the people would be challenged by the proposed policy. Steinman suggests that, if he were, Shekinah would be evidence that the putting away of the foreign wives and their children was not about radical ethnic purity, but about covenant faithfulness.

Any child of a foreign wife who devoted himself to the Lord and became a full member of Israel would not be put away. The issue was religious syncretism and the loss of covenant distinctiveness, not a fixation on bloodlines. When the same issue of intermarriage is mentioned in Nehemiah chapter 13, we see that the children of those who had intermarriage could barely even speak the language of Judah.

Their mother tongue, their mother's tongues, were those of the surrounding pagan peoples. When they couldn't even speak the language of Judah, it seems clear that they weren't being trained in the way of the Lord. Ezra, with the authority given to him by the Persian king Artaxerxes, enforced the policy that Shekinah had proposed, making all of the leading priests, Levites, and the rest of the people take the oath to put away their foreign wives.

Before sending out the proclamation concerning the covenant and its enforcement, Ezra fasted all night in one of the priestly chambers of the house of the Lord. Such an extraordinary fast evidenced how gravely Ezra took the situation. The other examples of such fasts in scripture tend to occur at times of national crisis and imminent judgment, such as the fast of the city of Nineveh in response to the message of Jonah.

Ezra throws the weight of his office behind the covenant. He makes an official

proclamation, summoning all of the returned exiles to Jerusalem, where the covenant stipulations will be put into effect. As a leader, Ezra is someone who leads chiefly by example.

He is also a teacher of the law, who instructs the people, so that, in cases like this, the people themselves wish to conform themselves to things that he has taught them. However, when the occasion demands, he isn't afraid to implement severe sanctions, in this instance the threat of banishment and forfeiture of property for those who do not submit to the covenant and its demands. Nevertheless, the weight of his approach doesn't fall on coercive measures, and it seems as though the people conform largely voluntarily to his proclamation.

The effectiveness of his leadership is manifested in the fact that, although he has coercive measures and ample authority at his disposal, his rule generally does not seem to work by the power of force. The Judahites and the Benjaminites assembled within three days. It was around December, in the cold and rainy season.

Standing in the court before the temple, feeling keenly both the bitterness of the weather and the weight of their guilt, the people were shivering and trembling. There, Ezra addressed the company, declaring to them their fault, exhorting them to amend their practice and to glorify and obey God, presenting the specific action in which submission to the Lord would be manifested, separation from the peoples of the land, and the putting away of their foreign wives. However, given the inclement weather and the extensive process of dissolving the unlawful unions, the people requested that the process be carried out over a greater period of time by the elders and judges in various cities, rather than in a lengthy, centralized process.

The people readily assent to the covenant, with only a small handful of dissenters. It is not obvious whether the dissenters object to the putting away of the foreign wives and their children, or whether their objection is merely to committing the process to the charge of local authorities. The returnees enforce the policy, the policy being administered by the heads of father's houses, appointed by Ezra himself, over a period of three months.

The completion of the process on the first day of the first month, exactly a year to the day after Ezra had started out from Babylonia, might perhaps remind us of other auspicious events that occurred on the first day of the first month of a new year, about one year after the start of a journey or process. In the story of the flood, for instance, the waters are dried from the ground by the first day of the first month of the new year. Likewise, the tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first month of the new year.

Perhaps more weight to these associations would be given by the recording of the fact that the tops of the mountains were first seen on the first day of the tenth month, the same day upon which the process of the elders' examination began. If a connection with

the flood and the Exodus narratives were intended, it might raise some interesting possibilities. For instance, it might invite us to consider parallels between the intermarriage that was part of the sin provoking the flood, the sons of God taking the daughters of men, and the sin of the returnees of Israel here.

The chapter ends with a list of men who had married foreign women. The list is, comparatively, a fairly short one. There are only approximately 110 men on it.

Considering that nearly 30,000 men were among the numbered sons of various houses in chapter 2, and that depending on how we account for the discrepancy, the number of men might even have been nearer 50,000, 110 intermarrying men, only a fraction of a percent, hardly seems to be evidence of a widespread problem. This raises the question of whether the response is really proportionate to the problem, and whether these foreign women are functioning more as a lightning rod for all sorts of tensions and anxieties within the community that are being displaced onto them. David Janssen has argued that this is an example of a witch hunt, in which a fragilized and insecure community arbitrarily targeted a particular marginal group within itself, delivering itself from supposed contamination, and reasserting its distinctiveness through their ritual expulsion.

In response to such theories, we ought to consider the list more carefully. There is the possibility that the list is representative, rather than comprehensive. There are other examples of discrepancies between the number of items in lists in Ezra, and their given totals.

Both chapters 1 and 2 have instances of notable discrepancies of this kind. Consequently, the possibility that the list isn't comprehensive should be considered. Many scholars have argued for such a position.

The claim that the list isn't comprehensive is strengthened by consideration of the length of time that it took to implement the oath, around 3 months, or 75 working days. This seems rather long, if local officials only had to dissolve 110 marriages between them. On the other hand, there is nothing about the list as presented within this chapter that would suggest that it is not a comprehensive one.

H.G.M. Williamson, who pushes back against claims that the list is highly abbreviated, remarks on the structure of the list and its similarities to that of chapter 8. The list begins with cultic figures moving from the high priest family down. The laity, Williamson suggests, may be presented in 12 schematized family divisions, perhaps stressing the fact that this is all of Israel. Some of the sons of the high priest, Jeshua himself, were guilty of such intermarriage.

Perhaps the problem of intermarriage was especially pronounced for the elite class, for those who most set the religious and moral tenor of the people. The practice of

intermarriage among them was mostly for political reasons, but it was a spiritual rot that threatened to spread throughout the entire body of the people, unless it was speedily arrested. A question to consider.

In 1 Corinthians 7, verses 12-16, the apostle Paul writes, But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? How might we relate this teaching to the practice of Ezra and the Jews in these chapters?