ESV Expository Commentary

VOL. IV

Ezra–Job
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The Bible pulsates with life, and the Spirit conveys the electrifying power of Scripture to those who lay hold of it by faith, ingest it, and live by it. God has revealed himself in the Bible, which makes the words of Scripture sweeter than honey, more precious than gold, and more valuable than all riches. These are the words of life, and the Lord has entrusted them to his church, for the sake of the world.

He has also provided the church with teachers to explain and make clear what the Word of God means and how it applies to each generation. We pray that all serious students of God’s Word, both those who seek to teach others and those who pursue study for their own personal growth in godliness, will be served by the ESV Expository Commentary. Our goal has been to provide a clear, crisp, and Christ-centered explanation of the biblical text. All Scripture speaks of Christ (Luke 24:27), and we have sought to show how each biblical book helps us to see the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

To that end, each contributor has been asked to provide commentary that is:

• **exegetically sound**—self-consciously submissive to the flow of thought and lines of reasoning discernible in the biblical text;
• **biblically theological**—reading the Bible as diverse yet bearing an overarching unity, narrating a single storyline of redemption culminating in Christ;
• **globally aware**—aimed as much as possible at a global audience, in line with Crossway’s mission to provide the Bible and theologically responsible resources to as many people around the world as possible;
• **broadly reformed**—standing in the historical stream of the Reformation, affirming that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, taught in Scripture alone, for God’s glory alone; holding high a big God with big grace for big sinners;
• **doctrinally conversant**—fluent in theological discourse; drawing appropriate brief connections to matters of historical or current theological importance;
• **pastorally useful**—transparently and reverently “sitting under the text”; avoiding lengthy grammatical/syntactical discussions;
• **application-minded**—building brief but consistent bridges into contemporary living in both Western and non-Western contexts (being aware of the globally diverse contexts toward which these volumes are aimed);
efficient in expression—economical in its use of words; not a word-by-word analysis but a crisply moving exposition.

In terms of Bible translation, the ESV is the base translation used by the authors in their notes, but the authors were expected to consult the text in the original languages when doing their exposition and were not required to agree with every decision made by the ESV translators.

As civilizations crumble, God’s Word stands. And we stand on it. The great truths of Scripture speak across space and time, and we aim to herald them in a way that will be globally applicable.

May God bless the study of his Word, and may he smile on this attempt to expound it.

—The Publisher and Editors
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# ABBREVIATIONS

## General

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aram.</td>
<td>Aramaic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Author’s Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>circa, about, approximately</td>
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<tr>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>confer, compare, see</td>
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<td>ch., chs.</td>
<td>chapter(s)</td>
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<td>ed(s).</td>
<td>editor(s), edited by, edition</td>
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<td>e.g.</td>
<td>for example</td>
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<td>esp.</td>
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<td>et al.</td>
<td>and others</td>
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<td>etc.</td>
<td>and so on</td>
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<td>ff.</td>
<td>and following</td>
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<td>Gk.</td>
<td>Greek</td>
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<td>Hb.</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
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<tr>
<td>ibid.</td>
<td>ibidem, in the same place</td>
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<tr>
<td>i.e.</td>
<td>that is</td>
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<tr>
<td>lit.</td>
<td>literal, literally</td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<td>mg.</td>
<td>marginal reading</td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
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<td>repr.</td>
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<td>rev.</td>
<td>revised (by)</td>
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<td>trans.</td>
<td>translator, translated by</td>
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<td>v., vv.</td>
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<td>vs.</td>
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## Bibliographic

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<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Anchor Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABCS</td>
<td>Asia Bible Commentary Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABRL</td>
<td>Anchor Bible Reference Library</td>
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<td>AnBib</td>
<td>Analecta Biblica</td>
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<tr>
<td>ApOTC</td>
<td>Apollos Old Testament Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>Aramaic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCOTWP</td>
<td>Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSBS</td>
<td>Daily Study Bible Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML</td>
<td>Everyman's Library</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPSC</td>
<td>Evangelical Press Study Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>HAR</td>
<td><em>Hebrew Annual Review</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NAC</td>
<td>New American Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCBC</td>
<td>New Century Bible Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIBCOT</td>
<td>New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
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<td>NICOT</td>
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<td>NIVAC</td>
<td>NIV Application Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSBT</td>
<td>New Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
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<td>OTE</td>
<td>Old Testament for Everyone</td>
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<td>OTG</td>
<td>Old Testament Guides</td>
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<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNTC</td>
<td>Pillar New Testament Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTW</td>
<td>Preaching the Word</td>
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<tr>
<td>REC</td>
<td>Revised Expository Commentary</td>
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<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</td>
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<td>Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHBC</td>
<td>Smyth &amp; Helwys Bible Commentary</td>
</tr>
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<td>THOTC</td>
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</tr>
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<td>TOTC</td>
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<td>TTT</td>
<td>Teach the Text Commentary Series</td>
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<td>UBSHS</td>
<td>United Bible Societies Handbook Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTJ</td>
<td><em>Westminster Theological Journal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WUNT</td>
<td>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</td>
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### Books of the Bible

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<th>Old Testament</th>
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<td>Nah. Nahum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Exodus</td>
<td>Hab. Habakkuk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev. Leviticus</td>
<td>Zeph. Zephaniah</td>
</tr>
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<td>Num. Numbers</td>
<td>Hag. Haggai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deut. Deuteronomy</td>
<td>Zech. Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh. Joshua</td>
<td>Mal. Malachi</td>
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<td>Ruth Ruth</td>
<td>Mark Mark</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Sam. 1 Samuel</td>
<td>Luke Luke</td>
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<td>John John</td>
</tr>
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<td>1 Kings 1 Kings</td>
<td>Acts Acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kings 2 Kings</td>
<td>Rom. Romans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chron. 1 Chronicles</td>
<td>1 Cor. 1 Corinthians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chron. 2 Chronicles</td>
<td>2 Cor. 2 Corinthians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ezra Ezra</td>
<td>Gal. Galatians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neh. Nehemiah</td>
<td>Eph. Ephesians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Est. Esther</td>
<td>Phil. Philippians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Job</td>
<td>Col. Colossians</td>
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<td>Ps., Pss. Psalms</td>
<td>1 Thess. 1 Thessalonians</td>
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<td>Prov. Proverbs</td>
<td>2 Thess. 2 Thessalonians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eccles. Ecclesiastes</td>
<td>1 Tim. 1 Timothy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Song of Solomon</td>
<td>2 Tim. 2 Timothy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isa. Isaiah</td>
<td>Titus Titus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jer. Jeremiah</td>
<td>Philem. Philemon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lam. Lamentations</td>
<td>Heb. Hebrews</td>
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<td>Ezek. Ezekiel</td>
<td>James James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan. Daniel</td>
<td>1 Pet. 1 Peter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hos. Hosea</td>
<td>2 Pet. 2 Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel Joel</td>
<td>1 John 1 John</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amos Amos</td>
<td>2 John 2 John</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obad. Obadiah</td>
<td>3 John 3 John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah Jonah</td>
<td>Jude Jude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mic. Micah</td>
<td>Rev. Revelation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apocrypha and Other Noncanonical Sources Cited

1 Esd.  1 Esdras

1 Macc.  1 Maccabees

Sir.  Sirach
EZRA

W. Brian Aucker
INTRODUCTION TO

EZRA

Overview

Ezra, along with Nehemiah, recounts a series of homecomings. Although there is long-standing scholarly debate concerning the authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah and the relationship of those books to Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah has traditionally been viewed as a unified work, a position taken in this commentary.1 As such, Ezra-Nehemiah comprises three sections: Ezra 1:1–11; Ezra 2:1–Nehemiah 7:73a; and Nehemiah 7:73b–13:31. The short first section (Ezra 1:1–11) is an introduction narrating the initial authorization granted by Cyrus, king of Persia, for the Jewish exiles to return to the Promised Land. This occurs as the result of the divine decree from the “mouth of Jeremiah” (1:1).

The second section (Ezra 2:1–Neh. 7:73a), the largest, is framed by two nearly identical lists (Ezra 2:1–70; Neh. 7:6–73a).2 Generally speaking, this second section describes movements to Jerusalem that result in three different building projects, each with its own historical context. The first two of these projects are found in Ezra; the third will take place in Nehemiah (see below). More specifically, the second section begins with a large list of individual names and numbers (Ezra 2), followed by two movements (chs. 3–6; 7–10). The first begins by noting the people are “gathered as one man to Jerusalem” (3:1). Here, as a unified people, they begin altar and temple reconstruction under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (ch. 3). Ongoing resistance to the building projects spans a wide chronological range throughout the reigns of several Persian kings. This results in cessation of the work (ch. 4). However, a prophetic call to restart temple reconstruction leads to a supportive decree from Darius and the successful completion of the temple (516 BC) and its resulting dedication (5:1–6:18). The first movement ends with a joyful Passover celebration (6:19–22).

The second movement (chs. 7–10) takes place fifty-seven years later and is described in two parts: (1) authorization and return (chs. 7–8); (2) conflict and resolution (chs. 9–10). After a brief introduction (7:1–10), Ezra the priest

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1 See Title, Author, and Date of Writing for support of this point.
2 The core ideas for this broad structure are indebted to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah, SBLMS 36 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 37–126. Eskenazi observes, “This major repetition [i.e., Ezra 2–Nehemiah 7] re-presents the major character, provides continuity for the section as a whole and unifies the events in between” (39).
is granted authority to lead another return to Jerusalem and is given tasks by
King Artaxerxes, especially the responsibility of instructing God’s people in
the “laws of your God” (7:25–26). Preparations for the return are followed by a
brief description of the journey itself, concluding with burnt offerings (ch. 8).
Homecomings, however, are not always easy, and the joy of return is short-lived.
An internal crisis arises with a report of serious “faithlessness” among returnees,
as men have married “foreign wives.” In response, Ezra mourns and confesses
(ch. 9). Proposals from within the community lead to the formation of a com-
mission that investigates and promotes confession, repentance, and atonement
(ch. 10). Resolution takes place within one year of the initial departure (7:9;
10:17), with a final list (10:18–44). The book of Nehemiah then recounts wall
building—the third construction project (Nehemiah 1–7)—along with a con-
clusion (Nehemiah 8–13).

**Title, Author, and Date of Writing**
The titles for the books of Ezra and Nehemiah arise from the names of two main
figures within them. When discussing the authorship and date of Ezra, we must
keep Nehemiah in view, for multiple lines of evidence show their unified treat-
ment. Division into two separate books was first attested by Origen (AD 185–254)
and from there to the Vulgate of Jerome (AD 342–420). The author of Ezra is
unknown. Within recent academic discussion, a number of proposals regarding
authorship and composition have been made: (1) the persons Ezra and Nehemiah
each authored the book bearing his name; (2) Ezra authored both Ezra-Nehemiah
and Chronicles; (3) Ezra-Nehemiah was part of the same work as Chronicles but
authored or edited by a person or persons other than Ezra (i.e., “the Chronicler”);
and (4) Ezra-Nehemiah was the work of one or more authors/editors/compilers
distinct from the Chronicler.

While unanimity is lacking, option 4 has displaced position 3 as the recent
consensus. How and when the various sources evident in these books were joined
to form the whole also continues to be a focus of scholarly discussion. A precise
date for final composition of the whole is not possible. Most estimates for comple-
tion range from 400 to 300 BC. The first-person account of Ezra, the so-called
Ezra Memoir underlying the narrative of Ezra 7–10, indicates the completion of
at least some of the material closer to the timing of the reported events (see brief
treatment under Genre and Literary Features).
**Date of the Book’s Events; Occasion**

The multiple temporal notices in Ezra, frequently tied to the reigns of Persian kings, enable reasonably precise dating for the events recounted within the book. The events in Ezra 1–6 took place from 538 to 516 BC. The Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar (605–562) captured Jerusalem in 586 (2 Kings 25). However, in 539, Babylon fell to the Persian king Cyrus the Great (559–530). By this reckoning, the “first year of Cyrus” (Ezra 1:1; 5:13; 6:3) is 538, the year of the first exilic return. It is during the “second year” (520; 4:24) of the reign of Darius (522–486) that temple rebuilding began again in earnest after external and internal factors brought rebuilding to a standstill. A second notice associated with Darius marked completion of the second temple on the “third day of the month of Adar” in Darius’s sixth year (516; 6:15). All of the events in Ezra 7–10 took place during a one-year period in 458, the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (464–423).

The occasion for the book’s writing may be inferred from key texts (6:14–18; 7:10; 9:8–9). In the aftermath of the chastening due to loss of home, land, temple, and king (i.e., exile), the author wanted readers to know that the covenant promise remains: God is still their God, and they are still his people. The book interprets the people’s very existence and the beneficence and cooperation of Persian kings during this time as evidence for the dogged, “steadfast” love of God (9:8–9). This people, to whom “belong the adoption” (Rom. 9:4; cf. Ex. 4:22–23), remained sons and daughters. As such, the old stories of the Law and the Prophets were still their stories, and their calling to be a distinctive people remained. Consequently, the book also exhorted its priests, as exemplified by Ezra, to pursue wholehearted study of the Word of God and to seek holiness—not only for themselves but also for their people (Ezra 7:10; 10:10–11; cf. Mal. 2:4–7).

**Genre and Literary Features**

With its companion, Nehemiah, which is followed by Esther in Protestant tradition, Ezra is part of the postexilic literature that concludes the Historical Books of the OT (Joshua–Esther).⁴ Like many of the Historical Books, Ezra is broadly identifiable as biblical historiography. That means that the book of Ezra provides a written account of past events. From numerous lines of inquiry that could have been pursued, the writer selected and ordered a range of sources to provide literary shape to the book for a purpose unashamedly theological in its presentation of events.

Those sources used in Ezra have their own particular generic identifications and perspectives worthy of study in themselves. Nowhere is the personal viewpoint so apparent than in the first-person accounts of events found in Ezra-Nehemiah, conveniently called “memoirs” by most scholars (Ezra 7–10).⁵ Beyond

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⁴ As in the Protestant tradition, Ezra and Nehemiah follow Chronicles in the Catholic canonical order. Within the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah are traditionally placed after Esther and Daniel and before rather than after Chronicles in the division known as the “Writings.”

⁵ Strictly speaking, the first-person account covers Ezra 7:27–9:15. Ezra 7:1–26 and 10:1–44 are often included in this category since it is assumed a first-person account was the source of the current third-person

_Theology of Ezra_

**A SOVEREIGN GOD WHO GATHERS A CHASTISED PEOPLE**

Through the experience of exile, God had chastised an unrepentant people. Yet in mercy he also granted those who remained (“a remnant”; 9:13) the privilege to return to Jerusalem and the land from which they had been expelled seventy years earlier. These events are viewed as the fulfillment of past prophecies, particularly that of Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1). In his sovereign power, God “stirred” kings (1:1–4; 6:14, 22; 7:27), other individuals (1:5–6; 5:1–2; 7:13), and families (2:1–63; 7:7; 8:1–14) to bring about a homecoming of “returned exiles” (2:1; 4:1; 6:16–21; 8:35; 9:4; 10:7, 16). God’s power is most evidenced in his “hand” that works through events (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Any good that comes to the people, whether protection from external threats (4:5–6; 5:3–5; 8:31) or the reversal of the policies of once-hostile rulers like Artaxerxes (4:7–22; cf. 7:6, 27–28), is viewed as the bounty and steadfast love of the divine King (3:11; 5:12–13; 9:8–9).

**A HOLY GOD WHO CREATES A DISTINCT PEOPLE**

Israel was separated out from the nations to be a holy and priestly nation (Ex. 19:5–6; Lev. 11:45). As God’s “son,” (Ex. 4:22–23) they were to serve and worship him in covenantal fidelity (Ezra 5:11). That task persists in Ezra. Like the first exodus community, this “second exodus” community requires an altar and temple in order to fulfill its priestly calling (1:2–4; 3:3–6; 5:15; 6:19–22; 8:35). To lead and instruct them in holiness, God provides “priests and Levites” (esp. 8:15–20), mentioned in nearly every chapter. When the conflict of mixed marriages threatens the “holy race” (i.e., “offspring”; cf. 9:2 ESV mg.) it is Ezra—the priest—who mediates in confession and repentance (ch. 9) in order to purify and preserve the “remnant” by calling them to separate from their foreign wives (10:10–11). Mixing with the “peoples of the land” is ritual impurity with the potential of leading them to return to the idolatry that characterized so much of the preexilic period and led to their demise in the first place (5:12; 9:7, 14). And yet this was no exclusivism based solely on ethnic or racial identity. As in the first exodus, any who separate themselves to worship the Lord may partake in the Passover (6:21; cf. Ex. 12:48).

**A FAITHFUL GOD WHO SPEAKS TO A LISTENING PEOPLE**

From the start, the question for Israel was “Did God actually say?” (cf. Gen. 3:1). The Israelites’ questioning of God’s word revealed itself throughout their history narrative in those chapters. Some scholars include Nehemiah 8 as part of the Ezra Memoir; others add Nehemiah 9–10 as well. See Williamson, _Ezra, Nehemiah_, xxviii–xxxii. The Nehemiah Memoirs will be addressed in that book’s Introduction.

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6  This list draws from sources identified in Williamson, _Ezra, Nehemiah_, xxiii–xxiv.
in their consistent disobedience to the voice of the Lord through his prophets (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:19). However, something has changed. The Israelites now see that there is a chance to get it right. In Ezra there is a renewed understanding that prospering comes by submission to the prophetic voice (5:1–2; 6:14–15). There is interest in performing according to the written “Law of Moses” (3:2; 6:18). There is submission to the leadership of Ezra the priest, steeped in his understanding of the law (7:6, 10; 10:3–4). There is awe and sorrow for sin rarely evident elsewhere in the Historical Books (9:4; 10:1, 9). Clearly, the fight with iniquity remains, “but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this” (10:2).

**Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ**

In the book of Ezra, past history shapes the present portrait. God’s covenantal people are reenvisioned as

- Abraham’s offspring repeating his ancient journey from Mesopotamia to the Promised Land (Ezra 2:1–3:1; 8:31–32; cf. Gen. 12:1–3);
- chastised and restored to the land according to prophetic promise (Ezra 1:1; cf. Jer. 29:10–14; 30:3; 31:27–28);
- a people led out of Babylonia in a new exodus, with support provided by others (Ezra 1:5–11; 5:14–15; 7:20; 9:8–9; cf. Ex. 12:33–36);
- sacrificing and taught “according to the Law of Moses, with the renewal of the Feast of Booths (Ezra 3:2, 4; 7:10; cf. Josh. 23:6; 1 Kings 2:3; Lev. 23:33–36; Deut. 16:13–15) as well as Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, even for nonmembers of the community (Ezra 6:19–22; cf. Ex. 12:48–49; 13:3–10);
- heeding the call to separate themselves from the “peoples of the lands” (Ezra 9:1–2) upon reentering the land, as in Joshua’s day (Deut. 7:1–3);
- rebuilding the temple (Ezra 6:14–18) and restoring its treasures (Ezra 1:7–11; 7:19; 8:30; cf. 1 Kings 6:1–38; 7:51) with worship practices according to Davidic instruction (Ezra 3:10–11; cf. 1 Chron. 16:34, 37–42);
- threatened but saved from enemies seeking their demise (Ezra 4:1–3, 17–22; 8:31; cf. Judg. 2:14–16);
- breaking faith with the Lord, like Achan, and still needing to confess, repent, and atone for fear of God’s wrath against community impurity (Ezra 9:10–11; 10:14–15; cf. Josh. 7:1, 19).

No direct citations of Ezra-Nehemiah occur in the NT. However, the relationship to Christ is found in his roles as king, priest, and prophet, themes suggested in Theology of Ezra. When these roles are found in the text of Ezra, they provide bridges to Christ. Beyond this, the book offers a glimpse into fulfillment of the great prophetic promises of a final restoration (Isa. 60:19–21; Jer. 31:33; 32:37–44; Ezek. 36:33). The story of a gathered remnant of an elect nation in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, still in need of ongoing purification, looks forward to the final
ingathering by Jesus of his universal body, the church, the purified of all nations, worshiping God in the new Jerusalem. At that time the glory of all the kings of the earth shall enter the city of God.\(^7\)

**Preaching from Ezra**

While the individual Response sections throughout the commentary offer further prompts for the development of sermon outlines and application, several wider principles may be kept in mind. First, if at all possible, one should preach through Ezra-Nehemiah as one unit. As noted already, these books have been traditionally viewed as one book and ideally would be best treated together in a sermon series. The climactic point of the book comes in the covenant renewal and final celebration (Nehemiah 8–12). If left out, Ezra is a story looking for an ending.

Next, one should keep in mind the several historical contexts. Early in a sermon series on Ezra-Nehemiah it may be necessary to address two things: (1) The varied historical settings of Ezra within the Persian period. Many people will never have read Ezra-Nehemiah and thus remain unaware that Ezra 1–6 takes place well before Ezra the priest enters the scene in chapter 7. Congregants may also be helped to note the biblical interconnection with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah within the narrative (5:1–2; 6:14–16). (2) It may be helpful at some point to provide an overview of the Historical Books (Joshua–Esther), or at least 2 Kings 24–25, into which Ezra fits as the next part of the concluding chapters.

Finally, the preacher must focus on the congregation of the Lord in the book. While Ezra is an important figure, and the book presents important principles of leadership, Ezra is not first and foremost a book about leadership. It is not Ezra who is the main character; rather, God and his redeemed assembly take center stage. Once we make allowance for the changing historical contexts, the means of grace presented in Ezra—worship, atoning sacrifice, prayer, Passover, the Word of God, the gathered fellowship—remain relevant for the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16) in every age.

**Interpretive Challenges**

**THE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH**

According to the biblical presentation, Ezra arrives in Jerusalem in 458 BC, the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (464–423; Ezra 7:7–8). Within the year (7:9; 10:17) Ezra deals with the problem of mixed marriages (chs. 9–10). His ministry and arrival occur thirteen years before Nehemiah, whose initial governorship is dated to Artaxerxes’s twentieth year (445; cf. Neh. 1:1). After wall completion, both Nehemiah and Ezra are present at the reading of the Law of Moses and the dedication of the wall that follow (Neh. 8:9; 12:26, 36, 38).

However, a long-standing debate concerns whether Ezra arrived not under Artaxerxes I in 458 but under Artaxerxes II (404–359), whose seventh year was

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\(^7\) See the very helpful theological essays in David J. Shepherd and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, THOTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 111–211.
398. If so, this reverses the chronological order, such that Ezra would follow well after Nehemiah. The major arguments for the reversed order are as follows:\(^8\)

First, if the activities of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, why do they interact so little within the biblical text? Given Ezra's calling to give instruction in the Law (Ezra 7:10), why does he not read the law publicly until some thirteen years after his initial arrival, when Nehemiah is also present (Neh. 8:9)? Otherwise, both men are found together only in the procession at the wall dedication (Neh. 12:31, 36, 38, 40).\(^9\)

In response, the lack of interaction is not surprising, given the particular calling and purposes of each individual. In addition, the Torah instruction in Nehemiah 8 occurs as part of a “liturgical celebration by the revived community.”\(^10\) While the text of Ezra 9–10 offers no evidence of reading of the Law, Ezra does in fact apply the Law to the specific issue of mixed marriages. Whatever else happened prior to the arrival of Nehemiah is not deemed significant to the wider history being recounted.

With respect to the mixed marriage issue, why are Nehemiah's later, milder attempts at reformation required (Neh. 13:23–27) if Ezra has previously successfully dealt with the crisis by overseeing divorces? In this view, Ezra actually fails in his reforms. Accordingly, some claim that Ezra's harsher, legal actions requiring separation (Ezra 10:11) better fit sometime after Nehemiah's initial milder attempts at reformation. However, Nehemiah's approach to the problem seems to presuppose the prior interpretation and application of the law by Ezra (Ezra 9:12; Neh. 13:25).\(^11\)

Finally, the most complex argument for the reversed order arises from the high-priestly succession. In Ezra 10:6, Ezra stays in the chamber of “Jehohanan [i.e., Johanan] the son of Eliashib.” The high priest who is a contemporary of Nehemiah is Eliashib (Neh. 3:1, 20; 13:28). Associated with Eliashib are multiple men with names comparable to Jehohanan: Jonathan (Neh. 12:10–11) and Johanan (Neh. 12:22–23). Following from these texts, some interpreters assume: (1) that Johanan was Eliashib's grandson rather than his son, as explicitly stated in Ezra 10:6 and Nehemiah 12:22–23; (2) that Jonathan (Neh. 12:10–11) is a scribal mistake for Johanan; (3) that Eliashib, the high priest of Nehemiah's day, is identical to Eliashib in Ezra 10:6. Furthermore, a letter among the extrabiblical Elephantine Papyri mentions Johanan as the high priest in 410 BC. It is therefore suggested that the Johanan of Nehemiah 12:22–23 is this same high priest whose chamber Ezra occupies, although he is not called “high priest” at Ezra 10:6. Since each of these points is built upon disputed assumptions, however, they are not strong support from which to argue that Ezra follows Nehemiah.

Overall, each of these and many other arguments in support of the reverse

\(^8\) The multiple special studies and alternative proposals exceed the purview of this commentary. An accessible, moderately detailed overview is found in Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary, TOTC* 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 161–175. For a concise summary of pros and cons of alternative chronologies see David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 321–325.

\(^9\) Some scholars raise the possibility that Nehemiah's presence at Nehemiah 8:9 and Ezra's presence at Nehemiah 12:36 are editorial additions, not part of the original text. See David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, NCBC* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 232; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah, 279*.


order have received cogent responses. Although an alternative date for Ezra’s arrival remains possible, none of the arguments demand adoption of any of the various proposals. Increasingly, scholars maintain the traditional view that Ezra precedes Nehemiah, a position assumed in this commentary.\footnote{Along with the previously mentioned Kidner and Howard, Clines also holds to the traditional order. He lists thirteen arguments for the reversed order and then briefly counters each argument (Clines, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, 17–20). Others who hold to the traditional order include Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, xxxix–xliv; Joseph Blenkinsopp, Ezra–Nehemiah: A Commentary, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 139–144; and more recently Redditt, Ezra–Nehemiah, 164.}

THE IDENTITY OF SHESHBAZZAR

The name Sheshbazzar is found only in Ezra. Called “the prince of Judah,” he is one of the leaders of the initial return and is given responsibility by Cyrus for returning the original temple vessels (1:8, 11). Later, within the letter to Darius, two new pieces of information are given. We learn that Cyrus made Sheshbazzar “governor” (5:14) and that “this Sheshbazzar” laid the temple foundation (5:16). The problem is that the actual laying of the temple foundation (3:8, 10) that follows immediately from chapter 1 is attributed to Zerubbabel (2:2; 3:2, 8; 5:2; cf. Neh. 7:7; 12:1). Note also that in Haggai, Zerubbabel rather than Sheshbazzar consistently receives the title “governor” (Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21). What is the best way to explain these observations?

It has been suggested that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are the same person, with Sheshbazzar functioning as his official name and Zerubbabel his personal name. If so, it is odd that the significance of these alternative names is never explained, as might be expected (cf. Dan. 1:6–7). Likewise, it is likely that both names are Babylonian. Having two names is not unusual, but Daniel, for example, has both a Hebrew and Babylonian name. Most importantly, in Tattenai’s letter to Darius, the elders (Ezra 5:9–10) and Zerubbabel (5:1–5) describe the work of Sheshbazzar using phrases that make Sheshbazzar active in a prior time and clearly distinct from Zerubbabel (5:14–16).

A more probable position sees the two as separate individuals with different functions and importance at various points in the period of early return (i.e., 538–516 BC). Sheshbazzar is granted an official appointment as governor by Cyrus (cf. 2:63) and tasked with leading the initial returnees and building the temple. Given this official responsibility and in royal correspondence with Darius, he is then highlighted for his role in laying the temple foundation as required by Cyrus. At some point prior to the temple restart in 520 he disappears from the scene. For the returnees, Zerubbabel is the more prominent leader, taking the lead with the altar and temple construction attributed to him in Ezra 3 and Haggai.

Outline

I. The Lord and Cyrus Issue Decrees and the Community Responds (1:1–11)
   A. The Decrees of the Lord and Cyrus (1:1–4)
      1. Temporal and Prophetic Notice of the Decrees (1:1)
      2. Cyrus’s Decree (1:2–4)
B. The Exiles Respond and Return with Treasures (1:5–11)
   1. Report of Treasures to Returnees from “All Who Were about Them” (1:5–6)
   2. Report of Treasures to Returnees from Cyrus (1:7–8)

II. The Community Rebuilds Temple, Torah, and Wall according to the Decrees (Ezra 2:1–Neh. 7:73a)
   A. The List of Exiles Returning (Ezra 2:1–70)
      1. Introduction to People and Leaders Who Came Up out of the Captivity (2:1–2a)
      2. The Number of the Men of the People of Israel (2:2b–35)
      3. The Temple Personnel (2:36–58)
      5. Summary Statements (2:64–70)
   B. First Movement: Altar, Opposition, and Temple (3:1–6:22)
      1. Rebuilding Begins: Altar and Temple Foundation (3:1–13)
      2. Opposition Tries to End the Reconstruction Projects (4:1–24)
      3. Prophetic Restart to Reconstruction Yields Epistolary Support with Temple Completion (5:1–6:18)
      4. Temple Completed with Festal Celebrations (6:19–6:22)
   C. Second Movement: Ezra Reconstitutes the People under Torah (7:1–10:44)
      1. Ezra Receives a Decree and Leads Another Return to Jerusalem (7:1–8:36)
         a. Ezra Receives a Decree from Artaxerxes (7:1–28)
         b. Ezra and Exiles Journey from Babylonia to Jerusalem (8:1–36)
      2. Mixed Marriages: Crisis and Resolution (9:1–10:44)
         b. Resolution: Confession and Repentance of the People (10:1–44)
   D. Third Movement: Nehemiah’s Ministry Commences (Neh. 1:1–7:4)
   E. List of Exiles Repeated (Neh. 7:5–73a)

III. The Community Rejoices: Covenant Renewal and Community Reconstitution (Neh. 7:73b–13:31)
   A. Covenant Renewal (Neh. 7:73b–10:39)
   B. Habitation of Jerusalem and Its Villages; a List of Priests and Levites (Neh. 11:1–12:26)
   C. Wall Dedication and Events “On That Day” (Neh. 12:27–13:3)
In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: 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 Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Section Overview
In its two scenes Ezra 1 establishes expectations and objectives for the rest of the book by providing readers with its setting, characters, and important themes. The first scene depicts the proclamations of kings (1:1–4); the second, the response of their subjects (vv. 5–11).

In the first scene the text employs royal voices, both human and divine, to recount a weighty historical moment in Israel’s ongoing story. On the one hand, the initial events are related through the proclamation issued by a human monarch, Cyrus, to his subjects (vv. 2–4). On the other, this proclamation accomplishes the objectives of a greater monarch, the Lord God, who is described as having

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13 Eskenazi, *Age of Prose*, 42.
sovereignly foretold these events through the prophet Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1). When the King of kings speaks, his objectives are accomplished.

Ezra’s opening verses, which parallel the concluding verses of 2 Chronicles, also introduce the Lord’s people, depicting them as subjects of Cyrus and beneficiaries of the decree. Their return to Jerusalem to rebuild the house of the Lord provides the main objective for their wider mission as the Lord’s community (v. 3), while others provide the necessary material assistance to support this objective (v. 4).

This leads to the second scene, in which these exiles under Cyrus’s rule commence movement toward Jerusalem (vv. 5–11). They go not empty-handed but with various treasures given them by those who are near (vv. 5–6) and by Cyrus himself (vv. 7–8). The chapter concludes with an accounting of former temple treasures that, having been exiled like the people, will now return to Jerusalem (vv. 9–11). The obedience of the human subjects— royalties and commoners alike—is attributed to God’s sovereign “stirring,” an unseen action that rouses the spirit and shapes the chapter (vv. 1, 5).

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Comment

1:1 The initial verse establishes the historical setting for the subsequent events and provides the political and theological foundation for much of the narrative that follows in Ezra-Nehemiah. At the human level, the animating force of the action is the oral and written proclamation of the Persian king Cyrus II. Although he reigned over the Persian Empire from 559 to 530 BC, he did not defeat the Neo-Babylonian Empire (where Israel lived in exile) until 539. Thus the “first year” is dated from that point (539–538), with the decree generally understood to have been issued in 538 (cf. Introduction: Date of the Book’s Events; Occasion).

Fortunately for God’s people, this human king’s proclamation fulfills the Lord’s word given through the prophet Jeremiah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, Judah’s next-to-last king (609–597; cf. Jer. 25:1). At that time, the Lord informed his people that their failure to listen to his word (Jer. 25:7) would result in their subjugation to Babylon for seventy years, after which he would bring them home (Jer. 25:11–14; 29:10–14; 32:42–44; cf. 2 Chron. 36:21). The beginning and end of
this seventy-year period is much debated. Suggestions for the range of dates have included: (1) from the replacement of Jehoahaz with Jehoiakim at the hands of Pharaoh Neco II in 609 (2 Kings 23:34) to Cyrus’s defeat of the Babylonians in 539; (2) from the fall of Jerusalem in 586 to the completion of the temple in 516; and (3) from the first year of Nebuchadnezzar II’s rule (605) to Cyrus’s decree in 538 (here taking the seventy years as approximate).

Though the date range is difficult to determine, what is clear is the Lord causes the proclamation of a human king, Cyrus, to fulfill his divine proclamation through Jeremiah. The Lord’s sovereignty over the hearts of kings is not uncommon in Scripture (Ex. 14:8; Deut. 2:30; Prov. 21:1), nor will this be the last time we encounter such sovereignty in Ezra (Ezra 6:22; 7:27). The text explicitly states that the Lord “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.” In the present context, the word translated “stirred” expresses God’s sovereignty in rousing to action either human rulers (1 Chron. 5:26; Jer. 51:11; Hag. 1:14) or nations (2 Chron. 21:16; Isa. 13:17; Jer. 50:9). As foretold by the prophet Isaiah, the Lord stirs up Cyrus with particular force: “I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, ’ says the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 45:13; cf. 41:2, 25; 44:28).

1:2–4 The importance of this proclamation cannot be overstated. In it, Cyrus refers to the divine actor behind his reign, the principle location at which most of the book’s action transpires, and the primary charge set upon him (v. 2). With respect to the divine actor, the decree mentions God five times. In the first mention, the divine being is none other than “the Lord , the God of heaven.” “God of heaven” is common in postexilic texts (Ezra 1:2; 5:11, 12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23 [2x]; Neh. 1:4, 5; 2:4, 20; Dan. 2:18, 19, 37, 44) and especially in communication between the Jews and Persians. The remaining references identify God by his great covenantal promise as the God who is with his people and whose temple is at Jerusalem. The decree’s fourfold repetition of “Jerusalem” confirms the city’s prominence within the wider story of Ezra-Nehemiah as the home of God’s people and the place toward which all action moves and in which nearly all action takes place. Most importantly, Cyrus is charged with renovating God’s house in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2), the major task in the first movement of Ezra (chs. 3–6).

The expressions in these verses, however, must not be viewed as Cyrus’s embrace of the covenant established by the Lord for his people. Instead, they should be read in light of the Cyrus Cylinder inscription (an ancient clay cylinder written to defend the claims of its king), which credits the primary Babylonian god, Marduk, with establishing Cyrus as “king over all the world.” It also describes the Persian policy of restoring to temples the images (i.e., statues) of their gods previously taken to Babylon. Cyrus restores the gods of various peoples (not just Israel), thus emphasizing his own benevolence toward those gods and also his desire for those peoples’ prayers. In addition, he pronounces his generosity toward

14 Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 12.
the people who dwell in cities over which he now rules. The proclamation of 1:2–4 is therefore politically expedient; Cyrus does for Judah what he does for other nations.\textsuperscript{15} In this case, however, the providence of the living God has moved his heart to act. The Lord raises up and deposes rulers for purposes about which such rulers may be oblivious.

In this case, the Lord’s immediate purpose is to bring his homeless people home to rebuild his house (i.e., temple). But a deeper goal exists. In abandoning the covenant, God’s people had abandoned their priestly role (Ex. 19:5–6); by restoring them to Jerusalem to rebuild his temple, the Lord revives their priestly function in the world.

The author of Ezra takes up Cyrus’s proclamation as one of his sources and expresses it in a manner relevant to his audience. Defining the homeless in more detail, the king’s words function as a net to catch any among his subjects (“among you”) who identify themselves as the Lord’s people (“his people”) and to encourage them to carry out the temple rebuilding (Ezra 1:3). On the one hand, hearers will be forced to ask themselves, “Am I among his people?”\textsuperscript{16} The answer to this question will make all the difference, since a positive response will result in the recipient’s playing an active part in God’s restorative work in Jerusalem. On the other hand, returning is not required. Cyrus’s decree urges and encourages rather than demands.

The desired action focuses on three related requests. The first expresses hope of God’s presence, which stands outside human control. Consistent biblical testimony demonstrates that success in God’s plan for his people comes only through his willing presence with them (Ex. 33:15–16; Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; 1 Kings 8:57; Matt. 1:23). Human effort at kingdom advancement bears no genuine fruit without the reality of this central covenantal assurance. The second and third requests are essential to fulfilling Cyrus’s primary charge to “build him a house at Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:2). Hearers must be moved both to “go up” to Jerusalem and to commence the work of rebuilding (v. 3).

An interpretive question in verse 4 concerns whether the assistance for the Lord’s people comes from Cyrus’s Jewish or Gentile subjects. This commentary supports the latter. The Hebrew translated “survivor” (sha’ar) generally describes what is left over or remains. In the context of Ezra 1, it refers to anyone who survives and, by extension, to a “remnant.” Accordingly, the phrase “each survivor” (v. 4) more precisely describes “his people” (v. 3), the favored community that now benefits from this call for assistance. Several texts with comparable contexts support this approach (Neh. 1:3; Hag. 2:3; cf. Hag. 1:12, 14). Having identified the beneficiaries, we now turn to the question of the source of their assistance. Cyrus initially directs his proclamation “throughout all his kingdom” (Ezra 1:1) before singling out the Lord’s people from this wider population (v. 3). He then calls on each local

\textsuperscript{15} Blenkinsopp, Ezra-Nehemiah, 75.

\textsuperscript{16} Some translations (KJV) and commentators translate the beginning of 1:3 as a question: “Who is there among you of all his people?” See Jacob M. Myers, Ezra-Nehemiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes, AB 14 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 3.
population, i.e., “the men of his place,” to support these returning survivors, later called “exiles” (v. 11). These “men of his place” (v. 4) correspond to “all who were about them” (v. 6) in the descriptive response. In other words, gifts to the Lord’s people come from those who are not his people, i.e., Gentile neighbors. In further support, many note this is in keeping with the first exodus: God’s action brings a release from captivity and gracious support from unexpected sources (cf. comment on 1:5–6).17

1:5–6 Response to the proclamation begins with the mention of four groups (Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites) who “rose up . . . to go up” (v. 5). This verbal combination, typically used of calls to action in war contexts (Josh. 8:1; Judg. 18:9; Jer. 6:4), is used here to describe the initial movement toward building a worship site (cf. Gen. 35:1, 3).18 Judah and Benjamin, the tribal remains of the southern kingdom exiled by Nebuchadnezzar, receive particular mention as the new seed to be planted in the land (cf. Jer. 31:27). Benjamin was historically part of the northern kingdom but remained loyal to the southern-based Davidic king when the northern tribes departed, dividing the kingdom (2 Chron. 11:1–4). This mention of part of Israel reveals a concern for all Israel (Ezra 6:17; 8:35) and continues with the reference to priests and Levites, who play an indispensable role in strengthening the people (2 Chron. 11:13–17). Laymen, temple personnel, and all others respond because God “stirs” their spirit to action. Just as he has stirred Cyrus to give his people permission to return (Ezra 1:1), God now stirs them to respond, motivating them to go. Mention of these four groups prepares the reader for the detailed list that follows in chapter 2.

In keeping with the king’s decree (1:4), the returnees’ Gentile neighbors “made strong their hands” (cf. KJV), a Hebrew idiom that may be accurately rendered “aided” (ESV) or “encouraged” (NASB).19 The range of materials given — precious metals, beasts, goods, and other gifts (v. 6) — includes what previously has been generically described as “silver” (v. 4) but is now more specifically identified as “vessels of silver.” This phrase also occurs in a comparable context in the exodus story, where God moves the Egyptians to show favor to his people (Ex. 3:21–22; 11:1–3; 12:35–36). The giving of gifts in Ezra 1 suggests a new exodus (Isa. 43:14–21; 48:20–21), in which the Lord not only calls his people to action but again provides what is needed to fulfill the calling.

Meanwhile, the words used to describe the aid rendered and items given make it clear this calling involves temple rebuilding. For example, the phrase translated “with gold” is frequently, though not exclusively, found in such contexts (Ex. 31:4; 35:32; 1 Kings 9:11; 2 Chron. 2:7, 14; 9:18). Likewise, the noun form, “freewill offering” (Ezra 1:4), and the verbal form, “freely offered” (v. 6), often refer to gifts

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18 Cf. comment on 3:1–3.
19 Elsewhere, the idiom is found in Ezra-Nehemiah at Ezra 6:22; Nehemiah 2:18.
given for the tabernacle (Ex. 35:29) and the first temple (1 Chron. 29:5, 6, 9 [2x], 14, 17 [2x]). The wider range of Scripture thus underscores that the items mentioned are intended not primarily for general support but to aid this second exodus community in second-temple reconstruction.

1:7–8 A more wooden translation of verse 7 reveals the wordplay used to contrast Cyrus with Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon (605–562 BC). Cyrus “brought out” the vessels of the Lord’s house that Nebuchadnezzar had previously “brought out” (ESV “carried away”) from Jerusalem during the reign of the Judean king Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:13).20 Whenever he defeated a people, Nebuchadnezzar usually took their idols and placed them in the temple of his gods to show their supposed subservience and bondage to the Babylonian gods.21 But, since the Israelites had no idols in their temple (Ex. 20:4–5), he used the temple vessels as a substitute, placing them in the temple of his gods to suggest that the Lord had been defeated.

In reality, however, it was the Lord himself who had orchestrated Nebuchadnezzar’s victory. The writer of Ezra alludes here to Jeremiah 27, using the same phrase “vessels of the house of the LORD” (Ezra 1:7; cf. Jer. 27:16; 28:3, 6) and evoking the Lord’s clear statement there that he would raise up Nebuchadnezzar to take the vessels as a punishment against faithless Israel (Jer. 27:6, 16–22). Just as the Lord had sovereignly overseen their removal by one king, he now sovereignly oversees their return by another.

Because in Israel’s case Cyrus has no temple idols to return, he instead returns the temple vessels under oversight of “Mithredath the treasurer” and “Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8). These names further ground the events in a Babylonian-Persian context. Mithredath is a well-known Persian name, and the word for “treasurer” (gizbar) is of Persian origin, occurring only here in the OT. On the other hand, Sheshbazzar is likely a Judean who has been given a Babylonian name.22

1:9–11 The chapter ends with the designation and numbering of the vessels mentioned in verse 8. The primary interpretive challenges concern: (1) the translation of terms occurring only here in the OT; (2) the quantity of items listed; and (3) the relevance of the list.

The terms for “basins” and “censers” are rare, and a wide range of translations are suggested in the lexicons, English versions, and commentaries; the ESV rendering is reasonable. With respect to the numbers, the total of the items listed (2,499) clearly does not match the concluding sum (5,400).23 This may be the result of a

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20 Nebuchadnezzar’s first year (605 BC) dovetails with the fourth year of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (609–597; cf. Jer. 25:1). Some temple vessels were removed at this time (Dan. 1:2). After Jehoiakim’s death, the majority of temple vessels departed during the short reign of his son Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:8), in the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (598/597).

21 Williamson observes, “Their deposit in the temple of the victor’s god was intended to underline to their devotees the inability of their god to save” (Ezra, Nehemiah, 16). A parallel event occurs in 1 Samuel 4–6: the Lord permits the ark to be taken captive by the Philistines and brought to the house of Dagon, where he topples the Philistine god.

22 For discussion of the identity of Sheshbazzar, see Introduction: Interpretive Challenges: The Identity of Sheshbazzar.

23 These numbers differ from such English versions as the RSV, whose individual items and sum total 5,469 because it follows the numbers found in the deuterocanonical book 1 Esdras 2:13–14.
textual corruption, or perhaps the lists in verses 9–10 are partial, while verse 11 offers a total of all items. Either way, verse 11 seeks to show the relevance of the list by connecting the circumstances of the vessels with that of the people. In each case, God’s care is underscored by use of the verb “to lead up, bring up.” Due to the Lord’s sovereign direction of Cyrus, Sheshbazzar’s task to “bring up” the vessels parallels the exiles, who are “brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem” by the Lord’s sovereign hand. Nation follows after nation and still, through a sovereign God who is faithful to his covenant, the people of God persist in their calling to build his house and worship.

Response
Ezra-Nehemiah opens with God’s people, at times scattered among the powerful kingdoms of Egypt and Assyria, now disoriented and displaced under the rule of the Babylonians and then the Persians. Losing one’s place and purpose must rank among the most difficult of human experiences. The Bible calls this loss “exile” (Lam. 1:1–3; cf. Ezra 4:20; Psalm 137). But the Scriptures also assert, especially through the prophets, that though the Lord willed the exile to chastise an unrepentant people (Jer. 7:3–7; 20:4–5; 21:3–7; Ezek. 39:23–24), he also willed to restore them to their home (Jer. 29:10–14; Lam. 4:22; Ezek. 39:25–28).

As of Ezra 1, however, this has not yet happened. In the aftermath of Jerusalem’s capture, temple destruction, and apparent loss of kingship, the Lord’s people are confronted with unrelenting waves of confusion about his reign. Does he care? Has he gone? Is he sleeping? With no answer seemingly forthcoming, the cry has persisted that God would act to liberate his people. Drawing on imagery from the first exodus, the prophet Isaiah had earlier epitomized the prayers of God’s people: “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago” (Isa. 51:9). Indeed, this passage affirms the “ransomed of the LORD” will return to Zion (Isa. 51:11). Later, God proclaimed through the prophet Jeremiah that his people would return to Jerusalem (Jer. 30:1–3, 18). Of course God is not asleep (Ps. 121:3). Rather, the God of heaven acts to confirm his lordship even over international affairs. The fulfillment of this promise begins in 538 BC, as the Lord “awakes” in Cyrus a willingness to permit the return of the first exiles.

The gracious act of bringing exiles home, of restoring them to the land, expresses once more the central covenantal promise: God remains their God and they are still his people (Zech. 10:8–10). The Lord’s mercy to the community must stimulate each member to identify with his people (Ezra 1:3) and embrace the fruit of repentance (Jer. 31:17–20). Once exiled due to covenantal unfaithfulness (Jer. 11:9–11; Ezra 5:12), the renewed people are returned to rebuild his house. Redeemed people must therefore plea for God to stir and create in them a willingness to meet their joyful obligation.

24 The same word translated “stirred” in Ezra 1:1, 5.
Political and historical contexts change. Rulers and nations rise and fall. At times the church is tolerated, at times oppressed. Nevertheless, God is King over nations and grants his people participation in his purposes in every age. The book of Exodus repeatedly states that the goal of freedom from Egypt was the establishment of a worshiping community (Ex. 5:1; 7:16; 8:1; 10:3). The obligation to be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:5–6) included the construction of a tabernacle, “that I may dwell in their midst” (Ex. 25:8). The construction of a more permanent temple under Solomon reflected the durability of these covenantal realities (1 Kings 8:1–11; Ezra 5:11). As redeemed servants of God, the main task persists into the present: to build a worshiping community. However, the Lord is the sovereign builder of his house, establishing Jesus Christ, son of David, as the cornerstone and his people as living stones and priests (1 Pet. 2:4–6, 9–10; 1 Cor. 3:10–11, 16–17; Eph. 2:19–22). From bondage to freedom, from Babylonia to Jerusalem to the new Jerusalem, the Lord brings his people home to their original purpose and ultimate destiny. In that new creation, the Lord will dwell with his people forever (Rev. 21:1–4), and they will worship him with their lives (Rev. 21:22–27).

OVERVIEW OF EZRA 2:1–NEHEMIAH 7:73a

Moving into the second major section of the book (Ezra 2:1–Neh. 7:73a) prompts several initial observations. The placement of the lengthy, nearly identical “census lists” at Ezra 2:1–70 and Nehemiah 7:6–73a bookends the beginning and end of this section.25 Broadly, the section is composed of three distinct episodes describing the movement of exiles that begins “over there” (i.e., Babylonia) and ends “over here” (i.e., Jerusalem).26 In that sense, the lists represent a single community not abandoned by God but granted a central role at this major redemptive moment. Most of the action takes place within this second section, as shown by three reconstructive tasks associated with each episode. The words temple (Ezra 3–6), Torah (Ezra 7–10), and wall (Neh. 1:1–7:73a) provide a simple way to consider the accomplished task for each episode in this section.

26 These structural observations are indebted to Eskenazi, Age of Prose, 37–40.