

ESV Expository Commentary

VOL. IV

Ezra–Job

EDITORS

Iain M. Duguid

James M. Hamilton Jr.

Jay Sklar



EXPOSITORY

Commentary

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Ezra–Nehemiah

W. Brian Aucker

Esther

Eric Ortlund

Job

Douglas Sean O'Donnell

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ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 4: Ezra–Job

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PREFACE

TO THE ESV EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

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

CONTRIBUTORS

Editors

IAIN M. DUGUID

PhD, University of Cambridge

Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

JAMES M. HAMILTON JR.

PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Professor of Biblical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary;

Preaching Pastor, Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville

JAY SKLAR

PhD, University of Gloucestershire

Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

Authors

W. BRIAN AUCKER

PhD, University of Edinburgh

Professor of Old Testament and Director of ThM Program,

Covenant Theological Seminary

(Ezra–Nehemiah)

ERIC ORTLUND

PhD, University of Edinburgh

Lecturer in Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew, Oak Hill College

(Esther)

DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL

PhD, University of Aberdeen

Senior Pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Elgin, Illinois

(Job)

ABBREVIATIONS

General

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

Bibliographic

AB	Anchor Bible
ABCS	Asia Bible Commentary Series
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ApOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
AS	<i>Aramaic Studies</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
DSBS	Daily Study Bible Series
EML	Everyman's Library

- EPSC Evangelical Press Study Commentary
- HAR *Hebrew Annual Review*
- JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- NA²⁸ Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed. Edited by Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce Metzger in cooperation with the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, Münster/Westphalia; German Bible Society, 2012.
- NAC New American Commentary
- NCBC New Century Bible Commentary
- NIBCOT New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
- NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament
- NIDOTTE *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.
- NIVAC NIV Application Commentary
- NSBT New Studies in Biblical Theology
- OTE Old Testament for Everyone
- OTG Old Testament Guides
- OTL Old Testament Library
- PL *Patrologia Latina*. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–1864.
- PNTC Pillar New Testament Commentary
- PTW Preaching the Word
- REC Revised Expository Commentary
- SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
- SBLMS Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
- SHBC Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
- THOTC Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
- TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
- TTT Teach the Text Commentary Series
- UBSHS United Bible Societies Handbook Series
- WBC Word Biblical Commentary
- WTJ *Westminster Theological Journal*
- WUNT Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Books of the Bible

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

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

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 commission 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 conclusion (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 treatment.³ 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 completion 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).

³ The view that these were originally one book is the majority position. Among external reasons for this position: (1) the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah is attested in nearly all ancient manuscripts, including the LXX and early rabbinic and patristic traditions; (2) we must count them as one to make sense of Josephus's numbering of the biblical books (*Against Apion* 1.8); (3) the Masoretes, medieval Jewish textual scholars, regarded the two books as one. Note, for example, that the middle verse of the two books is placed at Nehemiah 3:32 in a Masoretic marginal note—clearly not the middle of Nehemiah. Furthermore, the typical Masoretic notation that ends each biblical book in Hebrew is not found at the end of Ezra but is found at the end of Nehemiah. These and other points are enumerated in H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), xxi–xxii. Features within the books also support this position: evidence of the use of nearly identical lists of returnees (Ezra 2; Nehemiah 7); comparable use of decrees from Persian kings; and the presence of Ezra at the beginning of the final section of Nehemiah (chs. 8–13). For these internal features and others supporting unity, see Paul L. Redditt, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, SHBC 9b (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2014), 30.

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

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

the first-person source, the book includes royal decrees (1:2–4; 6:3–5), letters in Aramaic to and edicts from kings (4:8–16; 4:17–22; 5:6–17; 6:6–12; 7:12–26), inventories of temple vessels (1:9–11; 8:25–27), lists and genealogies (2:1–63; 7:1–5; 8:1–14; 10:18–43), and prayer (9:6–15).⁶

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.

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, worshipping 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

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.

¹⁰ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC 10 (Nashville: B&H, 1993), 44.

¹¹ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xliii.

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.¹²

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)

¹² 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.

- 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)
 - 3. Specifics of Treasures Brought Up by Sheshbazzar (1:9–11)
- 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)
 - 4. Those Who Could Not Prove Their Descent (2:59–63)
 - 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)
 - a. Crisis: Report Leads to Ezra’s Mourning and Confession (9:1–15)
 - 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)
 - D. Nehemiah’s Reforms: Temple, Sabbath, Separation (Neh. 13:4–31)

EZRA 1:1–11

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:

²“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. ³Whoever 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. ⁴And 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.”

⁵Then 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. ⁶And 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. ⁷Cyrus 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. ⁸Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. ⁹And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, ¹⁰30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; ¹¹all 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,¹³ 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

¹³ Eskenazi, *Age of Prose*, 42.