

Ezra 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 2. Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Sariah, Reoliah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mizpah, Bigvi, Rehum, and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel, the sons of Perosh, 2,172, the sons of Shephethiah, 372, the sons of Erah, 775, the sons of Pehath-Moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812, the sons of Elam, 1,254, the sons of Zatu, 945, the sons of Zakkai, 760, the sons of Bani, 642, the sons of Bebi, 623, the sons of Asgad, 1,222, the sons of Adonikam, 666, the sons of Bigvi, 2,056, the sons of Aden, 454, the sons of Eta, namely of Hezekiah, 98, the sons of Bezi, 323, the sons of Jura, 112, the sons of Hashem, 223, the sons of Gibar, 95, the sons of Bethlehem, 123, the men of Netopha, 56, the men of Anathoth, 128, the sons of Asmabeth, 42, the sons of Kiriath-Arim, Kephira, and Beeroth, 743, the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621, the men of Michmash, 122, the men of Bethel and Ai, 223, the sons of Nebo, 52, the sons of Magbish, 156, the sons of the other Elam, 1,254, the sons of Harim, 320, the sons of Lod, Haded, and Ono, 725, the sons of Jericho, 345, the sons of Seneah, 3,630, the priests, the sons of Jediah of the house of Jeshua, 973, the sons of Immer, 1,052, the sons of Pasha, 1,247, the sons of Harim, 1,017, the Levites, the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, 74, the singers, the sons of Asaph, 128, the sons of the gatekeepers, the sons of Shalom, the sons of Eta, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Aqab, the sons of Hittite, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139, the temple's servants, the sons of Zeha, the sons of Hasufa, the sons of Tabaoth, the sons of Kiros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Paidon, the sons of Labanah, the sons of Ha

the sons of Bazalet, the sons of Mahyadah, the sons of Harsher, the sons of Barchos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temer, the sons of Nazair, and the sons of Hetaipha, the sons of Solomon's servants, the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hesophareth, the sons of Peruda, the sons of Jaela, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Gidel, the sons of Shephethiah, the sons of

Hathil, the sons of Pokhareth-Hasebiim, and the sons of Ami. All the temple's servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. The following were those who came up from Telmila, Telhasha, Kirub, Adan, and Imah, though they could not prove their father's houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel, the sons of Deliah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nakoda, 652. Also of the sons of the priests, the sons of Habiah, the sons of Hakaz, and the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name. These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim. The whole assembly together was 42,360, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers. Their horses were 736, their mules were 245, their camels were 435, and their donkeys were 6,720. Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability, they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 dariks of gold, 5,000 miners of silver, and 100 priest garments. Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns. The book of Ezra begins with the record of the decree of Cyrus in 538 or 537 BC, by which the exiles of Judah were encouraged to return to their homeland and to rebuild

the temple. Ezra himself would not arrive on the scene for another 80 years. Reading chapter 2, we might wonder whether this is the same return as that referred to in chapter 1, where Shesh-Bazzo was described as the prince of Judah. Here, however, the company seems to be led by Zerubbabel. It's possible that Zerubbabel did not yet hold formal office, but was recognised as chief of the people as the heir of David. Other commentators hold the position that this was likely a later wave of returnees, although I think there are details in the context that push against this interpretation. The people who return are described as the people of the province. They are exiles no longer, but dwelling in their own land, in their various cities and settlements.

In Nehemiah chapter 7, where we find an almost identical list, we are told that it is a list of those who came up at the first, in verse 5. So it is reasonable to believe that this was the very first wave, or waves, of returnees. The fact that neither the temple vessels nor Shesh-Bazzo are mentioned raises the question of how this ought to be related to chapter 1. Hugh Williamson argues that the list seems to be composite, that elements of it, such as the listing of groups by their towns, suggests that it was composed after the return had occurred, and that, consequently, it is best not to understand it as a reference to a single event. The origin of the list of names in this chapter divides commentators, especially given its relationship with the list of Nehemiah chapter 7.

Williamson supports his claim that the list is likely a composite by observing inconsistencies in its material. For instance, ordering of the people by family and by dwelling place are interspersed, when we might expect a tidier ordering were it a single unified composition. Likewise, the use of both the men of and the sons of alongside each other in reference to the inhabitants of towns is a stylistic variation that might be surprising to find in a text arising from a single hand.

The claim that the list was likely a composite is not, however, accepted by all commentators. The early origins of the text are suggested by various considerations. Williamson observes that the sons of Hakkaz, excluded from the priesthood on the grounds of their uncertain ancestry in verse 61, seem to have members among the priests by the time of chapter 8 verse 33. The resolution of the status of such persons seems to have awaited the establishment of a high priest. Furthermore, the listing of the sites of their exile that we see in verse 59 would be less plausible many years after the return. On the relationship with the list in Nehemiah chapter 7, there are several things to be observed. In Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 5, Nehemiah says that he found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, which suggests that Nehemiah was drawing from a prior source. [8 : 59] The lists in Ezra and Nehemiah are largely identical, but there are many differences in the numbers and some differences in the names, differences that are more pronounced nearer to the end of the list.

Despite these differences, the number given for the whole company is identical, 42,360. Williamson is quite possibly correct in attributing many of these discrepancies to later textual corruption, or perhaps they are drawn from two different versions of an earlier document, and the variations precede them. James Jordan, arguing for a short chronology, has claimed that the Nehemiah and Mordecai mentioned in verse 2 are the famous persons of those names. I do not find this position persuasive. An important piece of evidence raised in relation to the question of lines of dependency is the fact that Nehemiah chapter 7 verses 70 to 72 lists the same items as are listed in Ezra chapter 2 verse 69. But Ezra chapter 2 seems to summarise and round up the numbers that we are given in Nehemiah. So for instance, 30 priest garments from the heads of fathers' houses and 67 priest garments from the rest of the people in Nehemiah's account, 97 priest garments in total, is rounded up to a single figure of 100 priest garments in Ezra.

It is unlikely that, had Nehemiah worked with Ezra's text, he would have divided a single rounded number in Ezra's text into two unrounded numbers. This suggests that either Ezra was working with the text of Nehemiah, or alternatively, that both were working with a pre-existing text or texts.

Andrew Steinman's claim that both Ezra and Nehemiah were likely working from an original document seems a reasonable position to me, given the evidence. An interesting detail is that general commonality of the text between Ezra and Nehemiah is not limited to the list itself, but extends beyond it. Ezra chapter 2 verse 70 and chapter 3 verse 1 read, Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.

When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 73 and 8 verse 1 read, So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived

in their towns. And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns, and all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate.

[11 : 26] As the accounts that follow these verses differ, many commentators see this as further evidence for the direct dependence of one of the texts upon the other. The continuation of the shared text into the narrative material that follows it could partly be explained by positing an original text that was not merely a list of returnees, but included such a list within a larger prose chronicle.

Steinman presses this point against those who, like Williamson, claim that the shared narrative material between Ezra and Nehemiah is evidence that one is dependent upon the other, most typically Ezra upon Nehemiah. Williamson argues that the reference to the seventh month and the conclusion of the shared material fits more neatly into Nehemiah's context than Ezra's, as Nehemiah chapter 8 verse 2 also refers to the seventh month. Yet Ezra chapter 3 verse 4 refers to the feast of booths, a feast of the seventh month, and also directly to the seventh month in verse 6. The claim that the transitional text is incongruous in its context in Ezra may not be so persuasive on closer examination. That the reference to the seventh month fits relatively tidily in both contexts, especially given the fact that the events that are introduced with this reference are different ones, divided by several decades, is a peculiar fact. Even if we do not believe that one text is simply drawn from the other, within the context of the canon, their commonalities invite us to read the episodes that follow them alongside each other. Such a reading is in fact quite illuminating. Ezra recounts the re-establishment of the altar and the subsequent celebration of the feast of booths, while Nehemiah's account is of the great celebration of the seventh month and the feast of booths and the renewal of the covenant, following the final completion of the work of building the wall.

That Nehemiah returned to the genealogy of those who first came up and started the work was a fitting bookend when the work was finally finished, and tightens connections between Ezra and Nehemiah. The list of returnees is divided into several categories, listed by Steinman as follows.

[13 : 24] Verses 3-20 likely list the members of clans who returned to Jerusalem, while the verses that follow list returnees to other cities and regions. Although the very large number of sons of Sunea perhaps suggests that this number refers to members of a clan, rather than to inhabitants of a village.

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

The servants of Solomon listed along with the priests and Levites were perhaps members of a group appointed by Solomon to assist the priests in secular aspects of the running of the temple. Of the places mentioned, the significant majority of them are in the historical tribal territory of Benjamin. While, as we have noted, the same total number of returnees is given in Ezra, Nehemiah, and also in 1st Ezra's, 42,360. The other numbers given neither add up to 42,360, nor to the same numbers as each other. By Steinman's reckoning, the persons mentioned in Ezra add up to 29,818, while those mentioned in Nehemiah add up to 31,089. Various explanations have been proposed to make sense of these discrepancies. Perhaps the subtotals only include males, but the total includes females.

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

[15 : 40] The significant difference between the number of male and female returnees that this implies is arresting, but by no means implausible. Considering the danger of the journey and the challenges of the situation that the returning exiles were arriving into, it would not be surprising if the returning exiles were predominantly young men. This would also, as Steinman notes, help us to understand some of the demographic pressures that underlay the problem of intermarriage.

Some of the heads of the families gave gifts for the house of the Lord, something recorded in verses 68 and 69. The fact that there was more than one servant for each six persons in the company suggests that they had some wealthy persons among them. Their numbers, while

considerable, represent but a tiny remnant of the people's former population. Much of Judah's original population settled in the lands of their exile and never returned. The numbering of persons here might recall the book of Numbers, which begins and ends with the census of the people. The former exiles returned to and resettlement of the land is bookended by references to this initial numbering of them. The attention given to the numbering of the returnees is noteworthy when, as Steinman observes, we consider that no comparable attention is given to the details of the rebuilt temple. That the rebuilding of the people, as it were, eclipses the rebuilding of the temple structure is perhaps instructive concerning the relationship between and relative priority of the two. A question to consider. Like Ezra chapter 1, Ezra chapter 2 speaks of a company returning to the land and concludes with a list of the gifts that they brought with them for the temple. How might this shape the way that we read these chapters and how we relate them to what follows?