

# The Restoration: 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah

## Lecture 22 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-22>

### *Overview*

This lecture continues the discussion of the psalms, and the genres and forms in which they appear, such as psalms of praise and thanksgiving, divine kingship, lament and petition, blessing and cursing, or wisdom. Another poetic book of the Bible is the Song of Songs, an erotic work the sexually explicit content of which has been piously reinterpreted over the centuries. The second half of the lecture turns to the period of the Restoration when the Judean exiles returned to what was now the province of Yehud under Cyrus, the Persian ruler. The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles refer to some of the events of this time as well as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah are said to renew the Mosaic covenant with the Torah at its center, and to institute a number of social and religious reforms (including a universal ban on intermarriage that will ultimately fail) in order to consolidate the struggling community.

### *1. Additional Forms and Genres in the Book of Psalms*

- [1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* Last time we started looking at the psalms and a number of different genres or forms in which the psalms appear. We were just looking at a psalm last time which seems to explicitly reject the Deuteronomistic interpretation of the national history and the national tragedy, depicting Israel as innocent, and rebuking God for his inaction.
- [2] There's another psalm in this genre that I'd like to read from. This is Psalm 44, selective passages:

“...In God we glory at all times,  
and praise Your name unceasingly.  
Yet You have rejected and disgraced us;  
You do not go with our armies.  
...You let them devour us like sheep;  
You disperse us among the nations.  
You sell Your people for no fortune,  
You set no high price on them...  
All this has come upon us,  
yet we have not forgotten You,

or been false to Your covenant.” [Very different from what the prophets have been screaming!]

“Our hearts have not gone astray,  
nor have our feet swerved from Your path,  
though You cast us, crushed, to where the  
sea monster is,  
and covered us over with deepest  
darkness.

If we forgot the name of our God  
and spread forth our hands to a foreign  
god,  
God would surely search it out,  
for He knows the secrets of the heart.  
It is for Your sake that we are slain all day  
long,  
that we are regarded as sheep to be  
slaughtered.  
Rouse Yourself; why do you sleep, O  
Lord?

Awaken, do not reject us forever!  
Why do You hide Your face,  
ignoring our affliction and distress?  
We lie prostrate in the dust;

our body clings to the ground.  
Arise and help us,  
redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness.”

[3] So here’s a psalm full of anger that contains an explicit denial of the rhetorically inflamed charges against Israel that we read in many of the prophetic books. We have not forgotten You, we haven’t been false to Your covenant, our hearts haven’t gone astray, we haven’t swerved from Your path. Why are You behaving this way?

[4] This astonishing protestation of innocence that accuses God of sleeping on the job is reminiscent of Job. In a way, the two conflicting viewpoints that we see running through a lot of this literature — one in which: there is suffering, therefore there must be sin, Israel has sinned horribly: and the other: there is inexplicable suffering, we haven’t done anything that would deserve this, anything at all — it really is reminiscent of Job. It seems to give us these two perspectives on Job’s suffering as an individual. We see that now played out on the level of the nation. What we have here is a view that is asserting God’s negligence rather than Israel’s guilt.

[5] Then you can contrast psalms like 44, the one I’ve just read, and 74, which I read at the end of the last lecture, with Psalms 78 and 106. These psalms belong to the category of hymns, and some people call this category ‘hymns in celebration of divine action in Israel’s history’ — the sort of historical reviews that praise God for all he has done for Israel; and they toe the Deuteronomistic line in their recapitulation of Israel’s history. From the Creation, from the Exodus and on to the conquest of the Promised Land, they stress Israel’s utter indebtedness to God. God has patiently endured Israel’s constant faithlessness. So when you juxtapose these two types of psalms, they’re just remarkably different.

[6] [Psalm 78]

He performed marvels in the site of their fathers,  
in the land of Egypt, the plain of Zoan.  
He split the sea and took them through it;  
He made the waters stand like a wall.

[7] It continues: “...He split rocks in the wilderness” — so it’s a recounting of all the marvelous things that God has done,

But they went on sinning against Him,  
defying the most high in the parched land.  
To test God was in their mind  
when they demanded food for themselves.  
They spoke against God, saying,  
“Can God spread a feast in the wilderness?  
True, He struck the rock and waters flowed,  
streams gushed forth;  
but can He provide bread?  
Can He supply His people with meat?

[8] It’s interesting that this is in the third person; they did all these terrible sinful things.

[9] The psalm that I just read previously that protests Israel’s innocence is in the first person. We have not strayed at all. We’ve been completely faithful to you, why are you treating us this way? So God’s faithful actions, Israel’s faithless responses are featured in the psalm that I just read and also in 106. They toe the Deuteronomistic line, and again we see this clear attempt to explain Israel’s tragic end. Here again the tendency is to blame Israel and to justify God at all costs.

[10] We move on now to the genre of psalms. Actually, these are two genres that I’m putting together, the genres of blessing and cursing. Obviously they’re rather antithetical. But first of all, psalms of blessing are psalms that invoke God to bless the righteous. It might be the nation Israel, or it might be the righteous within the nation, and to punish or afflict the wicked, and again, that can be enemy nations or it can be the wicked within Israel and other nations. And sometimes these psalms can be quite shocking in their violence and in their fury.

[11] Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon” — very rarely people read all the way to the end of that particular psalm. It’s very poignant at the beginning, but at the very end it calls for vengeance on the Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem, verses 8 and 9, “Fair Babylon, you predator, / a blessing on him who repays you in kind / what you have inflicted on us; a blessing

on him who seizes your babies / and dashes them against the rocks!”

Or “reveres the Lord” – [that] is the sense of “fear” there.

- [12] Psalm 109 contains this very lengthy list of terrible afflictions that the psalmist is asking God to smite his foes with (that was a poorly constructed sentence!), that the psalmist is asking God to, I don’t want to say bestow, but inflict upon his foe. Verses 8 and 10: “May his days be few, may another take over his position. May his children be orphans, / his wife a widow” — that’s a nice way of saying “may he die.”

May his children wander from their hovels,  
begging in search of [bread].

...May he be clothed in a curse like a garment,

may it enter his body like water,

his bones like oil.

Let it be like the cloak he wraps around him,

like the belt he always wears.

May the Lord thus repay my accusers,  
all those who speak evil against me.

- [13] So again, it’s hardly the simple piety that we often associate with the Book of Psalms.

- [14] The last category I just want to briefly mention is a category of psalms that have a reflective or meditative tone. These are psalms of wisdom, psalms in praise of instruction or Torah and meditation. They are somewhat proverbial in nature, many of them will begin with the sort of stock phrase, “Happy is the man who...” so we see that in Psalm 128:

Happy are all who fear the Lord,  
who follow His ways.

You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors;  
you shall be happy and shall prosper.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine  
within your house;

your sons, like olive saplings around your table.

So shall the man who fears the Lord be blessed.”

- [15] Many psalms we’ve seen seem to presuppose worship in the temple, and can even have that antiphonal character, the call and response, or call and echo character. But there are three that, instead, have this theme of meditating upon or delighting in the Torah; that’s Psalm 1, Psalm 19, and Psalm 119 (conveniently enough!).

- [16] 119 is the longest psalm because it’s written in acrostic form. There are different stanzas, a different stanza for each letter of the alphabet (22 letters) and there are eight lines in each stanza, all eight lines beginning with that letter of the alphabet, so it’s a very, very long psalm.

- [17] The psalm represents Torah as an object of study and devotion. Studying Torah makes one wise and happy: Psalm 19, verses 8 through 11,

The teaching of the Lord is perfect,

renewing life;

the decrees of the Lord are enduring,

making the simple wise;

The precepts of the Lord are just,

rejoicing the heart;

the instruction of the Lord is lucid,

making the eyes light up.

The fear (or reverence) of the Lord is pure,

abiding forever;

the judgments of the Lord are true,

righteous altogether,

more desirable than gold,

than much fine gold;

sweeter than honey,

than drippings of the comb.

- [18] So this elevation of Torah reflects the shift that begins or starts to occur in the Second Temple Period, the late Second Temple Period, in which Torah is of growing importance. In about two minutes we’re going to start to talk about this period and the importance and centrality of Torah — its centrality in terms of study — and the study of Torah as a form of worship.

- [19] So there are many different ways to categorize and classify the psalms. Many individual psalms seem to combine units that belong to different categories. So, for example, you have Psalm 22 which opens as a lament, “My God, My God why have You forsaken me?” That’s the well-known RSV translation, and then it changes to a hymn of praise. It concludes with this — it goes on into a kind of confident triumph.
- [20] At least one psalm, Psalm 68, really defies any kind of rigid categorization, so we can’t be too strict in trying to impose these forms. They are helpful guides to the interpretation of the Psalms, but again, we can’t be too rigid about it.
- [21] But from the sampling that we’ve seen it should be apparent that the Psalms are a microcosm of the religious insights and convictions of ancient Israelites. Perhaps because so many of them lack historical specificity — some of them are quite historical; some of them in fact recount Israel’s history in order to praise God, but many of them, very, very many of them lack any real historical specificity, and that is probably the reason that the Psalms have become a great source for personal spirituality in Western civilization.
- [22] Some of them were composed perhaps as many as 3000 years ago, and yet, they can be inspiring, or they can feel relevant to contemporary readers. They can provide an opportunity to confess one’s failings or to proclaim good intentions, or to rail against misfortune, or to cry out against injustice, or to request assistance, or to affirm trust in divine providence, or to simply express emotions of praise and joy, and wonder at creation, or reflect on human finitude in the face of divine infinitude.
- [23] I mentioned briefly the centrality of Torah — actually no — let me finish talking about Psalms and also move onto another major poetic work then we’ll come back to talk about the Restoration period.

## 2. *Song of Songs*

- [24] Another poetic book within the anthology of the Hebrew Bible is the little work known as the Song of Songs. And for many people this is perhaps the most surprising book to be

included in the Hebrew canon. It’s a beautiful and very erotic love song that celebrates human sexuality and physical passion.

- [25] The opening line seems to be a late superscription that attributes the book to Solomon, and it seems more likely however that these sensuous love lyrics are post-exilic. The attribution to Solomon was probably fueled by the fact that in 1 Kings 4, we read that Solomon — or there’s a tradition there that Solomon uttered 3,000 Proverbs and 1,005 songs. So it seems natural to attribute this song to Israel’s most prolific composer of songs and proverbs, according to tradition.
- [26] The speaker in the poem alternates, most often it is a woman. She seems to be addressing her beloved. Sometimes she addresses other women, the daughters of Jerusalem. At times the speaker is a man, but he’s not identified as Solomon. Solomon’s name is mentioned about six times, but Solomon is not said to be one of the speakers and for the most part the main speaker is female.
- [27] There’s a pastoral setting for the book. The two young lovers express their passion through and amid the beauties of nature. There are frequent references to gardens, and vineyards, and fruit, and flowers, and perfumes, and doves, and flocks of goats, and shorn ewes. There are very vivid descriptions of the physical beauty of the lovers. They are described in highly erotic passages. Translations of the Song of Songs vary tremendously as you might imagine, so I’m going to read one little section from the translation by someone named Walsh, C.E. Walsh, which I think captures the tremendous eroticism in some of the passages of Song of Songs:

I slept, but my heart was awake.

Listen, my lover is knocking.

“Open to me my sister, my love,  
my dove, my perfect one,  
for my head is wet with dew...”

My lover thrusts his hand into the hole,  
and my insides yearned for him,

I arose to open to my lover,  
and my hands dripped with myrrh,  
my fingers with liquid myrrh,

upon the handles of the lock.  
I opened to my lover,  
but he was gone. [Walsh 2006, 111-12]

to establish the largest empire that's been seen in the Ancient Near East to date. It stretches from Egypt all the way north up to Asia Minor which is modern-day Turkey, and all the way over to Eastern Iran; a huge empire.

[28] These poems are very unique. They give expression to the erotic feelings of a woman and, as I say, translations will vary tremendously. According to Jewish tradition, the ancient Rabbis debated over whether or not the Song of Songs should be included in the canon. And it was Rabbi Akiva, a late first-early second-century sage, whose view prevailed. He declared "the whole world was only created, so to speak, for the day on which the Song of Songs would be given to it. Why? Because all the writings are Holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."

[33] Unlike other ancient empires, the Persian Empire espoused a policy of cultural and religious independence for its conquered subjects. The famous Cyrus Cylinder — this is a nine-inch-long fired clay cylinder and it's covered in cuneiform writing — it tells of Cyrus' conquest of Babylon. The conquest is described as being at the command of Babylon's god, Marduk, so obviously the Babylonians' god Marduk wanted "our Cyrus of Persia" to be able to come in and conquer this nation. It tells of his conquest and it tells of Cyrus' policy of allowing captives to return to their homelands and to rebuild their temples and worship their gods. This is consistent; this archaeological find is consistent with the picture that's presented in the Bible.

[29] But for some religious authorities over the centuries, the candid descriptions of passionate love proved to be too much, and so the explicit content of the book (which contains no reference to God, by the way; God is not mentioned anywhere in the Song of Songs, so it seems to have been a completely secular poem originally) — the explicit content of the book has at times been interpreted away. So not only do we have translations that tone down a great deal of the eroticism, but we also have a tradition of interpretation that interprets away a lot of the explicit content of the text.

[34] According to the biblical text we'll be discussing soon, Cyrus in 538 gave the Judean exiles permission to return to Jerusalem and reconstruct their temple. The exiles did return; many of the exiles returned. They returned to what was now a Persian province: it's the province of Yehud; I don't think I wrote that up there. Yehud is the name now of Judea and Yehud is where we're going to get the word Jew. Yehudi is the word Jew; one who belongs to the province of Yehud. So many of the exiles returned to this now-Persian province Yehud, and they exercised a fair degree of self-determination.

[30] So we have trends within Jewish tradition that read the book as a metaphor or an expression of God's love for his chosen people, Israel. Christians have allegorized the song, seeing it as an expression of Christ's love for his bride who is the spiritual church. And I think some — I think all of the sections will be dealing with the Song of Songs this week, so you should have an interesting time looking at some of the interpretations of this text.

[35] Now, periodization of Jewish history tends to center on these events, so the period from 586 to 538 or so — that's known as exilic period. Most scholars maintain that the traditions of the priestly source, the traditions of the Deuteronomistic source had pretty well reached their final form in those years. Obviously, older traditions go into the composition of those corpora, but they reach their final form for the most part in that period.

### 3. *The Restoration and the Books of Chronicles I and II, Ezra and Nehemiah*

[31] Now I want to move on a little bit more to the historical background of some of the books that we'll be looking at in today's lecture and then also the last couple of lectures.

[36] So the post-exilic period following is also known as the Persian period, at first, but of course the Persians won't rule for long. Alexander's going to come marching through the Ancient Near East, so after the Persians we'll have the Hellenistic Period. But the

[32] We left the Israelites in exile in Babylon. And in 539 BCE the Babylonian Empire was itself defeated by the Persians under the leadership of Cyrus — Cyrus of Persia. In 539 he manages

period after the exile is referred to as the Persian period, the period of the Restoration, [or] the post-exilic period. It's also called the Second Temple Period because by about 520 they will have reconstructed the temple; so it's not inaccurate really to refer to this time as the Second Temple Period. The second temple will stand until 70, the year 70 of the Common Era. So the period, of course, before the exile we think of as the First Temple Period (the temple is destroyed in 586), so the first temple period or pre-exilic period.

[37] Now, the books of First and Second Chronicles provide a second account of the history of Israel. Genesis all the way through 2 Kings has given us one long account. First Chronicles actually begins with Adam and it does go through — 1 and 2 Chronicles do go up to the Babylonian exile. They echo a good deal of what we find in the Books of Samuel and Kings, but they have more of a priestly bias and they eliminate a lot of material that sheds a poor light on Israel's kings. So, for example, you won't find the story of David and Bathsheba when you're reading the Chronicles account of the reign of David.

[38] So Chronicles is already an interpretation. It's an inner-biblical interpretation. It is the Bible interpreting itself. A later strand of tradition reflecting on earlier strands of tradition and representing that material in a particular light. The Chronicler is less interested in David's political genius, for example; it doesn't go into his strategy and his political accomplishments nearly so much as it does go into his role in establishing Jerusalem as a religious capital, in planning a temple, in organizing the music for temple worship. These are the interests of the Chronicler.

[39] The Book of 2 Chronicles concludes with the decree of Cyrus, permitting the Jewish captives to return to their homeland and build their temple. We have a second, fuller version of this decree, which as I said, seems to be consistent with what we know of Persian policies — the policy of tolerating and even encouraging local religious cults. So that fuller version appears in Ezra.

[40] I'm going to read first from 2 Chronicles. 2 Chronicles 36:22-23,

And in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing, as follows: "Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me with building Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all of His people, the Lord His God be with him and let him go up.

[41] Then in Ezra there is an addition. Ezra 1:3 and 4,

...let Him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah, and build the House of the Lord God of Israel, the God that is in Jerusalem; and all who stay behind, wherever he may be living, let the people of his place assist him with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, besides the freewill offering to the House of God that is in Jerusalem.

[42] Notice that the decree at the very beginning in Chronicles — in the 2 Chronicles version — the decree is said to fulfill the word of the prophet Jeremiah. Now, you remember that Jeremiah prophesied that the Babylonian exile would last 70 years; he wrote a letter, he said settle down, this is going to last a while, plant plants and build homes. So he had prophesied 70 years for an exile. Well, from the time of the first departure of exiles in 597, maybe to the return in 538, 61 years — it's close. If you look from the destruction of the first temple perhaps in 586 to the completion of the second somewhere between 520, 515, we're not really sure, that's about 70 years. Either way, it seems that in the eyes of the Chronicler it was close enough. This seems to have been a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction. That it would be about 70 years before they would return.

[43] So the books of Ezra and Nehemiah give an account of the return of the Babylonian exiles in the late sixth and fifth century. And Ezra and Nehemiah were regarded as a unit; those two books were regarded as a unit in the Hebrew Bible, until the Middle Ages. They may in fact have formed part of a larger historical work; Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles.

- [44] Ezra, and to a lesser degree, Nehemiah seem to have a good deal in common with Chronicles, and therefore may derive from the same author. So sometimes in secondary literature you will see references to the Chronicler, which refers to the hypothetical author of 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra and possibly Nehemiah.
- [45] The chapters report the initial return of the exiles, the rebuilding of the temple, the career of Ezra, and the career of Nehemiah. All four of the books were probably edited in the late fifth century BCE, maybe close to the fourth century — that’s our best guess — when Judah was a small province still within the massive Persian Empire.
- [46] The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, however, contain conflicting information about the return, about the restoration, and as a result our knowledge of the timing of various events is quite poor. It’s really not clear who returned first to help rebuild Jerusalem, whether it was Ezra a priest, or Nehemiah a scribe. He was a Persian — [correction]: not a scribe, he was a governor. Ezra was a priest and scribe, Nehemiah was a Persian appointed governor of Judah.
- [47] And even though the Chronicler dates events according to the year of the reign of the Persian king, the king is Artaxerxes, and unfortunately there are two kings named Artaxerxes in the fifth century and there’s one in the fourth, so it’s extremely difficult to figure out when these events happened. So keeping in mind that even the experts cannot agree at all on the sequence of events, we are simply going to look at the career of Ezra, the career of Nehemiah. I’m not going to claim priority for either of them.
- [48] Because the events are not presented in chronological order, even in the books, I’m going to skip fairly freely around, back and forth between the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.
- [49] So the Book of Ezra opens with Cyrus’ decree, which we’ve heard, and then provides a long list of the exiles who returned to Judah after 538. They’re led by Sheshbazzar; and then among the exiles he says there was Yeshua who was a priest and Zerubbavel. Zerubbavel was a grandson of King Jehoiakim who was the last Davidic king who had been kept in house arrest in Babylon. He had been among the exiles in 597, he eventually had been released from house arrest in Babylon, so now his grandson Zerubbavel, a Davidide, was returning to Jerusalem, and you can imagine that this would have stirred hope in the hearts of many.
- [50] Chapter 3 of Ezra describes the sacrifices offered on a rebuilt altar and the beginning of the process of rebuilding the temple, probably around 521 or so:
- When the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, priests in their vestments with trumpets, and Levites sons of Asaph with cymbals were stationed to give praise to the Lord, as King David of Israel had ordained. They sang songs extolling and praising the Lord, “For He is good, His steadfast love for Israel is eternal.” All the people raised a great shout extolling the Lord because the foundation of the House of the Lord had been laid. Many of the priests and Levites and chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first house [=the first temple], wept loudly at the sight of the founding of this house. Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. The people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people’s weeping, for the people raised a great shout, the sound of which could be heard from afar.
- [51] So the older generations who remember the magnificence of the first temple of Solomon shed tears. The younger people are shouting for joy at the establishment of a new temple.
- [52] But the building doesn’t proceed smoothly and that’s due largely to the hostilities of the surrounding communities. These surrounding communities are referred to adversaries, adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. In chapters 4, 5, and 6 these Samaritans in many cases, offer to assist in the project of reconstruction. Their offer is rejected, and as a result the Samaritans, insulted, persuade the Persians that this is a bad idea. Rebuilding a potentially rebellious city is a bad idea, and the Persians listen to them and they order the rebuilding stopped.
- [53] There are two prophets then, Haggai and Zechariah. So these are prophets now of the post-exilic period. As we go through our

periodization of prophets you'll want to add this fourth category, post-exilic prophets.

[54] They urge the continuation of the building. A Persian official objects, the Jews appeal to the new Persian Emperor Darius. And they ask him to search through the court records, look for the original authorization by Cyrus — we have been authorized to do this. According to the text, Cyrus' edict is found. Darius agrees not only to enforce it, but to honor his obligation to supply money for the rebuilding. This is under Persian imperial sponsorship, and he will honor the obligation to supply money for the rebuilding and to procure sacrifices as well. The temple is finally dedicated, we think, about 515 BCE and a Passover celebration is celebrated in the sanctuary.

[55] There are other social tensions in the Restoration community, specifically friction between those who had remained behind in Judea during the exilic period and the returning exiles, who although they were few in number, enjoyed imperial support.

[56] These self-styled children of the exile, they refer to themselves as sons of the exiled or children of the exile [and] they refer to the local people — the local Judeans — as “peoples of the land.” This is a derogatory term that seems to cast aspersions on their very status as Jews. They're like the other nations or peoples of the land. They seem to be classifying even Judeans in that category of “other.” As we will soon see, some radically different views of Jewish identity are going to emerge during this period.

[57] So that's the initial Restoration, the process by which the temple was rebuilt. Let's jump now to (we think) somewhere in the mid-fifth century perhaps. Nehemiah — he's a Jewish subject of Persia — he's the official cup bearer to the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes in the court at Susa. This is a position that probably entailed his being a eunuch.

[58] The Book of Nehemiah opens with a description of Nehemiah's grief. He hears these reports of the terrible conditions of his people in Jerusalem sometime around the mid-fifth century and, weeping, he asks for the consent of the emperor to go to Jerusalem and to help rebuild the city. So Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem, we think about 445 BCE, and he undertakes the refortifications of the city. And

he meets with opposition. There's some internal opposition. There's a female prophetess, Noadiah, in Nehemiah 6:14, who seems to be opposed to this. There's some external opposition as well from Israel's neighbors: the Samaritans, the Ammonites, some Arabs. They resent this reconstruction and they see the reconstruction of the city's defensive walls as an affront to Persian rule.

[59] But Nehemiah continues; he gives his workmen weapons so that they can protect themselves against enemy attack and the walls around the city are completed in record time. These refortifications help to establish Jerusalem as an urban center, and eventually Nehemiah is appointed governor of Judah [Yehud], under Persian domination.

[60] The text says that he institutes various reforms: economic reforms, social reforms. He seems to be trying to improve the situation of the poor, and establish public order. We think that the governorship of Nehemiah overlapped to some degree with the mission of Ezra, and Ezra's activities are reported in both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some scholars believe that they didn't overlap, that that's an illusion created by our sources.

#### *4. Ezra's Dissolution of Foreign Marriages and Renewal of the Covenant*

[61] But chapter 7 of the book of Ezra introduces Ezra. He's a Babylonian Jew, he comes from a priestly family, but he's also described as a scribe who is expert in the Torah of Moses. In verse 10 of chapter 7 it's said that Ezra had dedicated himself to study the teaching of the Lord so as to observe it and to teach the laws and rules to Israel. So Ezra is commissioned by the Persian Emperor in a letter, the text of which is represented or reproduced in chapter 7:12-26. The Emperor commissions him to travel to Jerusalem, to supervise the temple, and to assess how well Mosaic standards are being implemented in the Judean province. He's charged with appointing scribes and judges to administer civil and moral order. He has the backing of the Persian empire to institute Mosaic Law as the standard and norm for the community in Jerusalem. This is standard operating procedure for the Persians — to find loyal subjects to regulate their own local cults according to ancestral traditions and



Ezra's work needs to be understood in that light.

[62] Chapter 7:[14-26, selections]:

“For you are commissioned by the king and his seven advisors to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care,...And you, Ezra, by the divine wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to judge all the people of the province of Beyond the River” [Cis-Jordan] [See Note 1] “who know the laws of your God, and to teach those who do not know them. Let anyone who does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king be punished with dispatch,” [so he has powers of enforcement] “whether by death, corporal punishment, confiscation of possessions, or imprisonment.”

[63] In addition, Ezra is appointed to bring treasures of silver and gold to the temple. The text says that Ezra brings with him a copy of the Mosaic Torah in order to regulate and unify Jewish life in the Restoration community, and together Ezra and Nehemiah bring about a revival.

[64] Ezra's reforms are aimed at strengthening the religious identity of the Judahites. He wants to revitalize morale and he also wants to prevent the decline of Mosaic standards and to prevent the decline of biblical monotheism. His two most important acts are the dissolution of foreign marriages (this is a first) and his renewal of the covenant.

[65] I'll say a little bit first about the dissolution of foreign marriages. Ezra is said to have been distressed when he arrived to discover that many of the returned exiles had married with, we think, non-Israelite women. It's not clear. Sometimes “peoples of the land” might refer to Judeans who had remained behind but who themselves had perhaps become lax, in Ezra's eyes, in their observance of Mosaic standards. But they had married women who seemed to follow pagan practices perhaps.

[66] Chapters 9 and 10 describe his efforts to reverse this trend. He begs God to forgive the people for this violation of his law, and then at a great assembly, he calls upon all the people to divorce their foreign spouses. Now, this isn't in fact Pentateuchal law plainly read. The

prohibition of marriage with any foreigner is a great innovation on Ezra's part, and it's one that, as we shall see, was not universally accepted at all.

[67] The high incidence of intermarriage is perhaps indicated by the fact that it took several months to identify all those who had intermarried and to send away their spouses and their children. Even priests were among those who didn't view intermarriage per se as a violation of the covenant. In the next two lectures we'll see other perspectives on this question of integration of foreign groups within the community. So I raise it as an issue now: we're going to see many different attitudes as we move through the last section of the Bible.

[68] The text of Ezra's prayer before God is a fascinating presentation of Ezra's interpretation of Israel's history and prior texts, and again, constitutes yet another response to the calamity that had befallen the nation; but [it] also constitutes another example of inner-biblical interpretation: later levels, or layers within the biblical text turning to older traditions and interpreting them, or reinterpreting them.

[69] So listen to how Ezra understands biblical tradition and listen to how he interprets Israel's history. This is from Ezra 9, he's praying to God before the assembled people. [Vv. 7-12]

From the time of our fathers to this very day we have been deep in guilt. Because of our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to foreign kings, to the sword, to captivity, to pillage, and to humiliation, as is now the case. But now, for a short while, there has been a reprieve from the Lord our God, who has granted us a surviving remnant...

[70] remember the prophetic idea of a remnant that would survive?

...and given us a stake in His Holy place; our God has restored the luster to our eyes and furnished us with a little sustenance in our bondage... Now, what can we say in the face of this, O our God, for we have forsaken Your commandments, which You gave us through Your servants, the prophets when You said,

[71] here he's quoting the Bible;

'The land that you are about to possess is a land unclean through the uncleanness of the peoples of the land, through their abhorrent practices with which they, in their impurity, have filled it from one end to the other. Now then, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons; do nothing for their well-being or advantage, then you will be strong and enjoy the bounty of the land and bequeath it to your children forever.'

[72] So he's quoting earlier tradition.

After all that has happened to us because of our evil deeds and our deep guilt — though You, our God, have been forbearing, [punishing us] less than our iniquity [deserves] in that You have granted us such a remnant as this — shall we once again violate Your commandments by intermarrying with these people who follow such abhorrent practices? Will You not rage against us till we are destroyed without remnant or survivor?

[73] So Ezra's argument is, first of all, following the Deuteronomistic line. History reflects God's judgment. Israel's tragic fate is because of her sins, and indeed, she's been given a mercy and a reprieve. She hasn't been punished as fully as she deserves. He also follows the prophetic line that this remnant has been saved and now restored. So the covenant hasn't been completely abrogated. But notice his identification of the sin for which Israel was punished. Israel has mixed — and this is the language that he uses elsewhere — Israel has mixed holy seed with common seed through marital unions with the peoples of the land, meaning foreigners certainly, but possibly also some of these Judeans who had remained in the land during the exile and who seem to have adopted some of the customs of their neighbors. And if history is any guide, he's warning, the community is placing itself at great risk by intermarrying again with those who will lead them into the worship of other gods and the performance of abhorrent practices.

[74] Surely, he says, this time God will not be so merciful as to spare even a remnant. So learn from history. We sinned once by intermarrying, that was the sin for which we have been exiled. If we do the same thing again, this time we will be punished without any hope of a remnant.

[75] So his interpretation of Mosaic prescriptions about marriage is an expansive one. The Torah does prohibit intermarriage with the native Canaanites at the time of the conquest, the rationale being that they would lead Israelites into abhorrent pagan practices, child sacrifices, and so on. But of course it's actually not a completely — there is actually a legal provision for how to go about marrying a captive Canaanite woman; so it's not a completely unqualified prohibition to begin with.

[76] The Torah then also prohibits intermarriage with certain, very specific foreigners, Moabites and Ammonites, specifically because of their cruel treatment of the Israelites during their trek from Egypt to the Promised Land.

[77] Egyptians are prohibited only to the third generation. But there's no prohibition against marriage with other foreigners — a Phoenician, an Arab — so long as they enter into the covenant of Yahweh, as long as they don't lead the Israelite partner into the worship of other gods. The rationale for intermarriage prohibitions in the Pentateuch are always behavioral, they're always moral. If this person will lead you astray to abhorrent practices that is prohibited. But marriage into the group is not prohibited.

[78] Indeed, Israel's kings married foreign women regularly. Many of the kings of Israel were themselves offspring of these foreign women. They were still fully Israelite. Israelite identity passed through the male line. But Ezra who is protective of Israel's religious identity, is zealous for the Lord, is wary of God's wrath — he's interpreting and promulgating these prohibitions in such a way as to create a general ban on intermarriage of any kind. Israel mustn't make the same mistake twice. Israelite identity is now made contingent in Ezra's view on the status of both the mother and the father. One is only an Israelite if one has both an Israelite mother and an Israelite father. Both must be of the "holy seed." This is a phrase [holy seed]

which is being coined now in Ezra's time and is now serving as a rationale for the ban on intermarriage. It's not that a person is prohibited because they will lead you astray to the worship of other gods. That's something that can be corrected if the person in fact enters into the religious community of Israel. The rationale is that they just simply are not of holy seed and there's nothing that you can do to change that, so this becomes a permanent and universal ban.

[79] So that's the first very important thing that Ezra tries to do: the dissolution of marriage with foreign spouses and to establish a blanket universal ban on intermarriage, to make Israelite identity dependent on the native Israelite status of both mother and father.

[80] His second deed is the renewal of the Mosaic Covenant. This act is reported in Nehemiah 8[:1-8]. There's an extended public reading of the Torah of Moses and that's followed then by a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant:

When the seventh month arrived — the Israelites being [settled] in their towns — the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding. He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching.

[81] [the word here is Torah]

Ezra the scribe stood upon a wooden tower made for the purpose...Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; as he opened it, all the people stood up. Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with hands upraised...[The leaders] and the Levites explained the Teaching to the people, while the people stood in their places. They read from the scroll of the teaching

of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading.

[82] Apparently, the assembled people no longer understood the classical Hebrew of the Bible, if it was formulated in that. What he was actually — what is this scroll? This is the first time now that we're hearing about the Torah as a scroll and being read to people. So this is historically quite fascinating. But the people don't seem to be able to understand it. Ezra and his assistants are probably translating it into Aramaic which is now the lingua franca of the Persian Empire, giving the sense of the text perhaps as it's being read. We really can't be certain what it is that Ezra was presenting as the Torah of Moses. It may have been the Pentateuch basically in the form that we now have it. Both D and P are very strongly reflected in Ezra. He quotes from them, he refers to them, and then interprets and applies them in new and interesting ways.

[83] In any event, this Torah was to become the basis and the standard — with a lot of good heavy Persian imperial support — for the Jewish community from that time forward. And at a festival celebration a few weeks later there was an additional public teaching of the law and a recital of Israel's history that once again laid special emphasis on Israel's obligations, what she owed to Yahweh.

##### *5. The Calamities as Cautionary Tales in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

[84] The recitation of that history is found in Nehemiah 9, and again as an interpretation of the calamities that Israel had faced; it's consistent with the earlier prayer of Ezra that I read. God has withheld nothing from Israel, yet Israel has defied God, rebelled against Him, killed the prophets who had urged them to turn back to the covenant; and God tolerated Israel's sin as long as he possibly could but finally he had to punish her. But even so, in His great compassion God didn't abandon Israel completely.

[85] Verse 33 of this prayer then turns and addresses God, "Surely you are in the right with respect to all that has come upon us, for You have acted faithfully and we have been wicked." So again, [we see] this justification of God and blaming of the Israelites for all that has befallen them

and learning a lesson for that in the future — no intermarriage.

[86] All of this is but a prelude then to the people's reaffirmation and renewed commitment to the covenant, and it's spelled out in great detail in Nehemiah 10. Chapter 10 opens, "In view of all this, we make this pledge and put it in writing," and then there follows a list of all the officials: the Levites, the priests, the heads of the people. And it says that all of these officials and leaders in conjunction join with the people, verse 30 and 31, they:

... join with their noble brothers, and take an oath with sanctions to follow the Teaching of God, given through Moses the servant of God, and to observe carefully all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, His rules and laws. Namely: We will not give our daughters in marriage to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.

[87] So we then read the various obligations that the people are committing themselves to, and these include observance of the Sabbath day and the Sabbath year as well as supplying the needs of and the upkeep of the temple. But it's surely significant that the ban on intermarriage and the observance of the Sabbath top the list. We are going to commit ourselves again to God's teaching, his rules and laws; namely: we won't intermarry and we'll observe the Sabbath! So these are singled out at the top of the list, as central covenantal obligations.

[88] Chapter 13 describes Nehemiah's efforts to see that the people live up to this pledge. And he scurries around Jerusalem — he's enforcing the cessation of work on the Sabbath, he's persuading individuals to give up their foreign wives.

[89] Ezra and Nehemiah were zealous in their promotion of the renewed covenant, and in their view, the centerpiece of the covenant was the ban on intermarriage and the observance of the Sabbath. It is interesting that these two phenomena, in addition to circumcision, will emerge as the three identifying features of a Jew in the ancient world when you look at external literature: they are a circumcised people, there's one day of the week that they don't work, and they don't marry outside their group. Those are the kinds of themes that you

start to see in writings of ancient Greeks and so on when they talk about this people.

[90] Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms can be seen as a direct response to the events of Israel's history. What's happened before just cannot be allowed to happen again. And they view the tragic history as a cautionary tale. It's calling upon the people to make the necessary changes to avoid a repeat disaster. There's only one way to guarantee that Israel will never again be destroyed. She has to live up to the covenant she failed to honor in the past. She has to rededicate herself to the covenant and this time she has to be single-minded in her devotion to God, because history has shown that God will punish faithlessness and betrayal. Israel can't be led astray by the beliefs and practices of her neighbors, and so a strict policy of separation has to be enforced if Israel's going to finally be cured of the desire for idols.

[91] Again, it's interesting that in Jewish tradition — the Jewish tradition is that the flirtation with idolatry, which had plagued Israel in the First Temple Period, ceased to exist in the Second Temple Period. So again, this is another area in which Jews earned for themselves a reputation in antiquity. They have a reputation for their strict monotheism, their scrupulous avoidance of foreign gods. They will not bow down to another god. There is this people that doesn't intermarry, they don't work one day a week, and they won't bow down to our kings or to other gods; these are the kinds of things [observations] you find in writings in this period.

[92] So Ezra and Nehemiah, backed by Persian imperial authority, help to create and preserve — not just preserve — create and preserve, a national and religious identity for Jews at a precarious time. Their reforms were not universally welcomed. Already, even in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah which give a very sympathetic account of their work, obviously, we can see rumblings and discontent.

[93] There are other works that are going to express opposition to the separatism of Ezra and Nehemiah. Isaiah 56:1-7, an interesting passage, it states quite explicitly that foreigners who have joined themselves to God are welcome. They are welcome in the temple; they are welcome even to minister before God. There is a good deal of historical evidence for

the assimilation of foreigners within the Jewish community going on all the time. Non-Jews became Jews, they married Jews. We know of one family, the Tobiad family, quite influential — they were originally an Ammonite family. Now, that is a group that is explicitly prohibited from entering the congregation in Deuteronomy! But this is a family that adopted Jewish identity, became fully assimilated. So clearly there's great difference of opinion on this matter. In the last two lectures we're going to be focusing a lot on the diversity of approaches to the whole question of Israelite or Jewish identity, and the relationship to the Gentile world.

[94] So, although under Ezra, the Torah became the official and authoritative norm for Israel, although under Ezra Judaism took the decisive step towards becoming a religion of Scripture, based on the scriptural text. This did not in itself result in a single uniform set of practices or beliefs. Adopting the Torah as a communal norm simply meant that practices and beliefs were deemed to be authentic, to the degree that they accorded with the sense of Scripture — and interpretation of Scripture varied dramatically. So that widely divergent groups now, in the Persian period and as we move into the Hellenistic period, widely divergent groups will claim biblical warrant for their specific practices and beliefs.

[95] So in short, Ezra may have unified Israel around a common text, but he didn't unify them around a common interpretation of that text.

[96] Alright, when we come back we'll be looking at about four more books, all of which set up very interesting and different views on some of these basic questions.

[97] [end of transcript]

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[98] Notes

[99] 1. Trans Jordan refers to the land to the east of the Jordan while Cis Jordan refers to the land to the west of the Jordan but from the perspective of Persia the area is known as "Beyond the River."

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[100]References

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