

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

TOTC

EZRA AND
NEHEMIAH



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COMMENTARY ON EZRA

EZRA 1 – 6

A TEMPLE FROM THE RUINS

The greater part of this book, though it bears the name of Ezra, tells of the pioneers who came back from exile to Jerusalem a whole lifetime before him. We shall not meet Ezra till chapter 7. By then, some eighty years of settling into the old country will have gone by, and he will come as a consolidator and reformer; not a temple builder like his predecessor Zerubbabel, nor a rebuilder of city walls like his younger contemporary, Nehemiah.

First, then, in chapters 1 – 6 we read of what awaited the earliest homecomers from Babylon: how they attempted to carry out the commission to build a new Temple; how they ran into local opposition and gave up the attempt for nearly twenty years; how they rallied at last and completed it, against a background of threats and political manoeuvres. The threats were defied, the manoeuvres were self-defeating, and this part of the story ends on a high note of rejoicing.

More than half a century was to separate that first climax from the events of chapter 7, but an earlier digression (4:6–23) will have filled in enough of the picture to show us that the Jews meanwhile

continued to be bitterly resented by their neighbours; enough, too, to prepare us for the devastating opening to the book of Nehemiah.

Apart from that foretaste, the present group of chapters, Ezra 1–6, covers a single generation, 538–516 BC, and is concerned with one great enterprise, the rebuilding of the house of God: a theme which it shares with two of the prophets of the day, Haggai and Zechariah.

Ezra 1. Liberty!

1:1–4. *Word from the King*

1. This opening verse has the characteristic solidity and depth of biblical history writing, with its interest both in the external details of an event and in opening up its inner meaning. The event is datable (538 BC), and can take its place among the new policies that flowed from the fall of one empire and the rise of another. But while Cyrus had his own good reasons for what he did (see below), the Lord had his; and these were, as ever,¹ the heart of the matter and the key to the future.

It was the Lord, we learn, who *stirred up* Cyrus to act, as he would also stir a group of exiles to respond (5). It was the same Lord who, unknown to Cyrus, had already ‘stirred’ him,² years before, to begin his march across the world, and had smoothed his road to victory with exactly this in view. His most significant achievement, against all human reckoning, was not to win an empire but ‘to build my city and set my exiles free’ (Isa. 45:13).

More than this, God had given his *word* to Judah that the exile would be over in a mere seventy years, ‘to give you’, as he said, ‘a future and a hope’ (Jer. 25:12f.; 29:10f.).³ And God was better than

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1. Some classic statements of this providential control can be found in Gen. 50:20; Isa. 10:5ff.; Acts 2:23; 3:17f.; 4:27f.; 13:27.
 2. See Isa. 41:25; 45:13, which use this Heb. word. See also Isa. 44:28 – 45:7 for Cyrus’s unconscious fulfilment of God’s role for him.
 3. Daniel remembered this and prayed for its fulfilment. He was rewarded with a vision of this pattern repeated on a grander scale and with finality (Dan. 9:2, 24ff.). Also in 520 BC, with the exile over but the

his word. It was barely fifty years since 587 BC, the year when Jerusalem had fallen. There had been a deportation before this (597), and a token one as far back as 605 (2 Kgs 24:10–17; Dan. 1:1ff.), but even the longest of these spans fell short of the allotted seventy years. It was not the last time that God’s mercy would shorten the days of trial (Matt. 24:22).

So a *proclamation* was made. This (if it followed the normal pattern) would be shouted by heralds in the principal towns of the empire, and possibly placarded as well.⁴ But whether or not the *writing* was on public view, it was preserved in the records, together with administrative details for the implementing of the decision. How much was to hang on this fact would emerge twenty years later in the events of chapter 6.

2, 3. The famous Cylinder of Cyrus throws an interesting light on this decree. The inscription (see p. 21) tells of his allegiance to Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, and of his respect for the gods of his subject peoples. Whereas their images had been treated as trophies by his predecessors, he now restored them to their ‘sacred cities’, rebuilt their temples and repatriated their worshippers. He expressed the hope that these gods would therefore pray for him daily to the gods of Babylon: Bel, Nebo and above all, Marduk.

From his own standpoint, then, to have the house of *the God who is in Jerusalem*⁵ rebuilt was but one instance of a consistent policy. More than one of his successors would show the same concern for correct religious protocol (see pp. 20ff.). The homage paid in verse 2 to the Lord was doubtless a diplomatic courtesy, yet sincere enough in its way. It was important to frame the decree correctly for each

Temple unbuilt, Zechariah heard the angel pleading for an end to ‘these seventy years’ of wrath, and being promised that ‘my house shall be built ...’ (Zech. 1:12–17).

4. Cf. E. J. Bickerman, ‘The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1’, *JBL* 65 (1946), pp. 249ff. (especially 272–275).
5. The end of verse 3 can also be punctuated as in AV, RV, making ‘he is the God’ a self-contained interjection. But this is somewhat awkward, and LXX, Vulg. and the massoretic punctuation support the interpretation adopted by RSV, etc.

repatriated group, and *the God of heaven* was how the Jews described their deity. Moreover to a polytheist of Cyrus's wide sympathies it would seem clear that all the gods had willed his triumph; therefore each in his proper context could be thanked for it.

According to Josephus, however (*Ant.* xi. 1), Cyrus had been shown the prophecy of Isaiah 44:28, which names him, and was eager to fulfil it. While this is not impossible,⁶ it has no corroboration; and Cyrus's own inscription shows that any knowledge he may have had of the Lord was nominal at best. Isaiah 45:5f. insists that to know the Lord involves acknowledging no god beside him.

4. To a devout Jew there were two expressions here to quicken his interest. One was the word for *survivor*, which in Hebrew would call to mind Isaiah's insistent message that 'a remnant' would return (cf. Isa. 10:20ff.). The other was an echo of the Exodus, in the call to the neighbours of the pilgrims to speed them on their way with *silver and gold* and other gifts, just as the Egyptians had done centuries before (Exod. 12:35f.) It would chime in with Isaiah's songs about a second Exodus (Isa. 43:14ff.; Isa. 48:20f., etc.), which lifted the whole enterprise on to the highest level.

Besides these voluntary gifts there were to be payments and releases from the royal treasury, specified in a separate document which found its way into the royal archives. This record was to play a vital part in a later crisis, as recounted in chapter 6; meanwhile the safe return of the Temple vessels forms the climax of the present chapter.

1:5–11. *Treasures to Jerusalem*

5. Nearly two hundred years after the kingdom of Israel had disintegrated, the remains of the little kingdom of Judah, which had always included some members of the other tribes,⁷ still had some cohesion and could rightly bear the name of Israel (cf. 1:3b; 2:2b).

6. Bickerman indeed sees it as quite probable: 'The Jews would hardly abstain from quoting these revelations in approaching Cyrus, nor would he neglect the divine voice. Josephus may be right ...' Bickerman, *art. cit.*, p. 269.

7. Cf. 2 Chr. 11:1–4, 13–16.

Now the Lord, as though to emphasize that he is not the God of the big battalions,⁸ stirred only a remnant of this remnant into action. This whittling down of numbers and power, ever since the heyday of the kings, is reminiscent of his way with Gideon's army and, later, with the crowds of Galilee and Judea. But the more obvious emphasis is on the word *stirred*, echoing what was said of Cyrus in verse 1, to make it doubly clear that this enterprise was from the Lord. Otherwise, as Psalm 127 shows, the builders and the watchmen would have done their work in vain.

6. On this echo of the Exodus story, see on verse 4. That verse shows also that the term *freely offered* refers to gifts for the Temple itself, the rest being evidently meant for the pilgrims. There was no question, incidentally, of their refusing this money from unbelievers; rather, as Haggai 2:7f. would point out, since the treasures of all nations were the Lord's, they were his to command.⁹

7. In the absence of images to restore as in the case of other religions (see on verses 2–4), the Temple vessels, or articles (the word is very general), made an obvious substitute. The written order for their return, and for the Temple's rebuilding at the royal expense, is preserved in 6:1–5.

8. The names of the two officials give us a glimpse of the new and the old régimes now combined. *Mithredath* is a Persian name in honour of Mithras the sun god ('Mithras has given'),¹⁰ and the word that describes him as *treasurer* is also Persian. The name *Sheshbazzar* on the other hand is probably connected with the conquered nation's sun god, the Babylonian Shamash.

Sheshbazzar is better described as chief or (NEB) 'ruler' than as *prince*, for the Hebrew word carries no necessary implication of royal descent. The question of his identity is discussed in Appendix 2, pp. 153ff. There is a view that Sheshbazzar was a second name for

8. Cf. Zech. 4:6, 10, spoken to this generation.

9. It was another matter when a gift came explicitly from a corrupt practice (Deut. 23:18) or might be reckoned to give the donor the status of a patron (Gen. 14:23).

10. There is another Mithredath in 4:7. It was quite a common name; its Greek form Mithradates is more widely known.

Zerubbabel, used in all transactions with the ruling power (cf. other re-namings, e.g. 2 Kgs 24:17; Dan. 1:7). Alternatively Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel may have been, respectively, the official and unofficial leaders of the enterprise. Neither view is without its difficulties.

9–11. From this prosaic inventory (and the textual problems it now presents to us – see ‘Additional note’ below) it is left to us to picture what it may have meant to see this consecrated gold and silver brought out into the light of day, every piece of it a witness to God’s sovereign care and the continuance of the covenant. The political kingdom had perished, but not the ‘kingdom of priests’. The businesslike transfer of articles, ‘counted out’ (8) from one custodian to another, may have been outwardly undramatic, but it was momentous. The closing words of the chapter, *from Babylonia to Jerusalem*, mark one of the turning-points of history.

Additional note on the list of vessels, 1:9–11

There are obscurities here in both the vocabulary and the figures. Basins (*’āgartēlē*) is a loan-word, a fact which may mean that the author was using an inventory compiled by a foreigner (cf. perhaps the archives mentioned in 6:1ff.). *Censers* (cf. 1 Esdras 2:13) is one of many guesses at the Hebrew *maḥālāpīm*. RV has ‘knives’, LXX ‘changes’ (of raiment? i.e. priestly robes?). The word does seem to derive from \sqrt{hlp} to change, but probably means either ‘duplicates’ or ‘varieties’ (cf. NEB).

The problem of the figures is that in the Hebrew text (supported by LXX) the separate items add up to less than half the recorded total. Therefore RSV (unlike AV, RV, JB, NEB) follows the tidier figures of 1 Esdras 2:13f. (see RSV mg. for the details). In defence of the Hebrew text one might argue that the named items are only a selection; but verse 10b mentions ‘a thousand other vessels’, which should take care of the remainder. So it seems that either the total or the components have been misunderstood (if signs were used for the numerals), or miscopied.¹¹ There may be a pointer to textual

11. On the signs used for numerals see H. L. Allrik, *BASOR* 136 (1954),

damage in the Hebrew word *mišnîm* (10), whose normal meaning, ‘double’ or ‘second’, is not compellingly relevant here.¹² It is thought by many to be the remains of a numeral; 1 Esdras 2:13, adopted by RSV, has ‘two thousand’ at this point.¹³ These are speculations; but few commentators doubt that the author was drawing on an actual list, whose original form showed the completeness of the hand-over of Temple vessels.¹⁴

Ezra 2. The pilgrims

This chapter, however uninviting it may seem, is a monument to God’s care and to Israel’s vitality. The thousands of homecomers are not lumped together, but (in characteristic biblical fashion) related to those local and family circles which humanize a society and orientate an individual. Such is God’s way, who ‘setteth the solitary in families’ (Ps. 68:6, AV, RV). And for the people’s part, their tenacious memory of places and relationships, still strong after two generations in exile, showed a fine refusal to be robbed of either their past or their future.

So these were living portions of Israel, roots and all, for replanting. But the fundamental motive for this careful grouping was not social but religious. This is the holy nation, given a new chance to live up

pp. 21–27. On discrepant totals, D. J. Wiseman refers (in a written communication) to ‘the well-known fact that some lists are excerpts, though they still keep to the original totals for the whole list (e.g. as in Alalakh texts)’.

12. RV has ‘of a second sort’ – but where is the first sort? NEB more plausibly sees it as a synonym of *maḥālāpîm* (‘of various types’).
13. Torrey, cited by Batten, conjectured that the consonants *mšnym* were all that remained of *šnym šnym* ‘2000’. Batten objects that 2000 is regularly written as the dual *ʿalpayîm* without the numeral. In an unvocalized text, however, the numeral would be by no means superfluous.
14. 2 Kgs 24:13b appears to leave no vessel intact in 587 BC; but from Dan. 5:2ff and from our passage it is clear that the objects that were cut up were not the smaller pieces, but presumably everything that was too big to transport whole.

to its calling. There can be nothing casual in its preparations. Not only must every priest have his credentials (61–63) but every member too (59f.), whether as a true-born Israelite or as belonging to a constituent household (65) or guild (cf. 43–58) – or again (as we learn later, 6:21) as a convert. It was something more than antiquarianism which would impel Nehemiah, nearly a hundred years later, to make this long catalogue the check-list for his regrouped community, and to reproduce the whole of it in his memoirs (Neh. 7:5–73).

The final paragraphs show another aspect of Israelite vitality (68f.) and another glimpse of a structured community which had a well-marked variety of components (70) and a God-given centre of unity (3:1).

2:1, 2a. The leaders

The section headings below will show how orderly an account, group by group, this chapter gives of the return. For its general interest, see the paragraph above; the notes that follow are mostly on minor points of detail.

1. *The province (mēdīnâ)* in question is Judah, a small district within the great administrative area known as Beyond the River, i.e. Syria and Palestine (see on 4:10). Judah was perhaps carved out of adjacent districts and newly granted an identity of its own – for Sheshbazzar was arriving there as governor (cf. 5:14). If so, the ruffled feelings of officials shorn of part of their command may have helped to set the hostile tone which they and their successors tended to adopt. And at the local level the collective word used here for *exiles*, the *gôlâ*, was to become something of an irritant, as a term which marked off the community that had been through its ordeal in Babylon from the rather suspect multitude that had escaped that purging.

2a. There are eleven names here, but Nehemiah's copy of the list preserves one more, that of Nahamani (Neh. 7:7), which has evidently dropped out of this verse in the course of copying. The choice of twelve, like that of the twelve apostles, was a tacit declaration that the community they led was no mere rump or fragment but the embodiment of *the people of Israel* (note the final words of this verse) and the corporate inheritor of the promises. Compare the reminder of the Exodus noted at 1:4, and the offering of 'twelve bulls for all Israel' in 8:35.

Zerubbabel, a grandson of king Jehoiachin,¹⁵ was the natural leader of such a company, whether his position at this stage was official or unofficial.¹⁶

Jeshua the High Priest (Zech. 3:1), whose name (in Greek, ‘Jesus’) is spelt Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah, was Zerubbabel’s fellow-leader. So close, indeed, was this partnership that it was seen by Zechariah as the foretaste of the perfect régime to come, when priesthood and royalty would unite in one man: ‘the man whose name is the Branch’.¹⁷

Some of the remaining names may look familiar to us, but time and place rule out their identification with the well-known Nehemiah or Mordecai, or with Seraiah the father of Ezra, or the Bigvai of Nehemiah 10:16.¹⁸ It is just that such names were common in this general period.¹⁹

15. He is known as the son of Shealtiel (3:2, et al.) who was Jehoiachin’s eldest son. But the Heb. text of 1 Chr. 3:19 makes Zerubbabel the son of Pedaiah, who was a younger brother of Shealtiel. If this is the true text, it implies a levirate marriage of Pedaiah to the widow of Shealtiel, whereby the firstborn was reckoned as Shealtiel’s to keep the family name in being (cf. Deut. 25:5f.; Ruth 4:10). As Shealtiel’s heir, he would be first in line for the throne.

16. It was certainly official by the time of Haggai (Hag. 1:1). On the question of his relationship to Sheshbazzar see Appendix 2, below, pp. 153ff.

17. Zech. 6:11–13, where AV/RV is the most faithful translation. See J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, ad loc.* Cf. Jer. 23:5 for ‘the Branch’ (*semah*), or ‘shoot’, as a Messianic title.

18. Another bearer of this name, differently spelt, is Bagoas, the governor of Judah c. 410 BC, mentioned in the Elephantine papyri. See further, pp. 159f.

19. Some commentators have suggested that we have here the well-known Nehemiah, etc., and that therefore the list either betrays the confused inventiveness of a late redactor (so Kellermann, *Nebemia: Quellen, Überlieferung und Geschichte, Beibefte zur ZAW* 102 (1967), p. 99; cf. the confusion in 1 Esdras 5:8, 40, where this Nehemiah is appealed to as an arbitrator or governor), or that it combines successive waves of

2:26–35. *The lay Israelites*

Two ways of identifying and ‘placing’ a person are here. Some Israelites had records of a recognized family or clan (3–19 or 20), others knew their traditional home town (20 or 21–35). An appendix to the list will mention people whose standing was in doubt (59f.), and even these are shown in groups according to their settlements in exile and their families. To be rootless and anonymous was the last thing an Israelite could wish to be.

A comparison of this list with Nehemiah’s copy of it (Neh. 7:7bff.) reveals a startling contrast between the transmission of names and that of numbers – for the names in the two lists show only the slightest variations²⁰ whereas half the numbers disagree, and do so apparently at random. The fact that the two kinds of material in the one document have fared so differently lends the weight of virtually a controlled experiment to the many other indications in the Old Testament that numbers were the bane of copyists. Here the changes have all the marks of accident. Now one list, now the other, will give the larger figure, and the differences will range from units to many hundreds.²¹ On the totals, see on verse 64.

immigration. It is pointed out that in Neh. 7:7 the equivalent of Seraiah is Azariah, a name similar to Ezra. This is fragile material for a hypothesis, which is not strengthened by the further supposition that the Mordecai here is Esther’s uncle, turned pilgrim in the end.

20. The only substantial difference is the absence of *Magbish* (30) from Neh. 7. There are two changes of order: Ezra 2:17 and 19 are transposed in Neh. 7:22f., and Ezra 2:33f. in Neh. 7:36f. *Jorab* (Ezra 2:18) becomes Hariph in Neh. 7:24, and *Gibbar* (20) becomes Gibeon in Neh. 7:25 (raising the question whether this name marks the last of the clans or the first of the towns in the chapter).
21. There are ‘single figure’ differences in the parallels to verses 6, 10, 11, 13, 17, 33; a difference of 1100 at verse 12; and various anomalies in between. These are informatively discussed in the light of the contemporary signs used for numerals in H. L. Allrik, ‘The lists of Zerubbabel (Neh. 7 and Ezra 2) and the Hebrew numeral notation’, *BASOR* 136 (1954), pp. 21–27.

2:36–39. *The priests*

These numbers add up to 4,289: about a tenth of the pilgrim company. King David had organized the priests into twenty-four family groups to take turns of duty; but only four of these were represented among the homecomers, and the same four families are still the only ones mentioned in 10:18–22, several generations later. So it was from these four, according to the Tosephta (ii. 1, 216), that the twenty-four duty rotas were reconstituted, adopting the names of David's original groups.²²

Wellhausen gratuitously assumed that the *Jeshua* whose 973 descendants are mentioned here (36) was the high-priestly *Jeshua* of these chapters (though this is not stated here, and there is another unidentified *Jeshua* in verse 40); therefore the narrator was allegedly taking his figures from a very late list²³ and failing to notice what he was implying. The natural sense of the verse, however, is similar to that of verse 40, where a family's or clan's subdivisions are marked by pivotal names from its earlier history.

Pashhur (38) is a name not found in 1 Chronicles 24, but may indicate the surviving branch of the Malchijah group, if 1 Chronicles 9:12 refers to the Malchijah of 1 Chronicles 24:9. Both *Pashhur* and *Malchijah*, however, were names common enough to make identifications precarious. Cf. the two together in Jeremiah 38:1, and two others in Jeremiah 20:1; 38:6.

2:40–42. *The Levites*

As with the priests, it was only a minority of Levites who returned at this stage. While all who are mentioned in these three verses were of the tribe of Levi, the term *Levites* in verse 40 probably means those who directly assisted the priests, as against those who belonged to the guilds of verses 41f., whose origins are described in 1 Chronicles 25:1 – 26:19.

Here an interesting shaft of light falls, quite incidentally, on the

22. The names are given in 1 Chr. 24:7–18. For their persistence, cf. 1 Chr. 24:10 with Luke 1:5.

23. J. Wellhausen, 'Die Rückkehr d. Juden a. d. Bab. Exil', *Nachrichten der königl. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (1895), p. 177.

antiquity of the Mosaic law and its freedom from later interference. For now the Levites, whom the tithe law treats as greatly outnumbering the priests, had suddenly become a tiny minority with only a fraction of their former claim on the community's support. Yet the law gives them everything, 'every tithe in Israel', and only requires them to hand on a tenth of this to the priests: 'a tithe of the tithe' (Num. 18:21, 26). Had the law been still in the making or rewriting at this stage, as many have tried to argue, it could never have reached us in this form. To quote Y. Kaufmann, who draws attention to this:

'Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah book was still being added to and revised ... The founders of post-exilic Judaism were not the composers, but merely the collectors of the Torah literature. They did not alter anything of what they "found written", much less add to it.'²⁴

2:43–54. *The Temple servants*

We are told in 8:20 that David and his officials had founded this order of assistants to the Levites. Their Hebrew name is the Nethinim (*nēṭîhîm*), as RSV margin points out, meaning the 'given' or 'dedicated' ones, which is a variation on one of the descriptions of the Levites themselves, of whom God said 'they are wholly given (*nēṭunîm*) to me'.²⁵

It seems likely that the more menial tasks fell to these men; and the presence of some foreign-looking names in the list²⁶ may indicate that some of these groups came into Israel from David's conquests, whether as immigrants or perhaps as prisoners of war. Certainly there were foreign units in his army (2 Sam. 15:18–22), and from an

24. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 193.

25. Num. 8:16.

26. E.g. in other OT contexts, Rezin (48; cf. Isa. 7:1) and Sisera (53; cf. Judg. 4:2); also the apparently tribal plurals Meunim and Nephisim (50; cf. 1 Chr. 4:41 and the Ishmaelite Naphish of 1 Chr. 1:31). Several other names suggest a non-Israelite origin by their form or by their occurrence in foreign records. For details, see the larger commentaries.

earlier stage (though for a different reason) the Gibeonites had been enrolled in Israel as a labour corps (Josh. 9:27).

Not long before the events of this chapter Ezekiel had preached against the use of ‘foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh’ as sanctuary attendants (Ezek. 44:6–8), and some have seen in this an attack on the Nethinim. He may have had certain Nethinim in mind, but not the Nethinim as such, for his attack is on those who are resolutely alien, who refuse the obligations of the covenant. Exodus 12:48 makes it clear that if a non-Israelite family accepted circumcision, the covenant blessings were all theirs (cf. Num. 15:14f.). Had there been any doubt about the Nethinim in principle, they would have found no place in this chapter.

2:55–58. *Descendants of Solomon’s servants*

This group is closely linked with the previous one, and a single total serves for the two of them in verse 58. This fact suggests that Solomon may have recruited them to supplement David’s Nethinim, but for secular tasks. Samples of their kinds of employment, or those of their forebears, may be preserved in the words *Hassophereth* (‘the scribe’, 55) and *Pochereth-bazzebaim* (‘the gazelle-keeper’, 57).²⁷ The only other mention of this community is in the parallel passage (Neh. 7:57ff.) and in Nehemiah 11:3, where again it is named just after the Nethinim.

2:59, 60. *Unconfirmed claims: (a) of Israelite birth*

The place-names seem to be those of the captivity, though they are unidentified as yet.²⁸ The importance of family records was twofold: for settling claims to property, and for ensuring that the restored community had an unbroken descent from the original Israel. But

27. Both these titles are feminine in form, like the word *Qoheleth* (for the author of *Ecclesiastes*) which is used with masculine predicates. The form appears to denote an office or office-bearer.

28. The prefix *Tel-* means a mound such as is formed by the growth of a town on its successive layers of occupation. Ezekiel’s Babylonian place of exile was *Telabib* (Ezek. 3:15), but the term *Tel* was also used in Palestine: cf. Josh. 11:13.

it was not pressed beyond this point: the unsuccessful claimants were not sent back, but evidently given provisionally the same standing as the circumcised foreigners, whose rights we have already noticed in the comments on verses 43–54.

Yet for all its value in preserving the chosen people, this emphasis on a pure Israel had considerable dangers, as the New Testament shows by its attacks on those who preened themselves on their pedigree. Presumably the Christian has his own form of this temptation, and his own lesson to draw from the Pauline aphorism: ‘they are not all Israel, which are of Israel’.²⁹

2:61–63. Unconfirmed claims: (b) to the priesthood

The fate that overtook Korah and his company when they tried to force their way into the priesthood was a standing reminder to Israel of the peril of such a course: ‘so that no one who is not a priest, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord’ (Num. 16:40). Therefore the precautions that were now being taken were not excessive but a plain duty.

61. *The sons of Hakkoz* evidently had their claim upheld in the end, if Ezra’s contemporary, ‘Meremoth *the priest*, son of Uriah’ (8:33), was the same person as ‘Meremoth the son of Uriah, *son of Hakkoz*’ in Nehemiah 3:4, 21. Against this it could be urged that the Meremoth of Nehemiah 3:21 appears to be classified with the Levites of verses 17ff.; but it is not stated how far that list extends, and in fact Meremoth’s colleagues on either side were apparently priests. See footnote on Nehemiah 3:17ff.

Barzillai was a name that carried considerable weight: its bearer had been a staunch supporter of David, and a man of wealth (2 Sam. 19:32). It may be that in adopting this family’s name (and becoming its heir?) the ancestor of these claimants had laid himself open to the charge that he had renounced his own birthright, the priesthood. It was laid down as part of the cost – and reward – of being a priest that (as God told Aaron) ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance ...’ (Num. 18:20).

29. Rom. 9:6, AV. Cf. Rom. 2:28f.

63. The word here for *the governor* is the Persian term *Tirshatha*, which AV, RV retain in this verse and in its four occurrences in Nehemiah (2:65, 70; 8:9; 10:1).³⁰ Here it evidently refers to Sheshbazzar (cf. 5:14, using the commoner word *pehâ*, which is Assyrian-based). His identity is discussed on pp. 153ff. Here it is interesting to note that he and not the high priest had to settle this ecclesiastical question. Whether the *Urim and Thummim* (through which the answer might otherwise have come³¹) had been lost in the exile, or whether the ability to use them had been withdrawn, is not entirely clear; but the latter seems to be implied by the wording of the sentence. Cf. Psalm 74:9, ‘We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long.’ There are two occasions also in 1 Maccabees (4:46; 14:41) when decisions had to be postponed for lack of revelation. Heaven seemed to have fallen silent, though in the present case the silence would soon be broken by prophecy again (5:1).

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30. Attempts at finding an etymology for *Tirshatha* have yielded meanings as diverse as ‘excellency’ (from a Persian verb ‘to tremble’; hence, questionably, ‘inspirer of awe’), or ‘eunuch’ or ‘circumcised’ (the two latter deduced from a modern Persian verb ‘to cut’). See W. Th. In der Smitten, ‘“Der Tirschâtâ” in Esra-Nehemia’, *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 618–620. But safer guides than etymology are synonyms (cf. *pehâ*, used of Sheshbazzar, Ezra 5:14, and of Nehemiah, Neh. 5:14) and contexts; and these point to the familiar translation, ‘governor’.
31. See Exod. 28:30; Num. 27:21. In the light of the longer text (Greek) of 1 Sam. 14:41 (as in RSV, NEB, etc.) it is suggested that the *Urim* and *Thummim* may have been a pair of small objects whose obverse or reverse sides signified God’s ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ if both objects showed the same side uppermost when the high priest drew them out of their receptacle. God’s refusal of an answer (1 Sam. 28:6) was perhaps indicated by a failure of the two to coincide. Josephus (*Ant.* iii. 8. 9) asserted that the answer was given by a miraculous shining of the jewels on the high priest’s breastplate or shoulder-piece, but that this had long since ceased.

2:64–67. *The totals*

64. The figure of 42,360 appears as the total also in Nehemiah 7:66 and 1 Esdras 5:41, yet the individual items add up to three different totals, as follows: Ezra, 29,818; Nehemiah, 31,089; 1 Esdras, 30,143. There have been attempts to explain the missing thousands: as members of the northern tribes, or as women, or as adolescents.³² But the narrative is silent on such points. As regards the northern tribes, it has made no distinction between them and Judah in the classified lists above, for those groups of homecomers are seen there as men of 'Israel' (2:2b, 59), not of a tribal minority.³³ As regards women, would the men in these family groups have outnumbered them by well over two to one? And the mention of the age of twelve and upwards in 1 Esdras 5:41 would have needed to be contrasted with an adult age in listing the separate groups (as Keil points out), had the author of 1 Esdras meant to reconcile the figures by his insertion of this phrase. There is general agreement that the divergences are copying errors, arising from the special difficulty of understanding or reproducing numerical lists. On this, see the second paragraph of comment on verses 2b–35, above. See also on the next two verses.

65. This inordinate number of slaves (rather than 'servants'; cf. NEB), about one to every six freemen, agrees with the evidence of wealth in verse 69, and makes the subsequent poverty described by Haggai less than twenty years later an object-lesson on material insecurity. A run of bad harvests and high prices (Hag. 1:6, 9ff.; 2:17), to say nothing of enemy intervention (Ezra 4), would soon leave nothing but their expensive houses (Hag. 1:4) to remind them of their former well-being.

The *singers* were distinct from the temple choirs of verse 41 and were simply a pleasant addition to a wealthy establishment: cf. 2 Samuel 19:35.³⁴

32. 1 Esdras 5:41, which seems to raise this possibility, excludes children under twelve from its grand total.

33. There were members of other tribes than Judah in the restored community (1 Chr. 9:3) but not, as far as we know, on this scale.

34. At this point the copy of this list in Neh. 7 provides a text-book

2:68, 69. The gifts

Freewill offerings, such as are mentioned here and at 3:5, are a sign of health in any enterprise, and all the more so when an official grant offers a temptation to complacency (if ‘grant’ is the right translation in 3:7, as I think it is). The phrase, *according to their ability*, does credit to these donors, and Paul may have had it in mind in his charge to the Corinthians to give in proportion to their gains (1 Cor. 16:2); perhaps, too, in his admiration of those who had given not only ‘according to’ their ability but, paradoxically, ‘beyond’ it (2 Cor. 8:3).

The parallel passage, Nehemiah 7:70–72, is more detailed at this point, mentioning separately the contributions of the governor, of some heads of houses, and of the rest of the people; also listing some of the offerings in kind, rather than in monetary terms.³⁵ In

example of one source of scribal errors (*‘homoioleuton’*). There the copyist’s eye has travelled from the *two hundred* (which in Heb. follows the word *singers*) to the same word in the next verse, where it is followed by ‘forty-five’. So in Neh. 7:68 the intervening words are missing from the Heb. text (though inserted in the mg. of some MSS), leaving the singers’ number as 245 and omitting the mention of horses and mules. See RSV mg. at Neh. 7:68. It illustrates again the hazards surrounding such lists, already noted above.

35. The various sets of figures can be totalled as follows:

	Ezra 2:68f.	Neh. 7:70–72	1 Esdras 5:45
Gold darics	61,000	41,000	1,000
Silver minas	5,000	4,200 (4,700?)	5,000
Vessels	—	50	—
Garments	100	597 (97?)	100

The two figures in parentheses reflect the fact that the words ‘five hundred’ in Neh. 7:70 (69, Heb.) are oddly placed, indicating that an item (silver minas?) has dropped out of the text, leaving this floating ‘500’ evidently attached to the wrong object.

The word variously translated ‘darics’ or ‘drachmas’ is *darkēmônîm*. If ‘darics’ (RV, RSV) is correct, the author is evidently expressing the amounts in terms of the coins of his own day, since these were apparently introduced by Darius I (521–486), a later king than Cyrus. The Greek drachma (JB, NEB) was not current in Palestine for another

this connection it is worth noting the valuation in Ezra 8:27 of ‘twenty bowls of gold worth a thousand darics’.

2:70. Settlement in the towns

The words (lived) *in Jerusalem and its vicinity*, are borrowed from 1 Esdras 5:46 by RSV and most modern versions, on the assumption that they have dropped out of the present text by accident. The copying of this chapter was clearly an arduous task, as we have seen, and the mention of Jerusalem as the home of the priests and Levites and some others makes excellent sense. There would soon be daily sacrifices to offer, many worshippers to attend to, and much work to supervise (3:4ff).

Ezra 3. Altar and Temple

3:1–6a. First things first

It would have been easy to rest content with the bare fact of arrival and resettlement in the homeland. But there was the king’s business – the Temple – to attend to; and prior even to that, there was the basic calling of Israel. That vocation, like ours, was to be ‘a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual’ (and in their case, literal) ‘sacrifices acceptable to God’.³⁶

So the first thing to be built was the altar (2), before even the materials were ordered for the Temple (7). Abram had marked his

200 years. An alternative suggestion (see H. Hamburger in *IDB*, s.v. Deric) derives the Heb. word from a much older term, the Assyrian *darag mana* (= 1/60 of the mina). This term, however, is not attested in the Assyrian dictionaries and is doubtful, since 1/60 of a mina would be a shekel.

The gold daric, of which a few examples survive, weighed a little more than the British golden sovereign. The silver mina (Heb. *māneh*), appropriately rendered ‘pound’ (weight) in AV, RV, is reckoned to have weighed 500 grams (1.1 lb) and was worth 60 shekels; but there were ‘common’ and ‘royal’ as well as ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ versions of these units.

36. 1 Pet. 2:5; cf. Exod. 19:6.

arrival in the land in just such a way, setting up his altar as a bold Amen to the promise (Gen. 12:7). But these settlers were moved as much by fear as by faith: *fear ... because of the peoples of the lands* (3). This could be taken to mean that they dared not attempt anything so ambitious as a Temple; but in view of verse 7, which sees them putting that work in hand, it is more likely to imply that the threatening situation had brought home to them their need of help, and therefore of that access to God which was promised at the altar. ‘There’, he had said, ‘I will meet with the people of Israel’ (Exod. 29:43).

It also made them careful over detail. The altar was set *in its place* (3), i.e. its traditional and proper place; and we read of all being done *as it is written ... as it is written* (2, 4), even to the elaborate numerical sequence of offerings at the feast of booths (4), which takes twenty-seven verses to describe in the book of Numbers (Num. 29:12–38). So the system of offerings and festivals was set in motion, beginning on the day which ushered in the seventh month (6) with trumpets (Lev. 23:24), the month which was the climax of the Jewish year. It was a worthy start to the new era. It had the backing of the whole people, who *gathered as one man to Jerusalem* (1), and whose leading family, that of Zerubbabel, joined with the priests in setting up the altar. But the initiative on this occasion rightly belonged to Jeshua, whose name precedes Zerubbabel’s only here (2).

3:6b–9. Preparations for the Temple

To lay the foundation is one meaning, but not the full range, of this single Hebrew word which can cover the whole process of making a structure fit for use – a job which here would include the work of carpenters as well as masons, and which in 2 Chronicles 24:12ff. meant the repair of a building which was by no means in ruins. In verse 10 it obviously describes the first stage of all, but in Haggai 2:18 it marks the resumption of this work after many years’ neglect.³⁷

7. In the transaction with Sidon and Tyre there is an echo – perhaps a conscious imitation – of Solomon’s preparations for the first Temple. He too had had the timber sent by sea to Joppa, and

37. On the implications of this, see Appendix 2, p. 154.

had paid for it with the country's natural exports of grain, wine and oil (2 Chr. 2:10, 15f.), which could presumably be loaded onto the returning ships. All this was now made possible not only by the gifts recorded in 2:68f. but by the *grant*³⁸ ... *from Cyrus* (which is mentioned here for the first time), for the new settlers would not yet have any produce of their own to export. It was a tiny foretaste of the 'wealth of the nations' and 'the glory of Lebanon' which it was promised would flow in one day 'to beautify the place of (God's) sanctuary' (Isa. 60:11, 13).

8, 9. It was fitting, again, that the work should start in *the second month* of the new year, for the first was dominated by the Passover. Besides – and this would hardly have escaped their notice – the second was the month in which Solomon's Temple had been started (1 Kgs 6:1).

The careful planning and recording of the operation are impressive. There was enthusiasm, reflected in the 'all' who came forward for the work (8b), but there was strict attention to standards, as is shown by the double mention of *the oversight*: first of *the work* (8), secondly of the *workmen* (9). Evidently the Levites as a whole³⁹ supervised the work of the laymen, and were themselves directed by their leading families (9).⁴⁰

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38. *Grant* is found only here, and basically means permission. Since permission to buy materials would hardly need specifying, it is reasonable to take the word to include provision as well as permission, as with our own word 'grant'.
39. The qualifying age for service varied with the times, the nature of the work and perhaps the numerical strength of the tribe. For the carrying of the sacred vessels on the march it had been 30 (Num. 4:3ff.); for the general tabernacle service, 25 (Num. 8:24); here and in 1 Chr. 23:27 (but see 23:3) and 2 Chr. 31:17 it was 20.
40. Brockington points out that the term for workmen (9) can designate officials (Neh. 2:16; Esth. 3:9; 9:3), i.e. in this case probably the levitical foremen. A less probable meaning is that the rank and file Levites were in charge of the technical aspect of the work, while the named families were responsible for discipline.

Of the names in verse 9, the families of Jeshua and Kadmiel headed

3:10–13. *Climax and anticlimax*

So the crescendo continues, to the strange close of the chapter. Once again, there are conscious echoes of Solomon's celebrations, though there are contrasts too. This time there is no ark, no visible glory, indeed no Temple: only some beginnings, and small beginnings at that. But God is enthroned on the praises of Israel, and these could be as glorious as Solomon's. Perhaps they were more so, for while they matched the earlier occasion, word for word and almost instrument for instrument (2 Chr. 5:13), they were sung in conditions more conducive to humility than to pride, and called for a faith that had few earthly guarantees to bolster it.

The last two verses have all the unexpectedness of actuality. The spontaneous cry of disappointment, breaking into the celebrations, was a foretaste of much that was to follow. Haggai would recognize that note and preach against it (Hag. 2:3 ff.); Zechariah would have to challenge those who 'despised the day of small things' (Zech. 4:10). But both those prophets did so with such memorable words that we can be grateful that they had to meet this mood and answer it.

Ezra 4. Confrontation

From this point onwards right to the end of Nehemiah there is conflict. Nothing that is attempted for God will now go unchallenged, and scarcely a tactic be unexplored by the opposition. This chapter describes the opening of hostilities and the first long set-back to the work; but before it tells of the immediate sequel, it pursues the theme of slander and intrigue well into the next century, up to the moment of disaster which was to bring Nehemiah hurrying to Jerusalem. If we were following only that theme we could go straight from verse 23 to the news of it in Nehemiah 1; but great things had been happening in the meantime, and verse 24 recalls us

the list of Levites in 2:40, and the name Hodaviah appears there instead of Judah, probably correctly (the two names are somewhat alike in Heb., and the familiar Judah would easily slip into the text). For the family of Henadad, found again with this group, see Neh. 10:9 (10, Heb.).

to the point which the narrative had reached in verse 5, before the digression.

Without that foretaste of history to reveal the full seriousness of the opposition, we should not properly appreciate the achievements recorded in the next two chapters (5 and 6) nor the dangers hidden in the mixed marriages which Ezra would set himself to stamp out (chapters 7 – 10). So the digression is important and functional; it is only misleading if one ignores the careful notes of time which plot the course of these events and finally return us to our point of departure, ready for the next chapter. It needs only the modern device of brackets, opening at verse 6 and closing after 23, to make this clarity doubly clear. They are well worth inserting.⁴¹

4:1–5. An offer refused

1. It is easy to overlook or play down the description of this deputation as *the adversaries* and so to form an impression of the encounter as a rude rebuff to a sincere and friendly gesture. Instead, we are meant to see it as the opening of a battle of wits: the first round in an assault on the integrity of the nation-church, an attempt which would be pressed home with every kind of tactic, disarming or menacing, defamatory or obstructive, but always geared to the one objective.

In passing, we can note the mention of *Judah and Benjamin*, the two tribes which, with Levi, had been the nucleus of the southern kingdom (2 Chr. 11:12f.). A sprinkling of members of the other tribes had also thrown in their lot with them from time to time (cf.

41. Despite the way the passage opens (see on verse 6), the author is sometimes represented as having imagined that the events of verses 6–23 and the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes all took place in the decade between Cyrus and Darius. But the rest of his book shows that he could neither have believed this himself nor wished his readers to do so. To insist on taking him in such a way is to make him not simply ignorant but totally inconsequent: one who starts by denying everything he is about to say. Only the hardest of evidence, certainly not a bare supposition, could support so odd a conclusion. See further on verses 6, 7, 12, 23, 24.

2 Chr. 30:11, 18; 34:9). The expression, *the returned exiles*, is literally ‘the sons of the captivity’ (*bēnē ha-gōlā*): see on 2:1.

2, 3. The mention of the *king of Assyria who brought us here*⁴² provides a pointer to the story of 2 Kings 17:24ff., and another angle on the speakers and their religion. That story, in brief, tells of foreign communities who were forced to settle in the depopulated land of Israel after the fall of Samaria. To teach them ‘the law of the god of the land’ an Israelite priest was eventually sent to them, but the outcome was only a mixture of religions: ‘they feared the Lord but also served their own gods’. The passage sums up bluntly what that really meant: ‘To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord ...’ (2 Kgs 17:34).

Such, then, is the uncompromising verdict of Scripture on the claim *we worship your God as you do*, when it is put forward as a multi-faith proposition.⁴³ It was clearly the underlying reason for the Jews’ reply, though they left it unsaid, contenting themselves with a flat refusal and a reference to the emperor’s instructions. The refusal is expressed almost in the form familiar to us from the Gospels, ‘what have we to do with you?’, except that here it is a statement. NEB puts it well: ‘(it) is no concern of yours’.

4, 5. The resulting campaign of harassment by the local people⁴⁴

42. Esarhaddon (681–669) began his reign 40 years after the fall of Samaria, but the transplanting of populations was evidently a long-standing policy. It was still being practised in the next reign, that of Ashurbanipal (the Osnappar of verse 10). Verse 10 also shows that what is told of ‘the cities of Samaria’ in 2 Kgs 17 was not confined to a small area, but affected the rest of the province.

43. There is a small textual difficulty behind the words *we have been sacrificing to him*, since the Heb. has ‘not’ (*lō*) instead of ‘to him’ (*lō*). MT and virtually all versions treat this as a scribal error. The two words sound alike, and are confused in several places (notably Isa. 9:3a, where AV awkwardly retains ‘not’). Here, the word-order favours ‘to him’; so does the tone of the request. Conceivably, ‘we have not been sacrificing’ could imply ‘because we had no temple’; but since all that was needed for sacrifice was an altar (cf. 3:6) it would have been an irrelevant remark.

44. The term, ‘the people of the land’ (*‘am-bā-‘āreṣ*), is general enough to

had the double force of persistence (the Heb. has a string of participles: they kept doing these things) and of variety. Discouragement (4a) relies on the subtle weapons of suggestion and sneers; intimidation (4b) and threats. Not content with these, they must get their victims discredited and on the wrong side of the authorities – and they were prepared to buy professional help (5) to achieve this.

It is small wonder that they succeeded. The supply-lines from Lebanon (3:7) were long and vulnerable, the new community felt exposed and surrounded; besides, as Haggai's preaching was to reveal, the excuse to postpone something as expensive and burdensome as building the house of God was rather tempting (cf. Hag. 1:2ff.). For about sixteen years, to 520 BC, the pressure against them was kept up, and as verse 24 will show, it was wholly effective.

4:6–23. A parenthesis: further persecutions

Any idea that the Jews had overestimated their enemies is soon dispelled by this glimpse of things to come (see the opening remarks on this chapter, above), however true it may have been that they had underestimated God.

6. *Abasuerus*, familiar to us from the book of Esther, is the Hebrew form of the Persian name Khshayarsha, whose Greek form is Xerxes. This was evidently Xerxes I (486–465). The mention of him here marks simply the passage of time, which had still not cooled the enemy's antagonism. But evidently nothing came of this attempt.

7–23. *Artaxerxes* I reigned from 464 to 423, and was the king whose reign (in my view⁴⁵) spanned the events of Ezra 7 to the end of Nehemiah. These complaints to him, and their outcome, show not only the dogged persistence of Israel's enemies, but the

take its meaning from its context, though it eventually became a standard term for the common and ignorant. Here it means the local population in general, whose hostility was either expressed or whipped up by the group encountered in verses 1–3. In Hag. 2:4, equally naturally, it means the rank and file of the Jewish community.

45. Alternative views are discussed on pp. 161ff.

uncertainty of a great king's patronage – for this was the king who had taken the trouble to send Ezra the reformer to Jerusalem. There also comes to light the delicacy of Nehemiah's task, in that it entailed obtaining a reversal of the king's policy; and we are allowed to see in verse 21 the providential loophole which left room for such a change.

7. This verse, to judge by the new set of names in verse 8, is most probably self-contained, simply mentioning (as verse 6 did) the sending of a letter but giving no details of it. In that case verses 6–23 tell of not two but three separate complaints, the last of which succeeded. *Bishlam* was read by LXX as 'in peace', which the consonants would allow; hence NEB has 'with the agreement of Mithredath,⁴⁶ Tabeel ... wrote to him'. This may well be right, as there is no 'and' between these words. The expression, 'in Aramaic', is repeated at the end of the verse (see RSV mg.), probably to announce the change of language⁴⁷ which now supervenes.

8ff. Not only this letter and the reply to it, but everything as far as 6:18 is written in Aramaic; so too is 7:12–26. On suggested reasons for this, see pp. 149f.

The repetitiveness of the next few verses comes partly from the current style of letter writing (where the words 'and now' [10c, 11c] are the equivalent of a signal to start a new paragraph), and partly from the author's decision to reproduce the high-flown preamble to the letter (9, 10) as well as his own narrative framework (8, 11a). NEB

46. On the name Mithredath see on 1:8. This man was evidently a Persian official whose backing would be useful. Tabeel is an Aramaic name, presumably of a local leader; cf. another 'son of Tabeel', in a context involving Aramaean intrigues, Isa. 7:6 (discussed in W. F. Albright, 'The Son of Tabeel (Isaiah 7:6)', *BASOR* 140 (1955), p. 35).

47. Alternatively the double mention of Aramaic (omitted in RSV text but referred to in the mg.) may indicate 'Aramaic script and the Aramaic language' or the written and spoken word (cf. NEB). The word for 'translated' is the source of the word 'Targum', which originally denoted the oral translation of the scripture portion into Aramaic after its formal reading in Heb. in the synagogue. Hence NEB: 'and read aloud in Aramaic'.

gives it a more modern lay-out, showing verses 9 and 10 as this preamble ('From Rehum ...' etc.), 11a as the editor's note, and then 11b and 12ff. as the address and main text.

9, 10 The long list was calculated to impress, as were the fulsome tributes to the tyrannous Osnappar (Ashurbanipal,⁴⁸ 669–627), who, like his predecessors, had uprooted whole populations (cf. verse 2). The epithets *great and noble* bring to mind the biting comments on such titles in, respectively, Luke 22:25f., Isaiah 32:5–8. But the writers of the letter are not concerned with such niceties as truth: only with exerting pressure by claiming to speak for the whole *province*⁴⁹ and to fear for the safety of the realm (cf. 13–16).

12. *The Jews who came up from you* would be Ezra's party of 458 BC (see chapters 7ff.), or else a later group. In either case some years would have elapsed before they could have been ready for the concerted building operation which provoked this letter, after the upheavals and heartbreaks of Ezra's reforms. Everything points to a date approaching the year 445 in which Nehemiah heard the news which (as I see it) corresponds to our verse 23 (Neh. 1:3).

It should hardly need emphasizing that the *walls* and *foundations* are those of the *city*, not the Temple; but the two operations are often confused. By the reign of Artaxerxes the new Temple had been standing for half a century; we shall be brought back to its story in chapter 5.

The show of touching loyalty continues, reinforced by the writers' allusion to eating *the salt of the palace* (14), i.e. to considering themselves personally bound to the king by the sacred ties of hospitality. But to the reader familiar with the Jews' precarious

48. The form in which his name appears here (Osnappar) is discussed by A. R. Millard in *JSS* 21 (1976), p. 11.

49. The term, *Beyond the River* (Aram, 'ābar nabarā; Bab. Eber-nāri; Heb. 'ēber ha-nābār), is used invariably as a name, i.e. 'Transeuphrates', not a descriptive phrase. The word 'province', supplied in some translations, is not present in the original. This large area, covering the whole of Syria-Palestine, was administered by a provincial governor, or satrap, under whom were governors of such districts as Samaria, Judah, Ammon, etc. See, further, on 5:3.

situation there is irony in this exaggerated posture of alarm, with its crescendo from the shocked contemplation of tax evasion (13) to that of a Jewish take-over of the whole vast province west of the Euphrates (16).

17–23. Still more surprising is the official reaction: a classical product of research (19) without intelligence. The great days of David and Solomon (20), and even of their most spirited successors, belonged clearly to a vanished era. But there is a gleam of good sense in the last clause of 21: *until a decree is made by me*. It made a policy review possible and with it, by the grace of God, the mission of Nehemiah. The decree also forestalled to some extent, as it happened, the reproach of inconsistency over its repeal, for it had authorized only the halting of the work, not the demolition and burning which actually took place (Neh. 1:3). By overstepping their instructions the provincial authorities only weakened their position.

4:24. *The narrative resumed*

The word ‘*Then*’ would at first sight point us to the verse immediately before this; but it only makes sense, as we have seen (pp. 53–54), if it is picking up the thread of verse 5 which was dropped for the long parenthesis (6–23). The time is again that of Zerubbabel, finishing with the same phrase as in verse 5, *the reign of Darius the Persian*; but we are now told what the earlier statement stopped short of saying: first, that the work was not only hindered but halted, and secondly in what year of Darius the deadlock was broken.

Ezra 5. The courage to rebuild

Like every spiritual advance, from Abraham’s to the missionary expansion in Acts, this venture began with a word from the Lord. And in common with the rest, it was quickly tested and threatened. This chapter and the next will show what came of it, and will round off the first part of Israel’s post-exilic story.

5:1, 2. *God breaks silence*

Happily we possess the very words of *Haggai and Zechariah*, and can see in their books not only the fascinating contrast between the two prophets (Haggai the plain speaker, who dots every ‘i’, while

Zechariah is provokingly enigmatic and visionary) but also the persistence and aptness of their preaching as the enterprise wore on. Behind the simple words, *with them ... , helping them* (2), there is more than meets the eye: four years of intimate involvement and bracing support.

We should also not miss the gentle reminder of man's accountability and heaven's help in the expression, 'God ... *who was over them*', at the end of verse 1.⁵⁰ These workers were not on their own, in either sense of that expression.

5:3–5 *Official misgivings*

The intervention came as soon as it was clear that the builders were in earnest. It was understandable. The empire had been seething with revolt throughout the first two years of Darius's reign; and now came this local burst of activity. Why were these *huge stones* (8) thought necessary? Was this simply a Temple, or something more? It was clearly the provincial governor's duty to find out, once his attention had been drawn to it. No doubt the local opponents of the work had hastened to inform him.

There is a mention of *Tattenai's* name (probably) and office (certainly) in a Babylonian record dated 502 BC which speaks of 'Ta-at[-tan-ni] governor of Ebernari'⁵¹ (i.e. of *Beyond the River*). Judah would have come under his jurisdiction, together with the whole of Syria and Palestine, and he appears to have been responsible to a still higher official named Ushtani who was over the combined satrapy of Babylon and Ebernari. *Shetbar-bozenai* is assumed to have been Tattenai's assistant, and the *associates* are spoken of in verse 6 as 'governors' or 'inspectors' (NEB).⁵² It was a formidable company.

50. The clause in italics, however, represents a single Aramaic word, which might mean simply 'to them' (cf. AV and, by its silence, NEB), i.e. '(they prophesied) to them'. But this would add nothing to what has been said, and the word in question stands as far as it can from the verb 'prophesied', which is the first word of the Aramaic sentence.

51. See A. T. Olmstead in *JNES* 3 (1944), p. 46; A. F. Rainey, 'The Satrapy "Beyond the River"', *AJBA* I.2 (1969), pp. 51–78.

52. The word (found only here and at 6:6) is 'āparskāyē', to be distinguished

The demand for credentials and, above all, *names*, portended fresh hazards. Credentials had certainly existed but might well be untraceable after so many years; and names taken down could be hostages to fortune. But *the eye of their God* upon them was better than fortune, and the integrity of the leaders evidently showed through well enough to make any immediate action other than a report seem uncalled for. What God's word had set in motion (1:1) had, as ever, no lack of his care, his watchful eye, to see it through. At this stage only fear could have halted the work.

5:6–17. *The report to Darius*

As a good historian, the author gives us first-hand material wherever possible: here as in 4:11 *the copy* of the correspondence; similarly in 1:2–4 and 6:2–5 material from the archives; later, vivid extracts from the memoirs of both Ezra and Nehemiah.

6. On the terms, *Beyond the River* (i.e. west of the Euphrates) and *the governors*, see on verse 3.

8. The expression, *the Great God*, as used by an outsider, probably meant no more than 'their chief God'. As we noticed earlier (on verses 3–5), the *huge stones* aroused suspicion of an ulterior motive for the project. The mention of *timber ... laid in the walls* shows that Solomon's method of building was being followed (1 Kgs 6:36; cf. Ezra 6:4 which prescribes the same ratio of stone to timber as Solomon's). Courses of timber at intervals, between those of stone or brick, were quite a common constructional feature over a long period in the Ancient Near East, and may have originated as a means of strengthening buildings against earthquakes.⁵³

11, 12. The title of God in these two verses would have had a familiar ring to Darius, who was a zealous worshipper of Ahura Mazda, 'the God of heaven'. But it does not follow that the Jews

from *pehâ* ('governor') in verse 3. It seems to be of Persian origin, but so far nothing is known of the duties of such officials. It may even have meant simply 'Persians' (cf. BDB), though few would support this meaning today.

53. See H. C. Thomson, 'A Row of Cedar Beams', *PEQ* (1960), pp. 57–63, to which Ackroyd draws attention at 6:3–5.

were being diplomatic in using such a phrase, as though to imply that *the God of heaven* could be worshipped under many names and styles. That issue had been settled for them.⁵⁴ If anything, their use of so great a title for their God was a challenge rather than a concession, and verse 12 makes sure that the exile is seen as no defeat for him, but an exercise of power.

14. The identity of *Sheshbazzar*, a vexed question, is discussed on pp. 153ff. The present verse is our means of knowing of his appointment as *governor (pehâ)*,⁵⁵ the position held now by Zerubbabel (Hag. 1:1).

16. Only here do we have Sheshbazzar named as inaugurating the abortive building project of chapter 3. The absence of his name from that chapter can be explained either by his having played only a formal part in the proceedings, or by the theory that Sheshbazzar was an alternative and official name for Zerubbabel, in which case it would be the right name to search for in the archives (cf. verse 17).

17. It is a small confirmation that we are reading an actual copy of the letter (cf. 6a), that it requested a search of records in *Babylon*, whereas the information turned out to be lodged elsewhere, as the next chapter will show.

Ezra 6. The Temple completed

This chapter will bring the story of the first twenty-odd years of the Return to a satisfying conclusion, rounding off what we know of the age of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. A new age, that of Ezra and Nehemiah, will open in chapter 7, a lifetime away from these events.

6:1–5. The decree of Cyrus rediscovered

The vastness of the Persian empire and the delays which its great distances could impose are well illustrated by this enquiry initiated in Palestine, referred to Babylon, and eventually answered from

54. See e.g. Isa. 42:8; 43:10f.; 44:6–8; 45:5–7, 22–25.

55. Ezra 1:8 ('prince', *našî'*) by itself might have meant no more than that he was the leading member of the Jewish community; and 2:63 does not put a name to the governor.

records in the remote *Ecbatana*.⁵⁶ Whatever the outcome might be, the builders had meanwhile the chance to press on, and they made good use of it.

E. J. Bickerman⁵⁷ has won general acceptance for his argument that the Hebrew proclamation in Ezra 1:2ff. and the Aramaic *record* or ‘memorandum’ (NEB) in 6:2c–5 have all the marks of authenticity and are ‘not two variants of the same record but two independent records concerning the same case’.⁵⁸ The former was for heralds to announce (and posters to confirm, 1:1b) to the exiles whom it concerned; the latter was a ‘minute’ for official reference, defining the administrative details implied in the decision. Similar memoranda, noted on various kinds of writing material (cf. *a scroll*, verse 2), have been recovered from several centres in the old Persian empire. Here, in answer to Tattenai’s enquiry, only matters that concern the Temple and its vessels are transcribed out of what may have been a longer document.

4. The *great stones* which had excited suspicion were now found to be expressly authorized – for the term is the same as for the ‘huge stones’ of 5:8 – literally stones for rolling, too massive to be transported by other means. As for *the cost ... paid from the royal treasury*, this was not a quixotic gesture so much as a logical implication of the project, which was prompted by the desire to win the goodwill and intercessions of whatever deities Cyrus ‘repatriated’ (see on 1:2–4). There could be no better use of public money; besides, the charge on the royal revenue could be collected in the province concerned, as Darius did not fail to point out (8f.). The burden would not be felt at the capital.

5. The release of the Temple *vessels* was recorded in 1:7–11. Here, the instruction to restore *each to its place* is a fresh detail, which chimes in with Cyrus’s concern for divine favour which we have just

56. E. J. Bickerman, ‘The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1’, JBL 65, pp. 249–275, points out (*ibid.*, p. 251) that Cyrus had stayed at Ecbatana in the summer of his first year as king of Babylon, the year in which he made this decision (1:1).

57. See footnote 56, above.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

noted. It went without saying that worship, to be acceptable, must be correct at every point. Darius would wholly share this view, and would accept its further implications by providing the materials of ‘pleasing sacrifices’ and by requesting priestly intercession for the throne (9f.). The due practice of the local religions would in fact continue to be a concern of Persian policy,⁵⁹ and would have some far-reaching consequences in that it led eventually to the reforming mission of Ezra, the subject of the remaining chapters.

6:6–12. Darius authorizes the work

No outcome could have been more favourable, or a more striking instance of the truth which William Cowper has captured in the lines,

The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy ...

– for the king’s reply now put the Temple builders in a far stronger position than before. It gave Zerubbabel all the benefits of state money and protection, without the profaning touch of state interference.

8, 9. On the use of public funds, both initially (8) and subsequently (9), see on verse 4 as to the probable motive and the means of it. From the accurate list of materials for worship (9) we can gather that Jewish advice was sought in drafting the decree; and this is confirmed by the accurate theology of 12a (whereby God is seen to dwell in his Temple not by necessity or by a kind of physical presence, but by *his name* – that is, by choosing to reveal himself there (cf. Deut. 12:5; 1 Kgs 8:27–29).

11. One who *alters* the edict would probably have included anyone who violated it (cf. Ryle). There was poetic justice intended in making a man’s own house his instrument of execution for tampering with the house of God. The form of punishment may or may not have been impalement (RSV; cf. GNB’s elaboration of the theme); certainly this hideous practice was no novelty, as Assyrian

⁵⁹. See Introduction, pp. 20ff.

monuments show. But the Aramaic reads literally ‘and lifted up he shall be smitten upon it’, which NEB takes to mean ‘fastened erect to it and flogged’, while BDB understands it as some form of crucifixion,⁶⁰ and 1 Esdras 6:32 as hanging. The common ground between such punishments was the public spectacle they afforded for disgrace and warning. It is a relief to know that Israelite law put two crucial restraints on such a practice: the victim was executed before this, not by means of it (Deut. 21:22; note the sequence), and the display of his corpse must not be prolonged (Deut. 21:23).

Whether the offender’s house was to *be made a dunghill* or to *be forfeit* (NEB) is another open question, as NEB margin points out both here and at Daniel 2:5; 3:29.⁶¹

The forceful terms that enliven the king’s despatch are worth extracting to make their own impact. With regard to outside interference: *Keep away; let ... alone. Supplies? In full and without delay; whatever is needed; day by day without fail. Legal sanctions? With all diligence.* The political motives for this forthrightness may have been many, including a desire to show respect for the policies of Cyrus and to promote stability in a part of the empire which was important for communications with Egypt, at a time when widespread unrest had only recently been quelled.

But behind all this there were bigger issues than imperial politics, and better security for Israel than a king’s good sense. God’s ‘frowning providence’ (to quote again from Cowper), in allowing the opposition

60. I.e. it takes ‘smitten’ to mean ‘nailed’. Myers, without committing himself to this view, notes that according to Herodotus, Darius had 3,000 Babylonians crucified when he occupied the city. Ryle draws attention to the technical meaning which the word ‘lifted up’ acquired (in addition to its ordinary sense) as a term for ‘impaled’ or ‘crucified’, and points out the possible bearing of this on our Lord’s enigmatic use of such language in John 12:32 (‘I, when I am lifted up ...’).

61. LXX, here and at 1 Esdras 6:32, takes the Aramaic *nēwālū* to mean forfeit (to the king). An Arabic root, *why*, may support this (cf. Brockington), but ‘dunghill’ or ‘ruin’ can find endorsement rather nearer home, in post-biblical Heb. and Judaeo-Aramaic. The LXX in Dan. takes the similar word *nēwālī* to mean destruction.

to raise the alarm, had not simply concealed his ‘smiling face’: it had given a fresh impetus to events by evoking the faith and courage of the builders and releasing a truly royal flow of material help.

6:13–15. *On to completion*

13. The expression, *with all diligence*, is something of a keynote in these chapters, expressing first the way the builders tackled their work (5:8), then the urgency of the king’s decree (6:8, 12),⁶² and finally the thorough co-operation of the civil power (6:13). *Tattenai*, as provincial governor, had acted responsibly throughout, in making the enquiry, waiting for confirmation (5:5), and giving full effect to the decree. He was no Sanballat.

14. We paused at 5:1, 2 to notice the seminal role of the two prophets, whose words brought a dead situation to life and two quiescent leaders into faith and action. Now the scene gains depth and momentum as we are shown *the elders*, the lesser leaders, taking up the work and pressing on to finish it, while in the background are the successive kings with their *decrees*, and at the apex the *command* (or decree⁶³) of *the God of Israel*. It is a model of the way God works and of the means he uses.

The mention of Artaxerxes, who belongs to the next century, takes us forward to the restoration of the city walls by Nehemiah, which this king authorized. His name, as the third royal patron of Israel’s rehabilitation, is added here to complete the picture, whether by the author or by an early scribe.⁶⁴

62. ‘In full’ (6:8, RSV) is a variant translation of the same Aramaic word.

Note also 7:17, 21 and (RSV ‘strictly’) 26. In royal decrees, however, it seems to have been almost a matter of formal emphasis.

63. The only distinction between the *command* (*ta’am*) and the *decree* (*te’em*) is the artificial change of vowels made by the Massorettes as a reverential gesture. LXX uses the same word for both; likewise AV, JB; cf. GNB.

64. It was already in the text used by the Greek versions. GNB creates a contradiction by inserting in verse 14 the word ‘Temple’ (‘They completed the Temple’) where the Aramaic leaves room for the glance ahead to Artaxerxes by its more general terms (‘They finished their building’), before returning explicitly to the Temple in verse 15.

15. The Temple was finished by the last month of 516,⁶⁵ only four-and-a-half years after Haggai's first call to action. So this venture of faith, begun in hard times (Hag. 1:6–11) and continued in a 'day of small things' (Zech. 4:10) and of ominous investigations (Ezra 5:3ff.), ended in triumph. It was also – though nothing is made of this here – roughly seventy years since the destruction of Solomon's Temple (cf. Zech. 1:12–17).

6:16–18. *The Temple dedicated*

The word for *dedication* (*ānukkā*) was later to become the name of a festival in memory of the Temple's re-consecration in 165 BC after its profanation by Antiochus Epiphanes (cf. John 10:22f.). But it applied to anything newly made and put at God's disposal, from an altar to a person's house (Deut. 20:5) or a city wall (Neh. 12:27). Even the training of a child can be expressed in such language (Prov. 22:6, Heb.), though it would be unsafe to read too much into this.

The offerings were costly enough, yet incomparably outshone by the 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (1 Kgs 8:63) of Solomon's dedication day. But the very contrast makes its own comment on that short-lived glory. This kingless, hard-pressed group was all that outwardly remained of it. The *sin offering for all Israel* was a more explicit comment; not on Solomon but on the nation as a whole. It was a confession of failure but also of faith. There was still atonement and still the covenant with the whole people – for this was the implication of the *twelve* sacrifices.

18. *The book of Moses* laid down the basic duties of priests and Levites, and the distinctions between them (cf. e.g. Num. 18); but the *divisions* and *courses* were the work of David: see on 2:36–39.

Note that this verse takes it for granted that the returned exiles

65. This month, just before the Passover month of Abib/Nisan, is usually equated with Feb./March. 1 Esdras 7:5 has the 23rd day, not the 3rd; but whether that was the true reading from which a word has dropped out in our text, or whether 1 Esdras has chosen a date which would allow a week's festivities to be immediately followed by the new year (cf. Brockington), remains uncertain.

had knowledge of the priestly law long before Ezra came to enforce it.

6:19–22. A joyful Passover

The feast followed only a few weeks after the dedication (see on verse 15). Rather appropriately the language of the story reverts now to Hebrew, only returning to Aramaic for the letter of Artaxerxes in 7:12–26. (The Aramaic section which has just ended had also begun with a letter in that language: 4:8ff.)

21. This is a crucial verse for correcting the impression one might gain from 4:1–3 of a bitterly exclusive party. That impression dies hard, but in reality we find that only the self-excluded were unwelcome. The convert found an open door, as Rahab and Ruth had done.

22. The word Assyria is a surprise here. If it is a copying error it is an early one, for it occurs in LXX. Perhaps, however, it is meant to awaken memories of the traditional oppressor (cf. Neh. 9:32), whose empire first Babylon and then Persia had inherited, but whose policies were now dramatically reversed.⁶⁶

So ends the first stage, a generation long, of Israel's rehabilitation. It had opened when the Lord 'stirred up the spirit of Cyrus' (1:1), and it concluded with his turning the heart of one of that king's most powerful successors.

On this note of joy the narrative breaks off, to pass over in silence the long interval between the age of Zerubbabel and that of Ezra. The silence was punctuated in 4:6 by a single note from the reign of Xerxes (486–465/4). Elsewhere the book of Esther tells of distant events within that reign, centred on the royal city of Susa. At Jerusalem, Malachi may well have prophesied shortly before the coming of Ezra, giving us, if so, a sharp taste of the mood and temper of the times which occupy our chapters 7–10.

66. The Persians themselves referred to this former province of Assyria as *Athura* (Assyria) in unofficial contexts (see A. F. Rainey *AJBA* 1.2 (1969), pp. 51, 73 n.19).

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